

# Roleplaying as Participatory Research

*By Lone Hersted*

*“If innovative scholarship is the outcome of hybridity, impurity, or blurring the boundaries between disparate realms of reality, disciplining is its enemy. There is no “thinking outside the box” without risking banishment from the box.”*

*Gergen, K.J. (2009 p. 210)*

Working from within the movement, often referred to as the *dialogical turn* (Flecha et al. 2003) or *the relational turn* (Donati 2011), this chapter throws light on the development of a participatory inquiry for learning and knowledge-building based on roleplaying. The inquiry is aimed at enhancing dialogical and relational skills among leaders and employees in an organization and is inspired by action research, arts-based research and social/relational constructionist approaches to research. The practice presented in this chapter is based on the assumption that central to organizational collaboration and the development of fruitful relationships are processes of dialogic coordination, which are at work in the continuous process of organizing. The important challenge is whether our ways of communicating can, for example, motivate and inspire people, or increase tension, conflict and alienation. Often we tend to communicate in repetitive patterns, and we get stuck in predictable games without end (Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch, 1974). Together we construct scenarios that can either move in a degenerative or generative direction. In this project a transformative approach was developed and applied where alternative ways of communicating and relating as living, responsive, embodied beings were explored in a playful, collaborative learning setting informed by the dramatic arts.

This chapter explains the methodological aspects of this approach based on roleplaying combined with supervision, including a polyphonic reflecting team. The practice is rooted in a constructionist stance where the research inquiry is considered a collaborative effort for generating change oriented insights and knowledge (see also McNamee 2010; McNamee & Hosking 2012; and Gergen 2015).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> My aim here is to develop and offer a reconceptualization of—and a new vocabulary about—the use of roleplaying in organizational contexts seen from a social constructionist paradigm.

As a researcher with a professional background in theatre and consultancy, I do not make a hard distinction between researcher, facilitator and co-creator. This is in contrast to the notion of the researcher as an “objective observer”, which historically has been the research ideal in the positivist tradition, where the dichotomy between researcher and researched is clearly marked. However, the relational/social constructionist approach towards research questions the researcher’s positioning as the “expert.” While working from a constructionist orientation, we concentrate on “exploring other, less hierarchical, more relationally engaged possibilities of co-inquiry in which knowing and influencing are more equally balanced” (McNamee & Hosking, 2013, p. xiv). In a constructionist understanding, there is no hard distinction between research and work for social change and what is usually considered “data” is seen as a co-construction and can assume many different forms. As McNamee and Hosking point out:

“All research intervenes in the lives of those who participate, as well as in the lives of the researchers themselves. This means that professionals who work in fields focused on social change, such as health and human services, organizational development, education, and community development, are researchers just as much as they are change agents. Similarly, researchers are change agents; they are not simply scientists making discoveries about the world; they change the world as they examine it. Inquiry is a relational practice and (re)constructs or constitutes relational realities” (McNamee & Hosking 2013, p. xvi).

The researcher in this tradition is often seen as a change agent, a co-creator and sometimes even as an artist. Gergen (2009) and other postmodernist scholars acknowledge that all research is a constructed narrative and advocate for alternative approaches to research, for instance, by use of novel writing, poetry, theater, music, dance, sculpting, etc. However, since the early nineties we see a tendency towards the acceptance of the arts in research, strongly advanced by the arts based research movement, for instance represented by Barone (1990), Eisner (1997), Eisner & Barone (2012), Jackson (1993), Butler-Kisber (2002), and Norris (2009).

Both novel-writing and the performing arts have made certain gains in the research communities, in particular within human and social science. For instance, at the University of British Columbia, two novels were accepted as dissertations (Dunlop, 1999) and Sameshina (2007) and paved the way for a broader understanding of research. Some researchers have gone pretty far in this movement, such as Saldana (2005), who works with “ethnodrama” where “data” is performed in a dramatic form, whereas Blumenfeld-Jones (1995, 2002) and Snowber (2002) argue for “dancing the data,” where

the dance is used as a mode of research representation. For the critical reader, this might sound weird, but in the physical sciences as early as in the 1920s, Heisenberg pointed out that “data” is mediated by the research act (Norris 2009, p. 24), and in 1976 Robert Nisbet wrote an entire book entitled “Sociology as an Art Form.”

Not only does the relational/social constructionist approach embrace hybrid forms of research, but it also questions the forced division between the researcher and the researched, and as well the separation between inquiry and intervention, process and outcome, data collection and data analysis. The constructionist approach is more pragmatic and is often characterized by processes that orient towards *openness towards different social realities, appreciation of local rationalities and, relationally engaged practices*, where participants experience that they are connected in different ways (see Hosking & McNamee 2013, p. 14 for further explanation). Rather than *collecting data*, we as constructionists talk about *generating data*. Some scholars (not only constructionists) even question the term “data,” pointing out that everything can be seen as data (Brinkmann 2014).

McNamee argues for research as a relational practice and points out that:

Research that is associated with discovery is situated within a modernist worldview. Traditional researchers are curious to discover how to understand the world “as it really is” and how to discover “new knowledge” about that world. Yet, if our view is a relational constructionist view, the “thing” (or entity) we are examining is the interactive processes of people in relation with each other and their environments. We are curious about what sorts of worlds can be made possible through particular forms of interaction, particular ways of talking and acting. Thus, the focus on relational processes that construct our worlds is understood as something very different from the focus on discovering how the world is (McNamee 2014, p. 75).

Knowledge from a constructionist viewpoint is mainly seen as a product of social process, building on specific language games and discourses. A social or relational constructionist approach to research opens up for new ways of conceptualizing and engaging in research.

Thus, what we commonly understand as the research tradition (i.e., post-positivist social

science) is, indeed, a valuable form of research—but it is not the only form. There are other language games to be explored. Social construction is one (McNamee, 2014, p. 76).

In addition, McNamee (2014) explains:

Thus, for the constructionist, the “doing” of research can take many forms. Each is, as mentioned earlier, a different language game. And, different language games construct different understandings of the world (McNamee 2014, p. 82).

Furthermore, she points out that “the research/practitioner divide is not a divide at all but a matter of stepping into diverse discourse communities. Any form of practice (e.g., education, psychotherapy, organizational development, community-building, etc.) is, according to McNamee, a form of inquiry” (McNamee 2014, p. 93).

Drawing on Gergen, Shotter, McNamee, Hosking, Cunliffe and other scholars working from a constructionist stance, by the present work, I wish to push the boundaries of our understanding of research, and I am aware that I might risk, as Gergen writes, “banishment from the box” (2009). In line with Shotter, I am skeptical towards the tradition of separating living process into separated units and putting them into categories. Instead of examining objects and phenomena at a distance, I am interested in creating knowledge from *within* a practice and from a process-oriented view in what could be described in Shotter’s terms as *relational responsive processes* in resonance and involvement *with* participants as co-constructors of knowledge. Here, I am in accordance with Cunliffe and Shotter (2006) when they argue for “participatory ways of knowing” (Cunliffe & Shotter, 2006) and when Shotter (1993a) argues for *knowing of the third kind* as *joint knowledge* or *knowledge held in common with others*.

While working from this paradigm, the idea with the inquiry described in this chapter was to position the participants as co-creators of knowledge in the roleplaying sessions informed by living dialogues with a reflecting, multivoiced team. Inspired by Shotter we could see this as an attempt to do *research from within*.

Instead of analyzing processes from the outside, Shotter advocates rethinking our ways of doing empirical research, while claiming that we need a different 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 2005c p. 585). He argues for a living involvement and calls this approach “*thinking-from-within*” or “*withness*” thinking, in contrast to what he defines as “*aboutness*” thinking. With inspiration from Bakhtin’s writings, Shotter suggests that the researcher positions him- or herself “within the moving” (p. 589) and advocates an “active, spontaneously responsive kind of understanding” (p. 590).

In a paragraph later in this chapter entitled “The approach to dialogue and its implications for our practice,” I will explain further the idea of “*withness*” thinking as described by Shotter, because it is of significance to the inquiry described in this chapter.

In order to illustrate the inquiry, I will present an example of my work with a specific project. The duration of the project in practice was one and a half years. The aim was to develop skills in dialogue, relational awareness, critical self-reflexivity and collaboration among leaders and employees in a 24-hour care center for neglected adolescents between the ages of 12-18. The adolescents were removed from their parents because of social and psychological problems and had often, during their childhood and youth, experienced serious breaches of trust in their relationships with other people. My initial contact with the institution was during a two-day workshop where I was asked, as a consultant, to help a team solve some major internal conflicts. I noticed that there was a high level of tension, not only on the specific team, but in the entire institution. Distrust, tension and conflict between the adolescents and the staff, between different staff members, between the staff and the leading team, and inside the leading team, as well. So I asked myself whether it would be possible to enhance dialogic and relational skills among the professionals working at the institution? Would it be possible to do a larger research project working with the development of dialogical skills, for instance using roleplay? I asked myself whether a more relational approach and the use of roleplay could help these people create better relationships and a better social climate in the organization? Based on the short experience with the team, I asked the principal of the institution whether they would be interested in participating in a research project where they worked with their communication and relationships through roleplay. He recognized the need and showed enthusiasm about the idea. I then introduced the idea at meetings with each team of employees, and it appeared that they found it interesting and agreed to start the project.

## **The basic ideas behind the research**

Thus, the research project was designed as a participative inquiry with inspiration from constructionist ideas and action research in line with Reason & Bradbury, 2008; McNiff & Whitehead 2011; Shotter 2008; McNamee 2010; McNamee & Hosking 2012; and Gergen 2009, 2014. The inquiry can be seen as a contribution to the rich tradition of drama as a pedagogical tool for change used in education, social action, community development, prisons, therapy, etc., for instance represented by Boal (1985, 1992, 1995); Rohd (1998); Sternberg (1998); Nicholson (2005); Taylor & Warner (2006); Jackson (2007); Norris (2009); Prendergast & Saxton (2009); Prentki & Preston (2009); Ackroyd & O'Toole (2010); Larsen (2011); Landy and Montgomery (2012), Pässilä, Oikarinen & Harmaakorpi (2015) and others.

Guided by Dewey's (1916) concept of learning-as-practice, the basic aim was to explore and refine an entirely collaborative learning practice for the enhancement of relational and dialogical skills. The idea was to enable the participants, not only to become *reflective practitioners* (Schön 1983, 1987) but furthermore to transform the social worlds and relationships in which they took part. Building on the constructionist idea that our communication is constitutive for our social world, the practice paid special attention to the use of language, as well as the bodily dimensions of communication. In the following I will describe how we created a process of collaborative learning based on the idea of learning-as-practice—*within* and from *within*—the organization. The project was guided by the assumption that we can reflect and create knowledge together in dialogical relationships, benefiting especially from the many different voices in a group.

In addition to these ideas on research and learning as participatory inquiry, the project draws in particular on the theories of dialogue developed by the Bakhtinian school (taken further by Gergen and Shotter since the eighties to the present day) and on systemic supervision methodology inspired by Gianfranco Cecchin 1987; Tom Anderson 1991; and Karl Tomm 1987-88, 2014. These ideas and practices will be unfolded in the following sections of the chapter.

## **Dialogue as an embodied social practice**

In the project we worked with the development of a broad repertoire of conversational skills while playing with different alternatives to degenerative scenarios and, in this way, changing these

degenerative scenarios into more generative ones in order to become more “resourceful conversational partners.” In order to comprehend the method described in this chapter, it is important to understand some of the basic underlying ideas, because these ideas have substantial implications for our practice. In the following I will account for some of the most pivotal ideas.

First of all, an important inspiration for this inquiry has been Gergen’s notion of generative and degenerative scenarios (2009), as described in the following:

In a generative scenario, the participants build on each other's contributions. As one might say, the conversation "goes somewhere." There is learning, creativity, and often a sense of delight. [...] Most disruptive, however, are the degenerative scenarios. These are scenarios that move toward animosity, silence, or the breaking of a relationship altogether. They may begin subtly, but unless they are terminated at some point, relations will suffer significantly. So will the organization (Hersted & Gergen, 2013, p. 26-27).

If we do not pay attention to these degenerative scenarios, they can easily and rapidly develop into *undesired repetitive patterns* (Pearce & Cronen, 1980, p. 225-240) or *dangerous dances* (Gergen 2009, p. 111), where conflicts escalate, the participants become alienated towards each other, they position themselves and the other in specific “corners” and finally, the conflict might even explode. But Gergen (2009) reminds us that these patterns are relationally constructed, and he gives emphasis to our ability to be creative and change these scenarios:

“No one wants to ‘fight it out,’ and yet, once the fight has begun, it is difficult to excuse oneself, to ‘cut and run’. From a relational standpoint these corrosive patterns are not inevitable. They are not built into our genes. Together, we stand as creators of the future. The question is whether we can locate new and compelling steps, moves that will enable us to leave the dance floor before disaster strikes” (p. 111).

What is interesting here is that these scenarios are not fixed or given by nature. People coordinate their actions and co-create scenarios all the time, and seen from a constructionist perspective, we always have a choice. Communication is something we learn from early childhood through participation in social processes, and we continue learning and refining communicative skills in a lifelong learning process. Communicating feelings also include a performative dimension; in other words, we learn how to perform feelings through participation in social life. As proposed elsewhere,

the more familiar you are with the variations, the more options you have for moving in the conversation (Hersted & Gergen, 2013, p. 28). In my view, we are able to create alternative communication forms, but it requires that we allow ourselves to stop and reflect on our actions and, in this way, develop and refine our ability to reflect-in-action.

From a relational approach, dialogue can be considered as a form of *coordinated action*. Metaphorically speaking, we invite our conversational partners into “a dance,” but we cannot control the outcome because we cannot predict how the other person will respond to our utterances. As Gergen, Gergen and Barrett (2004) point out:

No individual expression harbors meaning in itself. For example, what we might conventionally index as a "hostile remark" can be turned into "a joke" through a response of laughter; the "vision statement" of a superior can be refigured as "just more BS" through the shared smirk of the employees (draft p. 4).

Something that has been of significant inspiration for this project is the Bakhtinian understanding of dialogue, often referred to as “dialogism.” According to the Bakhtinian way of thinking, we are always in dialogue, and we always carry traces of former dialogues with us into new dialogues. Bakhtin (1984) and the circle of intellectuals around him developed a whole theory on dialogue that can be considered *polyphonic* (multivoiced). They argued that human life has an entirely *dialogic nature*:

Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue, a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium (Bakhtin/Voloshinov 1984, p. 293).

The dialogism developed by the Bakhtinian circle can be considered anti-individualistic and relationship-oriented. According to Bakhtin (1984), all social phenomena are constituted through the ongoing, dialogical relationship between individuals and groups, where a multiplicity of languages, discourses and symbolizing practices are involved. Instead of seeing individuals as isolated entities, Bakhtin placed emphasis on the relational processes that emerge between people in



their daily dialogic interactions, claiming that “truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person; it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction” (p.110).

In line with Bakhtin, the constructionist-relational understanding of dialogue is in contrast to the representational-referential understanding, which is bound to the idea about transmission from one individual to another. Instead of transmitting messages from A to B and reverse, we are co-constructing and coordinating the dialogue as we adapt our response to each other. The communication is shaped in the responsive interplay between the dialogue partners in a process of mutually molding meaning and continuous coordination. As offered elsewhere (Hersted & Gergen 2013): “Our words are not containers of meaning sent from one mind to another; rather our words acquire meaning as they are taken up in ongoing interchange. Like a game of football, no single person is in control of the outcomes” (p. 9). Meaning is co-constructed and coordinated in relationships. Or as Voloshinov from the Bakhtinian circle (1929/1973) put it:

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

In this view, language is a way of *acting* in the world, not the *mirroring* of thought. Another important dimension of dialogue is *embodiment*. Building on earlier experience from the world of theater, I am particularly drawn to the bodily dimension of dialogue, and in this project we worked with dialogue as an embodied social practice, which I will explain in the following. Drawing on inspiration from Shotter’s (2014) concern with *embodied responsiveness*, we must be aware of the “living bodily responses related to things that occur to us in our surroundings” (p. 16). Shotter uses the term “embodied ways of responding” concerning our spontaneous bodily reactions in relation to living beings, things and occurrences (2014, p. 18). Shotter points out that we must try to be fully present and pay attention to what happens in “the living moment” (pp. 31-33). The idea is that by listening to the response of our bodies and our interplay with our surroundings, we can learn about ourselves, the others and the surrounding world. The way in which we meet the other person, and the way in which we express ourselves through our body, becomes crucial for the relationship going forward. As Shotter points out:

It clearly makes an enormous difference if we approach another person on meeting them

with a clenched fist ready to strike or with an open hand ready to shake their's. To do this, we must learn how to see what is around us "in depth," as offering us a "space of possibilities" for our actions (Shotter, 2005a, pp. 42-43).

Therefore, in the project we attempted to be sensitive to multiple facets of communication, not only the spoken words, but also the voice, tone, pitch, rhythm of speech, body movements, gestures and facial expressions, etc. From my perspective, the embodied dimensions of dialogue is a significant part of this inquiry, a dimension that is often underestimated in communication studies in general. Here, we were interested in experimenting in which ways we, as human beings and professionals, can relate with each other through spoken and body language in daily organizational life.

### **"Withness" thinking**

Another significant concept underlying our inquiry has been the idea of "*withness*" thinking, as opposed to "*aboutness*" thinking, which was developed by John Shotter (2005a, 2005c, 2008, 2010). Shotter's "withness" thinking is a kind of dialogic thinking, which reminds us to try to think *with* the other person instead of positioning ourselves *above* (or below) the person. Instead of treating the other as an object for fulfilling one's own goals, it is a matter of meeting him or her with equity and curiosity. In other words, it is a question of meeting and recognizing the other as a *unique other person*. This might seem obvious, but at an early stage of the project I discovered that the way in which the professionals spoke to the adolescents was often highly institutionalized and alienating, and often the communication had a notion of a *power game*. The employees often talked to the adolescents from *above*, from a position of supremacy and power. It seemed like their major concern was to ensure that the adolescents were following the rules of the institution, but there was apparently no big interest in meeting the adolescents on a more equal basis, which often resulted in even more conflict, sometimes including the use of force. In our project "*withness*" thinking became extremely relevant, for instance in the way in which an employee approaches a young resident or the ways in which a leader relates to an employee. As I see it, it is a matter of developing a special awareness of thinking from *within* the unique situation and context for the conversation, and from this position being able to sense and notice what is going on, what is on its way and what kind of new possibilities for action could be more generative to explore. For Shotter, "withness" thinking is purely dialogical, and he explains his understanding of the term in the following way:

Witness (dialogic) thinking is a form of reflective interaction that involves coming into living contact with another's living being, with their utterances, their bodily expressions, their words, their "works" [...] Thus, in aboutness thinking, (in its extreme, pure form) another person remains wholly and merely an object of consciousness, and not another consciousness (Shotter 2005a, pp. 50-51).

When expressing ourselves, we expect the other to respond or act actively. In the same way we experience that others call us into response and so on. In this way our communication is never completed but always in the making. In this view it is a matter of taking an open approach in relation to the emerging and unpredictable. Even though we cannot predict the response of another, we can, however, develop our relational skills by using our imagination. The inquiry described in this chapter was based on the idea that, with help from roleplay, we can strive to identify ourselves with the other and imagine the response from the other. In this way, we can become more resourceful and skilled in participating in living dialogues with others. Here it must be underlined that it is by no means a matter of strategically planning conversations and meetings but, according to Shotter's (2008) idea of "witness" thinking, it is a question of, identifying oneself *with* others and of talking *with* each other, instead of talking *to* or *about* each other.

In the following, I will introduce the organizational context and the research inquiry, and then present some examples from our practice in order to give the reader an overall idea of the inquiry.

### **Organizational context and research design**

The project took place over a period of 18 months at a 24-hour care center for adolescents (between 12 and 18 years old), who were removed from their parents. The institution was owned and operated by the local municipality. The project included both the leaders and the employees of the center (including pedagogues/social workers, schoolteachers, psychologists, secretaries, gardeners, and kitchen workers). Each group of employees went through three days of training, except one group, which asked for one extra training day, and the leading group, which went through six training days (three days in the initial phase and three days in the final phase of the project).

The project was based on 22 training days with six different groups. Except for the leading group consisting of 5 leaders, there were between 8-10 participants in each group. The majority of the dialogue training sessions were recorded on video, except for cases where the participants did not wish to be recorded. Participants were ensured anonymity. Likewise, all participants were promised

professional secrecy regarding the lives of the adolescents living at the institution. During the process, I looked through the video recordings together with one of my students from the university who had supported me in recording the sessions. Our aim was to learn from these recordings and qualify our further work with the inquiry. We listened carefully to the utterances of the persons involved (including ourselves as participants in the inquiry), observed the bodily expressions and reactions and how participants (including ourselves) related to each other, interacted with each other and co-constructed their identities and the identities of others during the process. We also noticed the level of engagement and enthusiasm during the process. While watching these video recordings, it became clear to us that a series of themes taken up by the participants were recurrent, and we tried to identify these themes and give them a name/title. These themes will be presented later on in this chapter. Once during the process, a participant asked if we could watch one of the video recordings together in order to learn from it. I thought it was an interesting idea. Together with his team we spent a couple of hours watching, analyzing and reflecting on one of these video recordings where this employee had a central role. The recording entailed 1) the presentation of a scenario he had picked by himself, 2) the following dialogues with him and the reflecting team and 3) the alternative roleplay scenarios, which were developed after the dialogues with the reflecting team. Apparently, both the main person involved and the majority of his colleagues learned from this process, but I also noticed that he, to a certain extent, was exposed to his colleagues, and furthermore it became a little long for some of his colleagues. Therefore, this experiment did not set precedence for further practice, even though I fully recognize the value of watching oneself in relation to others on video in order to learn from it. Seen retrospectively, the use of video recordings could have been taken further in order to sustain the learning process at a collective level in each group, but as mentioned, for some of the participants, it could have turned into a vulnerable process, and I considered that it was important to protect participants from feeling exposed in front of the group. It was crucial for me, as the facilitator of the process, to contribute to the creation of an atmosphere of trust and confidence.

Some of the video recordings were transcribed and analyzed by me and my student in between the sessions, and there is no doubt that we learned from this process and that the entire inquiry was improved by these observations and reflections. However, due to the extent of recordings (22 working days from 9 am to 3 pm) and due to the fact that the project concerned the development of a *method* for enhancing dialogic and relational skills, I considered that a full transcription would not be appropriate. Instead, emphasis was put on the situated knowledge producing processes we

created together with the participants. In this chapter I present two concrete examples from our practice, in order to demonstrate some of the main characteristics of the inquiry and give the reader an overall idea of our approach.

The central part of the research was something we did together, as a group. In accordance with constructionist ideas, intervention and knowledge-building took place at the same time. Rather than “collecting” data (as we have learned from more traditional research), reflections and knowledge were co-created and generated collaboratively in an on-going cyclical process (see the model presenting the phases in our practice later in the chapter). During the roleplay sessions with a reflecting team, multiple local realities were investigated and molded in different but equal relations. As a recurrent principle, we approached each scenario from multiple stakeholder perspectives in a cyclical process where all participants took part. I consider this part as being central to our inquiry based on the overall ideas from action research.

In addition, to identify the potential effects of the inquiry, participants joined focus groups at the end of the process to discuss and reflect on their experiences. The three focus group interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in full length. The utterances from these focus group interviews were slightly divided in different categories concerning their learning outcomes. In particular, emphasis was given to outcomes such as acquiring bodily awareness, changing and expanding perspectives, developing critical self-reflection and enhancing relational consciousness. These outcomes will be presented and discussed in a forthcoming article (Hersted 2016 in press, vol. 2).

### **Creating a frame for playing and risk-taking**

It is my general experience that learning cannot be instructed but, in line with Shotter’s *witness thinking*, mentioned above, it must emerge from *within* the circumstances. As a process facilitator and reflexive inquirer, I emphasize the importance of creating a framework for play, risk-taking and reflection to occur. In order to create such a framework, we defined a set of simple rules. This helped the participants to establish confidence and, as well, to keep focus on the task. This was very important, because the climate in the institution was, as mentioned earlier, often marked by a high level of tension and activity, and therefore it was easy to become distracted by a series of disturbances from the surroundings. Seen from the facilitators’ point of view, it is also a matter of creating a psychological contract together *with* the participants and an attempt to ensure that

everybody in the process follows certain ethical guidelines. For instance, if participants become distracted and lose their concentration, the process is immediately affected, and the learning process becomes less intense. Or if participants become judgmental or start acting in a supercilious way towards one another, then the atmosphere for learning becomes toxic and repressive. Thus, we agreed on a simple set of rules for being present, focused, confident, non-judgmental, and respectful towards each other and, as mentioned, all participants were ensured anonymity.

The rules aim to establish a confidential zone for the allowance of showing professional dilemmas and vulnerability, and as well for new playful experiments and creative ideas to emerge. When participants are not familiar with role-play, they might feel anxiety with regard to public performance and may be afraid of showing their professional doubts and dilemmas in front of their colleagues. Most of all, some might fear being judged as unprofessional. Therefore, the most crucial thing, in my view, is to co-create and establish a level of trust within the group, which is not always an easy task. In this context, a few clear rules can be helpful, because they can constitute a more confidential framework for play. The rules serve as a kind of emotional scaffolding, which enables the participants to take risks, experiment and to show their difficulties. Here, risk-taking and playfulness are two sides of the same coin. In Vygotskian terms, one could claim that the rules contribute to the creation of a safety framework, which allows participants to work from within and move beyond the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978, 2012).

### **Spect-actors in disorienting dilemmas**

As mentioned earlier, before initiating the project I had worked a couple of days as a process consultant for one of the teams in the organization. I was asked by the principal of the institution to help the team, because they were stuck in internal and external conflicts. The principal had given the team the predicate “dysfunctional.” Even though I am skeptical against any kind of diagnosing, it was my impression that these and similar kinds of conflicts were not only present in the current team but apparently permeated the entire organization. The reasons for these conflicts were multiple and often complex. I noticed that often the organizational members tried to solve the conflicts from an individualist approach, by locating the “problem” inside one or another person without recognizing the relational aspects and their own part in it. Just as the principal gave the team the predicate “dysfunctional,” the employees classified the adolescents living at the institution by using

diagnostic terms or specific categories. As an example, the girls who had problems with cutting themselves due to psychological and social challenges were named “cutters”. Others were categorized as “Aspergers.” The employees tended to use what could be named as *institutionalized ways of communicating*, which was often impersonal and alienating. Instead of creating contact, confidence and understanding, these ways of communicating seemed to create distance and polarization. For instance, I noticed some of the employees using the terms “inmate” and “prisoner” while talking about a young boy from the Middle East. When somebody is positioned as an “inmate” or “prisoner,” the practice of punishment becomes legitimized. Nobody in the group questioned this term before we initiated a dialogue about it.

In order to maintain maximum participation in the roleplaying, the participants were asked to select challenging interpersonal episodes that they had experienced in the organization. For example, challenges in relation to the adolescents living at the institution or to their parents, or in relation to colleagues, other working partners, authorities or external stakeholders. Thus, the roleplaying challenges that the participants presented, were loaded with tensions, reflecting conflict and alienation within the organization itself. I viewed these roleplaying challenges in terms of what Mezirow (1994) calls *disorienting dilemmas*. According to Mezirow (1991), a learning process should facilitate the appropriation of new perspectives. Thus, as the participants played out these disorienting dilemmas, they were encouraged to create alternatives to the institutionalized routines of communication. They were invited to look at the episodes from new perspectives and to try out alternative scenarios by acknowledging the unique *otherness of the other* (Shotter 2005a; 2005d). Often the scenarios presented were divided into smaller sequences, where specific key utterances, intonation, movements, and gestures were questioned and acted out in alternative ways. We could, for instance, repeat a short fragment, a gesture, a sentence spoken in a particular way, or play the whole scenario again with new variations. In this way, the routine perspectives were de-constructed, and alternative scenarios were developed. The participants not only played out the roles but were also asked to comment on what they had seen and experienced, to reflect and offer alternatives from specific perspectives. When someone offered an alternative, he or she was invited to take the part and play it out. It was not a demand but an offer. Here, the members of the reflecting team not only functioned as spectators but they became “spect-actors” as described by the Brazilian theatre director, Augusto Boal (1979), the pioneer behind *forum theater*. The idea of the “spect-actor” by Boal was (inspired by German theater director Bertolt Brecht) to activate the spectator and make him or her reflect on the scenarios. In Boal’s approach to drama and theatre, the audience was

invited to comment on the scenarios and to take an active role in order to change the presented scenario. Inspired by Boal, we adopted this notion of spectators becoming actively involved “spect-actors.”

### **Working with a polyphonic reflecting team**

In the beginning of each session, we generated a reflecting team in order to facilitate awareness of the communicative process in the roleplay scenarios and the potentials for alternative actions available to the participants. The team members were positioned as actively reflecting dialogue partners concerning the roleplay episodes enacted by their colleagues. During the roleplay, the team members observed, listened and reflected from specific perspectives. This could be, for instance, the perspective of an adolescent, a mother, a father, a friend, a social worker, a pedagogue, a teacher, a leader, a union representative, etc. By observing the episodes from these different perspectives, the dialogues on the reflecting team become multivoiced. Inspired by Bakhtin (1984), I termed these *polyphonic reflecting teams*. The members of the reflecting team were encouraged to participate in reflecting dialogues about the observed episodes in the roleplay. This initial phase of a cycle typically focused on a past episode, but there was no attempt to be “objective” in the construction of episodes from the past, nor in our multi voiced analytical attempts to understand these. We were, of course, aware that the scenarios with the disorienting dilemmas were constructions based on the memory of the past. And we did not stop here, but took the process one step further. In the next phase, the members of the reflecting team were invited to contribute with new ideas and alternatives to the presented scenarios, not from an abstract theoretical position, but from *within* the situation. The hope here was to enhance *knowing-from-within* as described by Shotter (2005b; 2005c; 2012) by exploring what we learn “as we move around in relation to the others and othernesses we meet within the situations we inhabit [...]” (Shotter, 2012, p. 135). This phase of the process was future-oriented as we experimented with *possibilities not yet actualized* (Shotter 2007) and we could term this as a *before-the-fact* inquiry (Shotter 2007), because through imagining and experimenting with alternative scenarios, we co-created new understandings and action guiding anticipations of a situated kind.

The practice of reflective roleplay can be visualized as a learning cycle closely related to action research. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that this visualization is just a model and



that, in practice, such a learning and knowledge-building process is characterized by non-linearity and a high level of complexity.

*Future-oriented*

*Past-oriented*

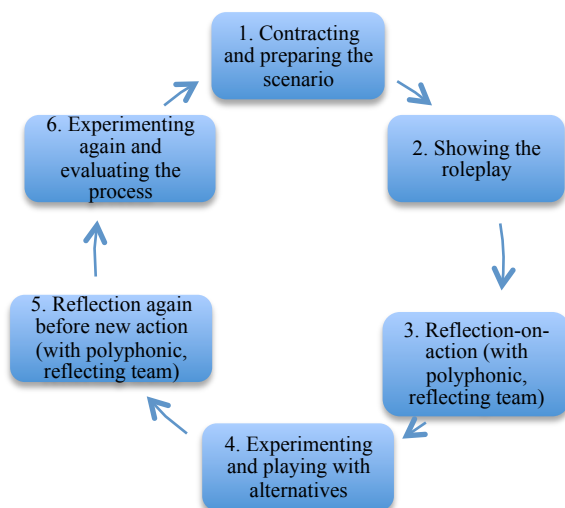


Figure 1. Phases in our inquiry of reflective roleplay

As mentioned, the reflecting team was encouraged to take a non-judgmental approach and show *curiosity* in a respectful way. As a reflexive inquirer, I reminded them to be careful in the ways they expressed themselves, for example, using formulations such as: “It strikes me that...”, “What makes an impression on me is that...” or, “I wonder why....” The role players were not obliged to follow the ideas from the reflecting team. The person who originally offered the episode (the disorienting dilemma) was free to choose what to do next. For instance, as the facilitator or reflexive inquirer, I might ask him or her, “Now that you have been listening to the reflecting team for a while, is there anything that you have heard from them that makes sense to you or somehow inspire you?”

The reflecting team members were not only observing, listening and having dialogues about the episodes, but sometimes, as mentioned above, moving (by invitation from the reflexive inquirer) into direct dialogue with the role players. Here, the method distinguishes itself from the systemic

supervision method used and described by, for instance, Tom Andersen (1991). In our practice, we did not draw strict lines between the reflecting team and the main persons in process (in this case, the role players). On the contrary; we were all in process and learning together.

Sometimes a member of the reflecting team was invited to place him- or herself behind one of the role-players and try to identify himself with this person. The reflexive inquirer asked, for instance, “What do you think is important for X in this situation?” or, “How do you think X experiences the situation we just saw?” In this way the participants were invited to “imagine otherwise.” The attempt was to enhance both *reflection in action* and *reflection on action* (Schön 1983), but also to train the ability to change perspective.

From a social constructionist viewpoint, reflexivity can be seen as ongoing dialoguing in a relational process, critically and creatively reflecting on taken-for-granted assumptions and opening up to multiple local forms of life and to what might be possible (Gergen, 1994; Hosking, 2008). Instead of considering reflexivity as an entirely individual process, in our inquiry, reflexivity was conceptualized as a collaborative learning and knowledge-building process by constantly asking questions and actively involving the reflecting team in the dialogues about past and future actions.

Cunliffe (2002) argues for incorporating reflexive dialogical practice in management learning as a way of developing “more critical and responsive practitioners” (p. 39) and advocates for *a critical self-reflexivity* or *a 2nd order reflexivity* which puts emphasis on insights into ways, “in which we relate to our circumstances and to others” (Cunliffe 2002). A 2<sup>nd</sup> order reflexivity differs from 1<sup>st</sup> order reflexivity, which is more focused on being critical towards the generalized other (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 40). She argues: “Self-reflexivity [2<sup>nd</sup> order reflexivity] is crucial because it is the basis for questioning the way we relate with others. By focusing on our own, often unacknowledged, representations of realities and working from within our experience, the impetus for change can be far more powerful than that mediated by externally imposed frames” (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 40). She furthermore argues that learning is not necessarily emerging in structured and linear processes, but can be a messy process of making connections.

By actively involving the many different voices in the reflecting team all participants were invited to reflect together and share responsibility for the learning and knowledge-building process.

Through the process we tried to deconstruct and open up *the disorienting dilemmas* to multiple understandings. Contradictions, doubts and new possibilities for action were discussed. By doing,

so the reflexive dialogues were rendered more complex. In this way, the multivoiced reflecting team members co-created learning and a *knowing-from-within* together with the role players through dialogical process. We were dealing with what Cunliffe and Shotter (2006) define as “participatory ways of knowing,” based upon the verb *knowing* rather than *knowledge*, where knowing can be characterized as “unbounded, fluid, bodily sensed and often tacit, i.e., implicit in one’s practices and expressions” (p. 235).

### **The researcher as reflexive inquirer**

During this kind of process the roles of the researcher are multiple, and therefore I prefer to name the researcher a *reflexive inquirer*. As described in an earlier article (Hersted, 2016 in press), it is first a matter of facilitating a nurturing framework for participation and helping participants to feel confident with the process. Building confidence is crucial for participation, which means that a relationship built on mutual respect and recognition between all participants is central for learning. Furthermore, as I see it, the *reflexive inquirer* must contribute with enthusiasm and engagement to the roleplay practices. For many participants, working with roleplay will be an unusual approach to learning, and it is important that they can trust the possibility for positive outcomes. Most important, the *reflexive inquirer* must encourage the participants in developing new practices and a new consciousness. The *reflexive inquirer* must move *with* the participants and be careful not to impose his or her “projects” or “solutions” on them. The participants themselves must, as much as possible, discover their own ways of navigating while trying out new ways of communicating through the roleplay. It may sound like a paradox, but on the one hand the *reflexive inquirer* must be humble and work from *within* the process, and on the other hand, he or she must be able to see the process from the outside, take initiative, formulate questions, introduce new language games, speech genres and sometimes even act as a provocateur. The *reflexive inquirer* must be able to see the process from a second order perspective and, at the same time, be a collaborative learner, one who joins in the experimental learning journey.

In more concrete terms, the *reflexive inquirer* must inspire the participants to see the disorienting dilemmas from new and different perspectives, and encourage them to imagine and to act out alternative scenarios where they experiment with different options for moving toward an active

attentiveness to the process of relating. As I see it, the *reflexive inquirer* cannot and must not manage the process, but can contribute significantly by drawing distinctions and highlighting specific aspects and details during the process. By asking questions, the *reflexive inquirer* can draw the attention to specific aspects, invite participants to dwell on specific dialogic moves and encourage reflection on alternatives.

As described elsewhere (Hersted, 2016 in press) I draw on the systemic questioning orientations of Gianfranco Cecchin (1987) and Karl Tomm (1988, 2014), and especially what is often defined as reflexive, circular questioning. This way of questioning is from a relational orientation and invites participants to reflect on an episode from different perspectives and to imagine alternative scenarios in their relationships. Thus, the *reflexive inquirer* might ask the roleplayers directly: “What would be important, do you think, for person X?” “And how would Y respond to this, if he or she heard your discussion?” Or he/she might ask the reflecting team what could be characterized as meta-questions: “Do you notice some specific patterns in their communication?”; “What do you think characterizes this language game?”; “How can we change the pattern?”; “What kind of relationship could you imagine instead?,” etc. The *reflexive inquirer* might also turn to genre questions such as: “If this was a movie, what kind of genre do you think is played out here? For instance, a thriller, a melodrama, a comedy, a tragedy or something else?”; “What other kind of scenarios could they create together if X and Y started communicating in new ways?” or “What kind of utterance could be the first helpful move towards an alternative way of communicating?” The *reflexive inquirer* does not have “the right answers” or “solutions,” but through questioning and through experimenting with alternative scenarios, the *reflexive inquirer* participates together with the participants in a creative *wayfaring* (Ingold 2008). Furthermore, it is important that the *reflexive inquirer* is sensitive and responsive to the needs of the participants and the overall context, showing flexibility and readiness to adjust the practice during the process.

## Cases

In the following, two examples of the roleplay scenarios will be presented in order to illustrate our practice in a more concrete way. Breaking with old communicative patterns is not necessarily an easy task, because it requires that we question our immediate reactions (based on *reflex*) in relation to others. As mentioned earlier, when working with disorienting dilemmas, the *reflexive inquirer*

gets insight into the “back stage” of the organization, and it happens that the *reflexive inquirer* finds himself in a disorienting dilemma. One might ask oneself: Should I go further and insist here? Or should we let it go and change the subject? One might feel tempted to bring in one’s own points of view in the dialogues, but the *reflexive inquirer* has to be very careful in these matters. I consider it to be of higher pedagogical effect if the *reflexive inquirer* can avoid giving direct advice, but instead use questions that inspire the participants to reflect and come up with alternative ideas themselves. During the entire process, the *reflexive inquirer* must be extremely patient and not put too much pressure on the participants, otherwise they will block out learning. It is a matter of finding a balance in being appreciative and challenging at the same time. Respect must be shown to the participants in such a way that nobody feels that he or she loses face. At the same time, the *reflexive inquirer* must question and challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions and communicative patterns, so as to keep this delicate balance.

### Case example 1

A relatively new employee (who was not educated as a pedagogue but as an engineer) asks for help to create a better relationship to one of the girls living at the institution. Initially, he tells us about an episode where the communication with the girl went really badly and turned into a conflict. The situation took place during the daily room inspection. According to the employee, the girl was messy and refused to cooperate in the cleaning of her room. The employee found himself in a dilemma: How should he react in that situation? After he told his story, I asked him to show it through roleplay as detailed as possible. Together with a couple of colleagues from the team he prepared the scenario (around 15-20 minutes preparation) and showed it to me and the reflecting team. The reflecting team members were invited to listen to and see the scenario from different perspectives: the perspective of the girl (Jennifer), the employee (William), a colleague, a leader, etc. The following presents a direct transcription from the beginning of the roleplay scenario recorded on video. Some of the physical actions of the participants are described in parenthesis, as I consider these actions to be just as important as the spoken words.

William (knocks three times on the door to her room)...

Jennifer: Come in.

William (enters the room)

Jennifer (is sitting on her bed)

William (approaches her but almost starts vomiting while shaking the hand of the girl and saying): Hello, Jennifer. (He remains standing and Jennifer remains seated on her bed. He avoids eye contact and looks at his watch, while saying): You have to get out of bed now. It's the middle of the day.

Jennifer (remains silent)

William (visually inspects the room by turning his head): Just look at your room. Didn't you clean up yesterday?

Jennifer (remains silent and looks down at the floor)

William: Listen, Jennifer. When people enter your room, it smells so much that you would almost think you had pooped in your bed. That is really bad. Are you hiding something here that is making it smell? Or is there a dead rat in here? It's absolutely terrible!

Jennifer: Can't I just open the window and vent the room?

William: Well, that would be a start. But we need to figure out where the smell is coming from. This smell isn't normal. What...could it be some of these clothes lying in here that need to be washed? When was the last time you washed your clothes?

Jennifer: The day before yesterday.

William: Well, then it's a shame that the clothes aren't placed in the closet instead of the floor. So... at least you could start by doing that. (He takes a look beneath her bed): What kind of bottles are those lying there?

Jennifer (looks terrified): What are you talking about?

William: There are two bottles lying there. Will you please pick them up, because I'm an old man.

Jennifer (picks up the two bottles and gives them to William): Well, it's just two bottles of soda.

William (astonished, refusing to take the bottles): Soda? No, I sure don't want to touch them! Tell me, now I'm asking you directly: Do you pee in those bottles?

Jennifer: No, it's just orange juice.

William (even more astonished and apparently provoked, while raising his voice): Orange juice? It looks rather thin to be orange juice!

Jennifer: It's just orange juice!

William: Well, I don't think you feel like drinking this, do you?

Jennifer: No, it has been there for a long time, so I don't want to drink it.

William: Well, I understand that, but in fact I'm convinced that you've peed in those bottles, Jennifer. This is definitely not very tasteful... Why? There is a door right here... You can just walk out and pee. Or is it because you're afraid at night... or what's going on...?

Jennifer (looks down at the floor and remains silent)

William (raising his voice): Well...?

*The employee stops the scenario and tells us that it turned into a conflict, but he does not inform us about the details in the conflict. As a facilitator of the process, I accepted this, because I did not want to put too much pressure on him, and we agreed to focus on the scenario presented above.*

### Relational reflections on case example 1

In the episode transcribed above, the ritualized "room inspection" at the institution turns into a conflict. While talking about the presented scenario with the presenters and the reflecting team, I discovered that the employee, William, was a newcomer and that he did not yet know the girl very

well. Furthermore, he did not have any pedagogical education but had a background from working at a factory. Before we started working on the episode, he did not know that Jennifer had a life story that, from early childhood, had been characterized by violence from a brutal stepfather and an overshadowing fear of his reactions. After the first roleplay session, during the conversation with the reflecting team, we discovered that, for many years, the girl had been constantly escaping the stepfather in company with the mother. Apparently, it seemed like William, at the beginning of the session, thought that the girl was just bad mannered and needed clear instructions from the adults. By asking the reflecting team members how the episode was experienced from the perspective of Jennifer, we gained more insight into her background and, little by little, we began to understand the possible reasons why she might be afraid of going to the toilet at night. We also discovered that, in front of her door, the institution had installed a series of alarm clocks that would immediately start making noise if she attempted to walk out of the door. In this way, by dialoguing with the reflecting team, tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 2009) about Jennifer and her circumstances was shared and new facets emerged. A team member informed us that several times he had found the girl lying paralyzed in the area around the institution, for instance in a ditch. “It seems like she’s dead then,” he said, “as if she had moved out of her own body”. Another team member told us that Jennifer, according to the report, in her early childhood (since she was three years old) had refused physical contact with others. At the same time, several team members explained that she used to run away from the institution and prostitute herself in town. Apparently, we were dealing with a young girl with specific needs and relational challenges and it would not make any sense to raise one’s voice in front of such a girl. It struck me that William had insisted on shaking hands with her (which was a ritualized convention at the institution), but at the same time he avoided any kind of eye contact with her. Apparently Jennifer needed emotional support in order to feel safe. How then, could the employee, in this case William, build up a trustful relationship with her? It was not only a matter of communicating in a more polite way, but also of taking the necessary time to meet the girl at “eye level,” being *with* her instead of yelling at her, and building up confidence little by little. We then tried to work with alternative possibilities from an approach of *being with* instead of *talking to* (Shotter 2010). For instance, we experimented with an alternative scenario where the employee, instead of standing in the door, took a chair and sat down and talked with the girl in a soft and patient voice. We also worked with the importance of having eye contact with the girl, which was rather difficult for William in the beginning. In short, it was not only a matter of finding the appropriate words (instead of blaming the girl), but also working with the ability to relate in all



aspects: wordings, intonation, eye contact, gestures, positioning, careful listening, etc. It was very much a question of learning to pay attention to relational processes and being relationally responsive (and responsible) in a sensitive way.

Apparently the employee, William, was a novice in a pedagogical working context, and by trying out different alternative scenarios, he expanded his repertoire of dialogic actions. The roleplay setting offered him, with help and inspiration from his colleagues, a framework to try things out that he had never imagined nor tried before, and it seemed to have been an important learning process for him. Also the participating colleagues seemed to learn from the session.

At William's request, we saw the video recordings together in the team a couple of weeks after the first training session. William said that he wanted to see it again in order to intensify his learning. After watching the first episode and some of the alternative scenarios on video, we had a dialogue about our observations. We notice it was not easy for William to break with degenerative patterns, and it seemed a little uncomfortable for him to try out new forms of communication. Drawing on Vygotsky, one could say that we were on the edge of the proximal zone of development (ZPD). The following is a direct transcription from watching the video recording together, where William and his colleagues tried out new alternative scenarios to the episode above with William and Jennifer.

William: The last version in which I participated seemed totally awkward to me.

Mary: What?

William: When I played the last version. It isn't me naturally [...].

[...]

Reflexive inquirer: I can see that you're working on it, and I also notice that it seems like you feel a little indisposed in this. Let's try watching the following...

[A new video clip from the earlier session is shown.]

Reflexive inquirer: What strikes you when you see this video clip? I'm also asking the newcomers to the project; you're welcome to offer your observations, too...

Robert: I think there is a change from what I observed in the first scenario. I can see my colleagues in new and different roles in a different way, in particular William. Normally, I

like William's style, but I also appreciate the new version of William I see in the video. I would like to see more of this side, because it's something different and I think it could contribute to changing the way in which the young people look at William. It seems he had been given the nickname the "grumpy guy," that "he is so tough that we don't want him to check our cleaning." Then sometimes he gets the predicate of being "the grumpy guy" just like others here also have this label. I think somehow that it would be good for William... I see something different [on this video], and I also notice a kind of reflection as to what else could be done, how can we find other strategies and approaches in order to see how we can improve these things. And this, I think, is rather evident in the process.

Reflexive inquirer: What is it exactly you can see that he is doing differently?

Robert: Usually he stands up. Just the fact that he now sits down makes a clear difference. I noticed that before they start playing the new scenario, he says that this is difficult for him and that he feels insecure, because this is a new role and another way of doing things, and we all have to grow accustomed to this when making changes. So one might feel that it is a little awkward. This seems obvious and I also notice that William seems to reflect upon how he can say things? How to express oneself? Usually he is very clear, but he looks a little insecure [as if thinking:] "How can I make it better and maybe express myself in more caring and appreciative ways?" This is how I see it...

[...]

William: I just want to say, that there is a huge difference between the situation now, sitting here and talking after having worked with the episode for 2-3-4 hours, where we have been talking about sanitary napkins and how one could have acted and so on... But it is a whole other story when you find yourself in the middle of the situation and you have to react to what's happening, instead of having time to lean back and analyze "what if I had done that," "how would she have reacted if I had done x y z"... One acts in the situation and I'll probably do that next time as well, but now I have got some more tools to act with.

Peter: You can use these things all the time in your work, William.

William: Yes, but in the situation, I couldn't have reacted differently. I have now been shown some new possible actions that will stick to my memory, but I couldn't have done things differently in the moment, in that situation.

Peter: But William, for instance, you can sit down and talk instead of standing in many situations.

William: Yes, definitely.

[...]

Helen: The most important thing for me is the approach we take in our communication with our bodies and in our communication in general, for instance, the ways in which we stay standing or sit down. The ways, in which we move our hands and our entire body, seeking eye contact, etc. These are the things we talked about last time and that we can make use of in the communication when we wish to say something important.

Mary: When they sit down, it doesn't seem like he is blaming her; they're more at eye level. But also the vocal pitch and the ways in which they say the things... It is not because they are making fun out of it, but in this way it is more on Jennifer's terms, right? Maybe it is not so embarrassing. He tries to spare her, so that it doesn't get so awkward. The fact that she hides sanitary towels and pees behind the dresser makes the situation painful enough. But in many ways, it is more at eye level now.

### *Further reflections*

Apparently, William was challenged here because his usual ways of communicating had been questioned, and he had now started experimenting with new ways of relating which were unusual to him. Obviously, he felt awkward doing so. As he put it: "It isn't me naturally."

In the role of reflexive inquirer, I tried to recognize his efforts and challenges and encourage him to keep on going. William's colleague, Robert appeared to be very careful and appreciative in his way of giving feedback to William from a non-judgmental approach.

It seemed like it was not only the staff members who were giving the adolescents nicknames or labels. Apparently it was also something that occurred among the adolescents in relation to the staff. According to Robert, William had received the label as the “grumpy guy” among the adolescents at the institution, a label, which did not offer the best conditions for his relationship with the adolescents. So the question was: How could William break with this categorization and show other aspects of himself, by practicing other ways of relating and communicating?

As we notice, Robert tried to encourage William and valorize his progress. He recognized that William might feel awkward in experimenting with new ways of communicating. He expressed his appreciation concerning William’s efforts in reflecting and learning. Robert tried to identify himself with William by saying: “I also notice that it seems like William reflects upon how he can formulate things? How to express himself? Usually he is very clear, but he looks a little insecure [as if thinking:] “How can I make it better and maybe express myself in more caring and appreciative ways?” In other words, Robert internalized William, and tried to see the situation from his perspective due to some of the exercises we had been working on in the process.

William expressed his anxieties and worries: “But it is a whole other story when you find yourself in the middle of the situation and you have to react to what’s happening, instead of having time to lean back and analyze “what if I had done that,” “How would she have reacted if I had done xyz?” One acts in the situation and I’ll probably do that next time as well, but now I have got some more tools to act with.”

As a reflexive inquirer, I understood William’s anxieties, and I also worried whether the “disturbance” had been too big for him. I feared that he would move into a self-defensive position instead of finding the courage to continue exploring new ways of relating. Apparently, in this case, we had moved to the edge of his ZPD. At the same time, I was aware that William was a newcomer at the institution and that he did not have any pedagogical education, and I did not want him to “loose face” or feel that he was vulnerable in front of his new colleagues. That would not be a good beginning for William in his new job. So how could he maintain his dignity and still learn from the episode? How could I as a facilitator and reflexive inquirer “be with” him and at the same time challenge him? It was a matter of finding the right balance.

Another colleague, Peter, also tried to encourage William in his efforts by saying: “You can use these things all the time in your work, William”. And William answered: “Yes, but in the situation,

I couldn't have reacted differently. I have now been shown some new possible actions that will stick to my memory, but I couldn't have done it differently in that moment, in that situation".

Apparently, a third colleague, Helen, tried to move the attention away from William (maybe in order to spare him any awkward feeling) by formulating a more general learning outcome that could probably benefit the whole group: "The most important thing for me is the approach we take in our communication with our bodies and in our communication in general, for instance, the ways in which we remain standing or sit down. For instance, the ways, in which we move our hands and our entire body, seeking eye contact, etc. These are the things we talked about last time and that we can make use of in the communication when we wish to say something important." Helen's utterance made me think that she was in a process of learning and also capable of articulating and sharing her learning with her colleagues.

A fourth colleague, Mary, showed her ability to identify both with William and Jennifer, without favoring either of them. Furthermore, she attempted to encourage William by saying: "[...] in many ways, it is more at eye level now". Apparently, she recognized that William was trying to be *with* Jennifer in the alternative scenario.

In sum, learning can sometimes be frustrating because in the learning process we start questioning our common practices and we become challenged to rethink and re-conceptualize our taken-for-granted assumptions. It seemed obvious that the initial strategy by William in relation to Jennifer did not work very well and ended up in conflict where they both were stuck. As an employee, William had to find other ways of approaching her. Obviously, he felt awkward trying out new pathways, but it is interesting to see how the reflecting team members tried to support and scaffold him in his learning process. This seems to be in accordance with Vygotsky's notion of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) understood as:

"the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).

In my view, the recognition and support from the team is crucial for learning, and, it is my impression that not only William but also his peers were in the middle of an intensive and challenging learning process.

### Case example 2

The following example was presented to us by two pedagogues working at the institution on the same team. It is a direct transcription from a video recording of the roleplay scenario presented by the employee, Liza and her colleague. Liza plays the role of herself and her colleague plays the role of a twelve-year-old girl, Kathrin. The girl has hidden herself in the lavatory, probably in order to smoke a cigarette, which is not allowed at the institution. One of the pedagogues tries to make her open the door. The conflict escalates and turns into physical violence from both parties.

Liza: Kathrin, you have to get out of that lavatory now.

Kathrin: Relax!

Liza: You have to get out now!

Kathrin: You don't decide that.

Liza: NOW, Kathrin!

Kathrin: (leaves the lavatory)

Liza: You must listen to what I'm saying.

Kathrin: Fuck you, nobody is going to... (Kathrin kicks Liza on her leg)

Liza (catches her arm): That's enough!

Kathrin: Fuck you! Shut your ass! Don't touch me!

(A physical fight begins, and after a while, Liza forces Kathrin down on the floor).

Kathrin: Go away you fucking idiot!

Liza (keeps her pinned on the floor): You have to talk in a nice way!

Kathrin: I don't give a damn! Ahr!

Liza: Kathrin, relax and then I'll let you go.

Kathrin: Ahr!

Liza: Try to move your arm away, and then I'll release my grip.

Kathrin: Ouch! Ouch! Stay away from me!

Liza: Relax, now! Then I'll leave so you can have five minutes alone.

Kathrin: Yes! Go away!

### Relational reflections on case example 2

As we see in the example, the situation intensifies very quickly and the pedagogue (Liza) seems to lack other tools than use of force.

As a reflexive inquirer, I asked myself: Is it reasonable at all to use physical force against a twelve-year old girl who hides herself in the lavatory? As we notice, it was the girl (Kathrin) who kicked the pedagogue first, but could we find other possibilities for communicating than responding in a similar way? According to Gergen (2009), this could be identified as a “dangerous dance,” and what is important to remember here is that we always have a choice in whether we follow the dance or introduce another way of communicating. So how could we turn the degenerative pattern into a more generative scenario? As a reflexive inquirer, I did not want to judge the employee who had been using force against the girl in self-defense. It was not my role to be a judge but to facilitate a process of learning. Instead, as a starting point, we looked at the episode from different perspectives with the reflecting team—in particular, the perspective of the pedagogue (Liza) and the girl (Kathrin).

One of the other pedagogues on the team questioned why, after all, it was “mandatory” to insist that Kathrin immediately leave the lavatory? Why could she not stay in the room for a while until she cooled off? This question seemed to challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions of Liza and some of her colleagues, and different explanations were articulated, for instance: That one could be afraid that Kathrin might jump out of the window, or that she would occupy the toilet when others might need it, or that smoking in the lavatory was not allowed according to the rules of the institution.

One pedagogue mentioned that she had noticed that Kathrin had difficulties in relating to other people. For instance, she could “ask for hugs twenty times a day.”

Another pedagogue presented the idea that if Kathrin did not get “positive contact” she would then search for “negative contact,” for instance by initiating a physical fight.

One pedagogue indicated that Kathrin had been in an incestuous relationship with her father, where sex and violence were intertwined. Maybe this information could contribute to a better understanding concerning the difficulties for Kathrin in relating with other people. Often she was either very sexual or aggressive in her approach to other people.

Another pedagogue expressed the concern that Kathrin had become a prostitute. There were several antecedents where she had run away from the institution and been together sexually with strange men in exchange for money. The employees had searched for her and sometimes picked her up hundreds of kilometers away. In one of these episodes, the explanation from Kathrin had been that she “had been kidnapped by a group of bikers.”

When we talked about alternative ways of relating to her, one of the male pedagogues said:

I think there is an enormous task in differentiating it for her, what it is and when it is enough and so on. It is about defining limits for her and also about helping her to find out how she can deal with different situations. I also think that she has been subject to sexual abuse, something, which her behavior also indicates. She has this screwed up way (now in the role of the girl): “If I can’t get it one way, then I can get it another way. I know many tricks, I can hit people, I can doll myself up, I can...” (then, speaking as himself as a professional again): Then knowing when enough is enough is also a tightrope for me. I also have to be careful. It’s my role to show her...how she can get it [positive contact] and what should she stop doing by correcting her. This is a big task, because she has this... it is second nature to her.

The dialogue went on for a long time. Apparently, we did not arrive at any concrete solution concerning the specific episode, but we agreed that violence against violence was not a good track, and we therefore tried out a series of alternatives. Through the dialogue with the reflecting team, many different aspects concerning the episode were illuminated, and we discussed several preventive initiatives such as building up mutual trust by relating to Kathrin in more appreciative ways, showing her that they were taking care of her without exaggerating giving hugs, talking with



her in more personal and solicitous ways and taking her out to some activities that she enjoyed and could help her in building up self-esteem, such as sporting activities with other young people, horseback riding, etc.

### **General topics**

There is no doubt that during the entire project, we touched on themes that were usually difficult to talk about for the employees, yet important. It became clear that the inquiry opened up for dialogue about organizational taboos by offering a confidential framework in which it was possible to approach delicate topics from a gentle, non-judgmental approach. The two examples above are not exceptional. By retrospectively looking through the video material and the field notes from the process, I identified a set of overall, recurrent themes that were often repeated in different variations:

- Child neglect
- Transboundary, offensive behavior
- Sexual exploitation and prostitution
- Different sorts of crimes
- Cigarettes and psychedelic drugs
- Deviation from the institutional rules
- Learning difficulties among the adolescents
- Cultural, ethnic and religious differences
- Stigmatization and isolation
- Use of force and physical abuse
- Pedagogical disagreements, different points of view among the staff members
- Tensions between and within the professional groups
- Lack of coordination and disagreements concerning the division of tasks

These themes were often very complex and involved many different stakeholder perspectives, but as I see it, they all reflected a need for working reflectively with the relationships, dialogue, curiosity, discursive identity constructions, constructions of social reality, taken-for-granted assumptions, relational coordination and collaboration.

### **Signs of learning**

I found it important to explore the outcomes of reflective roleplay. Were there any signs that participants gained useful insight and skills from their engagement in the process? As mentioned before, relevant utterances concerning their learning outcome were collected through three semi-structured, focus group interviews, each an hour in length. Participating in the focus groups were nine random representatives from different employee categories (e.g., administrators, team leaders, schoolteachers, pedagogues, kitchen employees, and secretaries). In sum, some of the topics that showed up in the focus group interviews were learning outcomes such as: acquiring bodily awareness, expanding perspectives and enhanced self-reflection and relational consciousness (for further information about the learning outcomes in details, see Hersted 2016 in press).

### **Further reflections on our inquiry**

During the entire process while experimenting with roleplay, I was impressed by the level of details and the convincing ways in which the participants identified with their roles. It occurred to me that the participants themselves were astonished to experience that they were able to do “theater” or “roleplay,” and I observed that in the majority of the cases, they managed to play the roles quite well without overacting. In this kind of work, it is very important to avoid “stereotyping” the other but to be aware of nuances and multiple facets. The dedication and serious engagement among the participants was crucial to the process and helped us to go on and explore the dialogues with the reflecting team, and experiment with alternative scenarios.

The work with the polyphonic reflecting team consisted primarily of training the participants to see an episode from different perspectives and increase the reflexivity level by unfolding dominating stories, questioning taken-for-granted assumptions, inviting other voices, etc. It was a matter of

building up mutual confidence and introducing and keeping a smooth structure, which provided room for play, improvisation, dissensus, and multiplicity.

The work on the scenarios with William and Jennifer or Liza and Kathrin were not unusual examples. During the project, the participants opened up and revealed many episodes where tensions had escalated and turned into serious conflicts, and on some occasions, had ended with use of force. As a *reflexive inquirer*, I was initiated into a kind of shadow world, similar to what Goffman (1959) would define as *backstage*, which differs significantly from the official institutional website. I think that the confidence that we built up together was crucial for these things to happen. Otherwise it would not have been possible to work with these delicate matters. Sometimes it was even difficult to bear the emerging insights as a *reflexive inquirer*. Working as a facilitator with roleplaying on a team of 8-10 participants who have not been used to this kind of “theater work” before is not always an easy task. It requires an augmented relational awareness in all aspects, and a specific aesthetic sensitivity to the process. In this kind of work the *reflexive inquirer* has to move on several tracks at the same time: being fully present in the process together *with* the participants and paying attention to details and, at the same time, keeping an awareness and overview of the process and paying attention to the organizational context. The reflexive inquirer must try to be sensitive to the responses and reactions of the participants and to the relationships developing in the process, find the right timing for each session, keep the dynamic, flow and energy in the process, and encourage the participants to put themselves at risk. Drawing on McNamee, we could use the term *radical presence* (McNamee 2015) as an ideal approach to be pursued. The idea of radical presence builds on a relational understanding of our social worlds and pays an active attentiveness to processes of relating. McNamee puts it this way: “Adopting a radical presence focuses our attention on the specificities of any given interaction while also allowing us to note patterns across interactions, across time, place, and culture (McNamee, 2015, p. 377). Earlier on she writes that the idea of radical presence has to do with “an exploration of broader relational and institutional contexts and the ways in which professionals and ordinary people alike can be responsive, present, and open to a multiplicity of life forms” (McNamee, 2015 p. 373).

It was my hope that the training could help the participants to develop their dialogical and reflexive skills in order to create better relationships and prevent delicate situations from escalating into irreversible spirals. The attempt was to help them to reflect and be able to break with degenerative patterns and in this way become more resourceful conversational partners (Shotter & Cunliffe

2003). The ultimate aim is to create organizational change. The process implied questioning the taken-for-granted assumptions and routinized daily practices by discussing pedagogical and human values and amplifying perspectives and repertoires for action. In my view, we succeeded to a certain extent in creating transformative learning (Mezirow 2000) among the majority of the employees and the leaders. Through roleplaying we were both bodily, emotionally and intellectually engaged, while discovering and learning “in the making” that there are no universal formulas in this kind of work.

### **Learning as embodied social practice**

Roleplay has an esthetic dimension and engages all our senses. As mentioned earlier, it involves multiple forms of communication, not only the spoken word. Similar to the learning theories presented by Dewey (1916) and Lave and Wenger (1991), we worked with learning considered as social practice, in which person, activity and world are mutually constitutive. This is in contrast to learning as a uniquely cognitive process. Instead of holding that we learn a repertoire of cognitive schemata, the project was rooted in the idea that we learn new ways of practice through active, embodied engagement, as co-participation, which to a high extent relies on the capacity to improvise together. As Lave and Wenger point out, speech, knowing and learning are closely intertwined in the participation:

“The notion of participation thus dissolves dichotomies between cerebral and embodied activity, between contemplation and involvement, between abstraction and experience; persons, actions and the world are implicated in all thought, speech, knowing and learning” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 52).

In sum, the roleplay with a polyphonic reflecting team contained many different elements: imagination, identification, multiplicity, changing perspectives, meta-reflexivity, dialogue, embodiment, relational responsiveness, improvisation, play, experimentation, risk-taking, collaboration, and co-creation. Engaging in this practice involves all our bodily senses. Together, these multiple elements constitute a whole, integrated, and multilayered approach, which I would characterize as synesthetic, collaborative learning. As Nicholson points out:

“The gift of applied drama is that it offers an opportunity for an ethical praxis that disrupts horizons, in which new insights are generated and where the familiar might be seen, embodied and represented from alternative perspectives and different points of view” (Nicholson, 2005 p. 167).

## **Relational ethics**

A key concept in this inquiry is, in my view, the relational ethics condensed in Shotter’s term “*witness*” thinking (Shotter 2008, 2010). This inquiry encourages us to understand processes from “within” and to be “with” the other person instead of positioning ourselves above (or beneath) the person. We saw this challenge clearly in the two examples presented above. Instead of treating the other instrumentally (for instance, by insisting mechanically on institutional rules) or as an object for fulfilling one’s own goals, it is a matter of meeting the other with equity, thoughtfulness and curiosity. In other words, it’s a question of meeting and recognizing the other as a unique person. In our project, “*witness*” thinking became extremely relevant, for instance, concerning the ways in which an employee approaches a young resident, a parent or another colleague or the ways in which a leader relates to an employee and vice versa. Instead of labeling the other, it is a matter of seeking to acknowledge and valorize the other’s *unique otherness* (Shotter 2005a). As described elsewhere, this requires that we make an effort to try to relate to the other person and talk *with* him or her, instead of talking *to* or *about* the other. At the same time, it is a matter of developing a special awareness of thinking from *within* the unique situation and the context for the conversation, and from this position being able to sense and notice what is going on, what is on its way and what kind of new possibilities for action are emerging (Hersted, 2016 in press). As Shotter points out:

Witness (dialogic) thinking is a form of reflective interaction that involves coming into living contact with an other’s living being, with their utterances, their bodily expressions, their words, their “works” [...] Thus, in aboutness thinking, (in its extreme, pure form) another person remains wholly and merely an object of consciousness, and not another consciousness (Shotter 2005a, p. 50-51).

Closely related to “*witness*” thinking is Bakhtin’s idea of *the unfinalized other* (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 63). According to Bakhtin it would be unethical to *finalize* (or determinate) another person by defining who that person *is*, as if that person had a fixed identity. Drawing on Bakhtin’s dialogism we can say that

dialogue avoids putting people into fixed identities, definitions or categories and builds on the recognition of the other's unfinalizability. Bakhtin did not believe in an autonomous inner self, a core nucleus, on the contrary, he claimed that what we usually understand as a 'self' is polyphonic (multivoiced) and that these multiple voices are born out of relationships. Drawing on Bakhtin's dialogism, Frank (2004) elegantly puts it:

[...] no one person's voice is ever even his or her own; no one existence is ever clearly bounded. Instead, each voice is always permeated with the voices of others. Each voice resists and contests some voices, and it embraces others, but there is no one that could coincide with itself (Frank, 2004).

When finalizing another person we create alienation and distance and we limit the possibilities of other people to show their polyphonic self. In a Bakhtinian understanding, this is not a dialogic approach. Frank points out that:

Dialogue depends on perpetual openness to the other's capacity to become someone other than whoever she or he already is. Moreover, in a dialogical relation, any person takes responsibility for the other's becoming, as well as recognizing that the other's voice has entered one's own (Frank, 2004, p. 967).

As mentioned elsewhere, when expressing ourselves we expect the other to respond or act actively. In the same way, we experience that others call us into response and so on. In this way our communication is never completed but always *becoming*. In this view of communication, it is a matter of taking an open approach and being responsive in relation to the emerging and unpredictable. As Shotter puts it:

As soon as I begin an interchange of looks with another person, and I sense them as looking toward me in a certain way (as they see me looking toward them in the same way too), a little ethical and political world is created between us. We each look toward each other expectantly, with anticipations, some shared, some not, arising from what we have already lived in our lives so far (Shotter 2005d, p. 104).

We may have anticipations concerning a relationship but we cannot predict the response of the other. However, we can develop our relational skills by using our imagination. With help from roleplay, we can train our ability to identify ourselves with the other and imagine different sorts of responses from the

other before the response takes place. In this way, we may become more resourceful and skilled in participating in living dialogues with others. Here, it must be underlined that it is *not* a matter of strategically planning conversations and meetings but, according to Shotter's (2008, 2010) idea of witness thinking, it is a question of talking *with* each other, instead of talking *to* or *about* each other (Hersted, 2016 – in press). Or as explained here:

Dialogically-structured activities occur, then, only when we enter into mutually responsive, living, embodied relations with the others and othernesses around us – when we cease to set ourselves, unresponsively, over against them, and allow ourselves to enter into an inter-involvement with them (Shotter 2005, p. 23).

Not only did the participants in our project play and experiment with different ways of communicating *with* each other, but I as facilitator and reflexive inquirer also had to work closely *with* them and meet each of them as a *unique other*. The challenge is to show patience, recognition, and curiosity and to be fully present in the unique moments of creating together. This requires that the facilitator and the other participants constantly pay attention to the context and that they demonstrate flexibility and an ability to improvise during the process.

We can compress this kind of relational and contextual awareness into some basic ethical guidelines, such as:

- Always recognize the unique *otherness of the other* (term by Bakhtin and Shotter)
- Avoid the construction of closed identity conclusions (working from the Bakhtinian idea that we have *multiple* and *unfinalized* selves)
- Work *with* people and at the same time challenge and question the taken-for-granted assumptions and established truths (in the group and by oneself)
- Continue being curious, keep wondering and ask open questions
- Always be creative and look for new openings in the dialogue
- Avoid imposing initiatives on anybody but work *with* people in a *relationally-responsive* way

- Always respect a participant's wish not to participate in the roleplay. Be creative and offer other ways of participating, e.g. taking part in the reflecting team
- Work from the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky)
- Ensure that all participants feel comfortable during and after the process

In order to avoid typical pitfalls, and based on our practice, I furthermore have some general suggestions to those readers who might consider using the inquiry of roleplay with a reflecting team:

- It is crucial to create a nonjudgmental atmosphere with mutual recognition
- The reflexive inquirer and the participants must be very sensitive towards tensions and conflicts in the organization and ensure relational responsibility and respect for everybody in the process
- The reflexive inquirer must stay curious and be able to use different kinds of questioning types (coaching skills is a must-have for a good outcome) in order to open up for new openings and new understandings. I, myself, have drawn great inspiration from the work of Karl Tomm (Tomm 1987-88; Tomm et al. 2014).
- Participants must help each other be fully present, also when a few colleagues are in focus during a longer session. It is important to activate the reflecting team frequently in order to keep the energy and motivation among all participants and to inspire each other mutually.
- The *reflexive inquirer* must bring energy into the process and possess a surplus of mental resources, in particular when the participants take up conflicting and vulnerable topics.

### **Final remarks**

As this project suggests, dialogic roleplay combined with a polyphonic reflecting team can serve as a significant tool in the development of dialogical and relational skills for individuals and teams. The inquiry outlined here draws attention to the ways in which we use language in constituting reality, our relations, our identities and the creation of new opportunities in our social worlds. Adopting an explorative, experimental and playful approach, this educational practice was designed



to increase discursive and relational awareness, and to invite creativity in developing new and alternative possibilities for action. Not only did the project involve learning among a significant group of employees but among the leading team, as well, in order to create organizational change. The results of the project are promising and can serve as inspiration within professional fields such as consultancy, education of leaders and employees and academic research. It is also important to notice that the benefits of this inquiry go beyond organizational development and can be stretched even more to the educational sphere, augmenting existing teaching and training practices. Our aim has been to experiment and try out a method for both learning and research at the same time, and there is no doubt that this inquiry based on roleplaying differs from many conventional research methods. However, from a constructionist approach, all research constructs the world on its own terms, and there is no research purified from human values, relationships, earlier experiences, etc. Seen from the perspective of action research (Reason & Bradbury 2008), the inquiry presented here can be defined as a qualitative, explorative and collaborative research inquiry.

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