Situated Dialogic Action Research as an Approach to Organizational Learning "from within" Dialogical Process

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This paper contributes both to the field of organizational learning and action research by exploring how organizational learning can be developed "from within" process and "from within" the organization itself through "situated dialogic action research" (Shotter, 2006, 2010a), as opposed to instrumental and linear approaches to organizational learning. The paper argues for a relational-responsive process-oriented approach to co-creating learning in organizations, and the central research question of this paper is: How can we co-create organizational learning while moving forward together "from within" dialogical process? This is illustrated through an example from a five-year action research project in a public institution specialized in supporting citizens with significant visual and hearing impairments. In this project, leaders and employees from the institution participated in dialogues in minor groups and collaborated on specific actions for learning and knowledge development defined by themselves through situated dialogic action research. Data from the dialogical process were generated through audio recordings, photos, field notes, and visual posters with drawings and notes from the process. The findings from the project have shown that the process has led to learning and development at personal, departmental, and organizational levels. This included: 1) an increased reflexivity in the dialogues; 2) a greater sense of agency and empowerment among the participants; 3) strengthened collaboration within and across organizational units (teams and departments); 4) enhanced competences (among all of us) in participating in, and facilitating, dialogical processes; 5) a strengthened collaboration in the relationship between leaders and employees; and 6) enhanced learning and professional development across disciplines and locations. The overall conclusion of our study is that action research can be used for much more than just developing competence in organizations, while the project has shown that situated dialogic action research can also enhance organizational learning and strengthen relational collaboration and coordination across structures, units and locations.

Keywords: Action research, organizational learning, "withness-thinking", dialogue, process

Introduction

In this paper, we argue that learning and change in organizations should be based on a relational, dialogical, processual and emergent perspective, and that attempts to do so should be initiated *from within* the organization through dialogue and active involvement, as suggested by John Shotter and his notion of *situated dialogic action research* (Shotter, 2006). Furthermore, we present and discuss an extensive action research project as an illustrative example of using action research as a qualitative approach to developing learning and research in a large organization.

The paper is structured as follows: 1) in the first section, we describe and discuss different understandings of organizational learning; 2) in Section 2, we argue that organizational learning must be understood as a facilitated process based on situated participation, dialogue and interaction "from within" the organization; 3) in the third section, we define and discuss the notions of "withness-thinking" and "aboutness-thinking" as coined by John Shotter; and 4) in Section 4, the methodology of the project is described. Thereafter we explain 5) the background of the project and 6) the project design. We then provide the reader with 7) an illustrative example, before 8) the most crucial findings and learning points from the project are described, and 9) finally, the overall conclusion is presented.

Different Understandings of Organizational Learning

Organizational learning is a complex phenomenon that draws on various approaches and involves learning at multiple levels. It can be understood as individual learning, where employees learn within, and on behalf of, the organization, and it can also be seen as learning that unfolds in the professional and social communities of practice within the organization (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), where learning occurs in teams, departments and across these units (Brown & Duguid, 1991, 2001; Gherardi, 2006; Nicolini & Meznar, 1995). Moreover, the organization as a whole can be viewed as a learning entity, where learning is linked to the development of, for instance, the culture, communication, strategy, and vision of the organization. We see this approach, for instance, in the notion of *the learning organization* (Jørgensen et al., 2019; Senge, 1990).

However, many traditional approaches to organizational learning are still marked by instrumental and technical rationalities aimed at improving corporate performance and

efficiency with very little understanding of learning as a relational-responsive and collaborative process "from within" the organization, and across organizational structures and silos. These approaches typically overlook the emergent and relational nature of learning as it unfolds across boundaries and in everyday collaboration. In our view, organizational learning requires continuous dialogue and active participation that is grounded in the everyday experiences of those within the organization.

We argue that organizational learning must be understood as a process that arises through situated participation, dialogue, and interaction. This shift moves the focus from the idea of top-down implementation and transmission of knowledge to the creation of meaning through dialogue, and from structures and systems to relational-responsiveness. Such a view aligns with ideas in process theory and social constructionist thinking (Gergen, 2015; Shotter, 2006), which highlights how learning and knowledge is always shaped through language, interaction and context. These perspectives are particularly relevant in times of complexity and change, where meaning and direction must be negotiated through dialogical process. In recent years, an inspiring movement within the field of process philosophy has influenced the field of organizational *theory* (e.g. Chia, 2010; Gergen, 2010; Helin et al., 2014; Langley & Tsoukas, 2017; Shotter, 2010c); however, in our view, there is still a need to develop relational-responsive inquiries for organizational learning in *practice*.

Therefore, in this paper, we argue in favour of action research as an approach to developing learning "from within" the organization. From this standpoint, action research is more than a *method*: it provides a practical and reflective *orientation* to learning. In particular, what Shotter (2010a) refers to as *situated dialogic action research* invites researchers and practitioners to inquire together into the challenges they have experienced, cultivating learning and agency *from within* organizational life. Instead of applying predefined and fixed models developed elsewhere, participants generate insights through their own activities, relationships and concerns.

Later in this paper we show how this perspective can be enacted through a five-year research project in a public organization. Our inquiry is guided by the following research question: *How can we co-create organizational learning while moving forward together through dialogical process from within the organization?*

By highlighting how learning can emerge through dialogue, joint action and reflection, we aim to show how *situated dialogic action research* can serve as a way to create meaningful and contextually relevant change – shaped not by predefined models but by those who live and work within the organization.

Situated Dialogic Action Research: A Relational Approach to Learning "from within" the Organization

Action research is concerned with development, learning and change within organizations and social communities through the active involvement of people and encompasses many different approaches. In this paper, we discuss the use of action research – which encompasses a wide range of approaches that combine action, dialogue and reflection in cycles of inquiry aimed at learning and change – to create and support organizational learning. Rather than constituting a single method, it is better understood as a family of participatory traditions rooted in diverse epistemologies, including pragmatism, systems thinking, critical theory and social constructionism.

Our focus is on action research as a dialogical and situated approach to organizational learning from a social constructionist perspective. This orientation builds on the work of John Shotter (2010a), who introduced the term *situated dialogic action research* to describe an inquiry that unfolds within the flow of dialogue and social interaction. In this perspective, learning and knowledge are not transferred from the outside but are rather co-created through reflexive dialogue in relation to everyday organizational practice.

Action research from this standpoint supports organizational learning *from within* by creating space for participants to articulate their wishes for change, address challenges, explore new possibilities and take action together. It invites practitioners and researchers to inquire collaboratively into issues that matter to them, rather than solving externally defined problems. The role of the facilitator is not to provide predefined solutions but to nurture spaces where participants can engage in dialogue, reflect together and respond to what emerges. Hilary Bradbury (Bradbury, 2015) offers a useful definition of action research that supports this approach:

> Action research is a democratic and participative orientation to knowledge creation. It brings together action and reflection, theory and practice, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern. Action research is a pragmatic co-creation of knowing *with*, not *on* or *about*, people. (Bradbury, 2015, p. 1)

In our work, this co-creative orientation is further informed by a social constructionist understanding of organizations, where meaning, development, learning and change emerge through language and interaction. Rather than viewing language as a neutral tool, we see it as constitutive of practice – shaping what becomes possible in relationships and organizational life.

From an action research perspective, organizational learning is not understood as an individual process but as a complex phenomenon involving social learning, cyclical processes, democratic participation and the development of communities. In action research, the focus is on the creation of learning and change based on urgent challenges that must be rooted in practice and defined *from within* the organization itself. Dialogue, development and shared reflection on actions take place in facilitated processes within learning loops that connect reflection, dialogue and learning to practice. Thus, an experimental learning space is created where participants collaborate around their challenges, often in smaller groups.

In other words, in action research, learning and knowledge must be created *with* the participants in a co-creative process. Action research has a pragmatic aspect, while insisting on action as well as evaluation and reflection upon the action. At the same time, contemporary action research often draws on social constructionist ideas while paying attention not only to action, but also to the use of language, as learning, development and change in organizations are seen as social, relational and linguistic constructions created through dialogue, interaction and meaning making as a relational-responsive process. Or put more precisely: in a social constructionist orientation, our use of language is understood as action and therefore as a constitutive force – our "sayings" are also "doings" (Gergen, 2015; Gergen & Gergen, 2015; Hersted et al., 2020; Ness & Strong, 2013; Shotter, 2007, 2010a).

"Withness-Thinking" Versus "Aboutness-Thinking"

As explained earlier, this paper argues for a relational-responsive process-oriented approach to creating learning in organizations. Our approach to action research is inspired by social constructionist and process-oriented ideas as seen in the writings of John Shotter (Shotter, 2010c) and Kenneth Gergen (Gergen, 2010), and by the notion of "knowing from within" and "withness-thinking" as coined and unfolded by the former (Shotter, 2005a, 2005b, 2006). According to Shotter, "withness-thinking" contrasts with "aboutness-thinking" and involves being open and responsive and continuously adjusting our communication and actions to the response we receive from our surroundings – rather than simply pushing through our own agenda. As Shotter (2006) points out:

> […] If we are to rethink appropriate styles of empirical research, then 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. Crucially, this kind of responsive understanding only becomes available to us in our relations with living forms when we enter into dialogically structured relations with them. It remains utterly unavailable to us as external observers. I will call this kind of thinking, 'thinking-from-within' or 'withness-thinking', to contrast it with the 'aboutness-thinking' that is more familiar to us. (Shotter, 2006, p. 585)

This means that the researcher must engage actively with the participants instead of studying people and organizations at a distance and position organizational members as objects or informants. As previously mentioned, Shotter uses the term *situated dialogic action research* (2010a), in which the focus lies on generating knowing-from-within (2006, 2010a), meaning that researchers engage *with* co-researchers through relational-responsive dialogue *from within* the living flow of activity to find possibilities for moving on (Shotter, 2010a). *Withness-thinking* and engaging *from within* imply being sensitive to the relationship, the surroundings and the organizational context, i.e. moving from an inquiry focusing only on what goes on inside people's heads to an inquiry "focused on what people go on inside of" (2010a, p. 272). In brief, *withness-thinking* concerns the ability to show relational responsiveness (Hersted, 2015, 2021; Shotter, 2006), which

involves the ability to relate to others, to see things from others' perspective, to show interest in other people and their relationship with the world, and to take into consideration their life circumstances and their experience of the world. As Shotter (2006) explains:

> While there are many other writers who are oriented toward helping us think *about* process 'from the outside', so to speak — that is, about processes that we merely observe as happening *over there* — there is another way of engaged, responsive thinking that becomes available to us in our relations with living forms, when we can enter into *dynamic or dialogical relations* with them. I will call this thinking-from-within, or *withness*-thinking. (Shotter, 2006, p. 586)

As a philosopher of dialogue, John Shotter exhibited a deep interest in action research and wrote several articles about this approach (e.g. Shotter, 2007, 2010a) where he advocated *knowing-from-within* the organization itself, rather than trying to impose overarching concepts onto it. In this regard, he not only used the term *withness-thinking* but also the concept of *knowing-from-within*, which he defines as "a kind of knowledge one has *from within* a social situation, a group, an institution, or a society, and which exists only in that situation" (Shotter, 2010b). According to Shotter and his co-authors, we should strive to listen attentively and respond sensitively to our own and others' uniqueness (Katz et al., 2004; Shotter, 2006). This poses an ethical demand: we cannot simply use others, or our environment, instrumentally based on a "rational" logic. The concept of thinking and knowing "from within" emphasizes the importance of engaging deeply and responsively with people in their context. Shotter's ideas of knowing "from-within" and "withness-thinking" highlight the necessity of listening attentively and responding sensitively to the uniqueness of each person and trying to understand how the individual experiences a particular situation and the circumstances surrounding it. This ethical demand challenges us to move beyond instrumental, rational-logical approaches that treat people and environments as mere tools for achieving predefined goals. Instead, it calls for an approach rooted in respect, mutual understanding and a commitment to co-creating meaning and solutions "from within" lived experience and the relational stream of life in the organization – an

approach that corresponds very well to the ethical responsibility inherent in participatory and context-sensitive action research. Based on these ideas and ethical principles, in our project, while attempting to facilitate action research processes from a "withness-thinking" approach, we paid specific attention to the following working questions:

- How can we co-create organizational learning while moving forward together "from within" dialogical process?
- How can we as facilitators and action researchers relate to co-researchers in engaged and relational-responsive ways and try to understand their world "from within"?
- How does the world appear from their perspective?
- How do co-researchers express their needs, wishes, and challenges?

When working with organizational learning through action research, the action researcher's role is to engage in and facilitate dialogical processes. This involves working with dialogue, reflexivity and action in groups, emphasizing co-creation, learning and knowledge production as relational processes. It implies creating space for multiple voices, in line with the idea of polyphony (Bakhtin, 1984; Frimann & Hersted, 2020). Moreover, these dialogical processes are aimed at exploring and co-creating the desired future through joint visualization, dialogue, and actions based on the participants' own needs, proposals and ideas. Through dialogue, relationships are built and strengthened, and opportunities for future actions are created; it is about paying attention to the spontaneous, the lively, the embodied, while being responsive in encounters with co-researchers. In the following two sections, we zoom in on the methodology and the specific action research project.

Methodology

This study emerged from a shared ambition: to learn, together with organizational members, how meaningful change can unfold from within everyday practice. Rather than applying an external model or following a predefined one, our inquiry developed through sustained engagement with challenges experienced by the participants (co-researchers)

themselves and their own initiatives for change shaped by our reflexive questioning and dialogues with a *reflecting team* (for a more detailed description of our use of a *reflecting team*, see Frimann et al., 2019).

Over a five-year period, we collaborated with approximately 70 co-researchers in a public organization through four subprojects, each forming its own dialogical learning space. The ambition was not only to support local, organizational learning and development but to explore how cycles of reflexivity, experimentation and shared inquiry could strengthen organizational learning "from within".

Grounded in a relational understanding of learning and knowledge creation, our research design combined dialogue, reflexivity and action in ways that invited responsiveness, co-creation and curiosity. In this orientation, what counted as empirical material, insight or development was always situated – emerging through dialogue and interaction rather than imposed criteria.

The research was grounded in a relational understanding of knowledge creation and drew on Bill Torbert's (1998) framework of first-, second- and third-person perspectives to support reflection and learning at individual, group and organizational levels (see also Erfan & Torbert, 2015). In each subproject, participants identified a wish for development based on challenges they faced in their organizational practice. These inquiries were carried forward in collaborative cycles of dialogue, experimentation and reflection – facilitated by two university researchers and two internal consultants together with co-researchers participating in *reflecting teams* (Andersen, 1991), *witnessing teams* (White, 2011) and *future workshops* (Jungk & Müllert, 1996). These formats provided dialogical spaces where co-researchers could share their experiences, articulate their concerns and challenges, and also develop and reformulate initiatives in response to feedback from their surroundings. Each cycle emphasized relational responsiveness and co-creation, rather than solution delivery or externally imposed change.

Data were generated systematically to support iterative cycles of action and reflexivity. Throughout the project, we generated over 400 hours of audio recordings from the dialogue sessions, focus group interviews and additional workshops, and furthermore, we compiled field notes, photographs, and other visual scaffolds. At the beginning and

end of each subproject, we conducted semi-structured focus group interviews to gain insights into participants' evolving experiences, reflections, and perceived learning.

Our analysis combined thematic strategies with a focus on what Shotter (2007) terms "arresting" or "striking" moments – which can be described as dialogical episodes or turning points where new ways of seeing, understanding or acting begin to emerge through interaction. Shotter defines these moments in the following way:

> […] we call them 'striking', 'moving', 'arresting', or 'touching' moments. Such moments seem to matter to us in that, in our lived experience of them, they unfold in such a way as to accommodate novelty or to resolve a difficulty. In other words, in connection with what earlier we called *difficulties of orientation* or *relational difficulties*, such 'striking' moments seem to provide us with the kind of exemplars we need, in moments of disorientation on encountering something unexpected, to remind us of ways of relating, or modes of orientation, or styles of address, that might be helpful in re-orienting us. (Shotter, 2008, p. 130)

These arresting or striking moments were identified through repeated reading of transcriptions, and their further analysis was inspired by discourse analysis in relation to the desire for development of individual co-researchers and the shared reflections within the teams.

To ensure analytic depth and triangulation (Flick, 2022), we synthesized multiple types of empirical material – dialogue transcripts, visual scaffolds, field notes and interview data – mapping how shifts in understanding unfolded across time and levels. We developed visual process maps for each co-researcher, illustrating how their wish for development, experimental actions and key insights were interwoven with group and organizational dynamics. The data have been analysed and discussed carefully among the three authors, and excerpts used for publishing have been verified and approved by the participants/co-researchers involved.

Background of the Project

The action research project was conducted in a public organization that provides highly specialized pedagogy and support in the field of deaf-blindness and hearing loss. The

project was initiated because the organization was confronted with increasing demands for documentation and knowledge development. Therefore, the management and the staff agreed to work with a stronger focus on knowledge sharing, knowledge development, and bridging theory and practice; however, this was easier said than done, as the organization faced a challenge in focusing more on knowledge work. A series of questions were raised, such as: *How can we understand the term "knowledge"?, Who defines the meaning of this term? and How could a sense of ownership among staff be created and supported?*

Based on earlier sporadic experiences with action research, the organization found that action research could be a helpful approach in creating learning spaces where the organization's members could collectively develop their practice and the organization through social interaction, dialogue and new initiatives for action. Based on these experiences, the management group decided to initiate this action research project, which should be facilitated by two internal consultants from the institution and two researchers from Aalborg University. The roles of the two internal consultants and the two researchers from the university were, on the one hand, to design, plan and facilitate the project and, on the other, to generate and analyse data from the process for publication in collaboration with the co-researchers (the participating employees and mid-level managers). This collaboration has resulted, to date, in several publications (Frimann et al., 2018; Frimann et al., 2019, 2020, 2022).

During the first year of the project, 22 employees actively participated and new knowledge and sustainable solutions to organizational problems were developed in a co-creative process. Based on these positive results, three additional action research projects were carried out as a collaboration between the institution and the university. In total, over a five-year period, 68 co-researchers participated in one of the four subprojects, including both employees and middle managers.

Project Design

The focal point of all four subprojects was the co-researchers' own development goals, which served as the driving force in the projects. At the beginning of every sub-project, action research was introduced in each department as the overarching framework. Here we facilitated a process with the co-researchers where they discussed their hopes and aspirations for the organization through the following questions: "What kind of

challenges do you encounter in your daily practice, where you have been thinking: 'I wish that...'?" and "How could the realization of the desired changes improve the citizen-focused efforts and support the development of knowledge and professional competencies among the employees?" Subsequently, learning groups were established across organizational affiliations to support interdisciplinary dialogue, knowledge exchange, and co-creation of learning and new initiatives among the co-researchers.
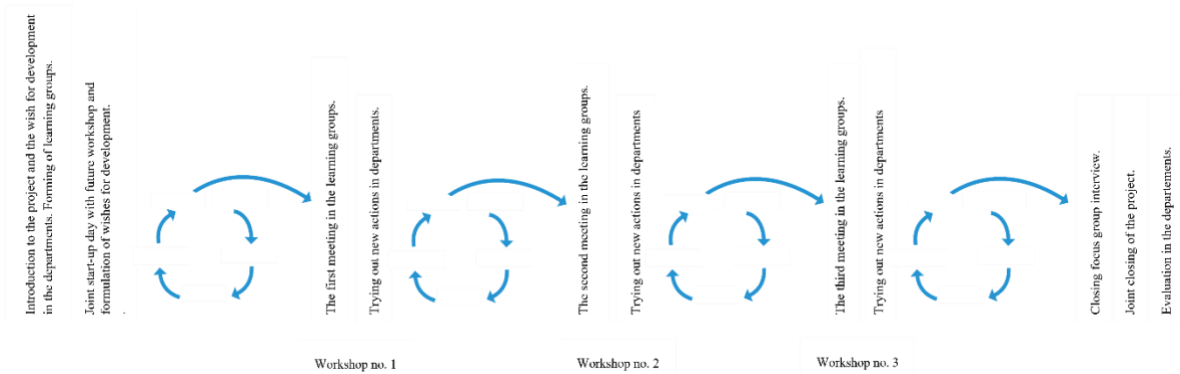

Figure 1. An example of the overall project design used in each subproject.

The last subproject began with a *future workshop*, which provided an opportunity to work with the future, based on critique, dreams and realistic possibilities for actions (Jungk & Müllert, 1996). On the shared kick-off day, we facilitated a process whereby the co-researchers were invited to dream about the future and define and discuss their own ideas and wishes for development.

After the introduction, the co-researchers met for four dialogue sessions facilitated by the two researchers from the university and the two internal consultants. There was an interval of approximately six weeks between each session.

In the first dialogue session, each co-researcher clarified the need for change and formulated their own development goal as the foundation for their inquiry throughout the project period. Each session consisted of a dialogue within the learning group facilitated by the two university researchers and the two internal development consultants. These sessions were defined by a learning environment based on interaction, collaboration, shared reflection, and the involvement of multiple perspectives. In this process, we used different approaches and tools, including *reflecting teams*, *witnessing teams*, Karl

Tomm's questioning types (Tomm, 1987a, 1987b, 1988) and role-playing (for further details, see Frimann et al., 2018, 2019, 2020, 2022).

Based on the shared reflexive processes, each co-researcher decided to try out specific actions to bring them closer to their development goal. Between the sessions, each co-researcher tried out the defined action in their own department and received responses from their colleagues and managers. All these actions were discussed and evaluated within the learning group in the subsequent session, with the evaluation and the shared reflection in the learning group forming the basis for adjustments or the formulation of new actions.
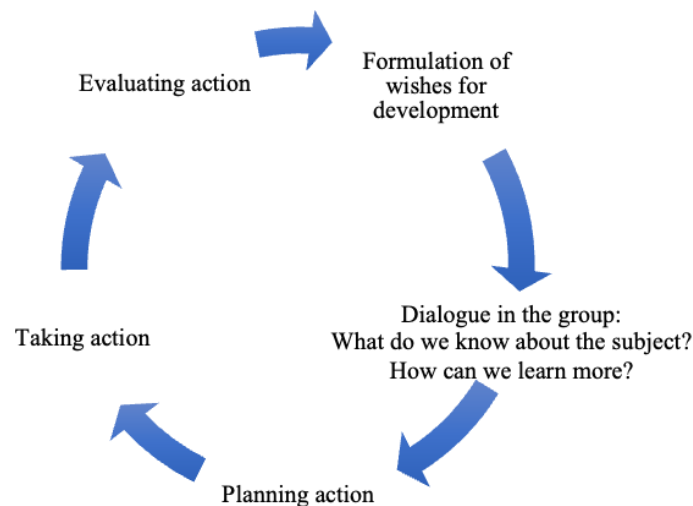

Figure 2. Overall process in each loop

Throughout the project period, the co-researchers had the opportunity to receive support and coaching from the facilitators of the process (two university researchers and two internal consultants). Workshops were held concurrently to create space and opportunities to address related themes to supporting the co-researchers' ideas for development. In the latest project, these workshops focused on Karl Tomm's questioning types (Tomm, 1987–88), "witness-thinking" (Hersted, 2015, 2021; Shotter, 2005a, 2005b, 2006) and Jody Gittell's theory of relational coordination. The latter addresses how a higher degree of relational coordination can support collaboration across units and professional differences (Gittell, 2016).

An Illustrative Example: Maria's Journey as an Action Researcher

The following example from the project illustrates how our work with action research provided a framework for organizational development and learning "from within" the organization. The example shows how the co-researcher Maria, who was an employee in the organization, became able to specify, design and try out new initiatives for organizational development. During the process, Maria began to facilitate dialogical relational processes that enabled her and her colleagues to move forward together, co creating new ways of solving the core tasks in the department.

In the first dialogue session with Maria and the *reflecting team*, Maria expressed a desire to co-create a shared and common understanding of the core task in their department, so that she and her colleagues could have a shared foundation to work from. Maria's aim was to support and improve the onboarding and inclusion of new employees in the department. During the first dialogue session, Maria illustrated the organizational landscape with drawings and explained how the support for the citizens and task solving in the department was dependent on the ways she and her colleagues coordinated and communicated with each other, as well as how they were able to onboard new colleagues into the department. To gain a nuanced perspective on collaboration within the department, Maria investigated how and under what conditions she and her colleagues had already succeeded in developing new professional initiatives. At a staff meeting, she invited her colleagues to share positive experiences from their daily practice. According to Maria, this generated energy and supported a dialogue about what she described as "*star moments*" in the department.

Based on the dialogues with her colleagues, Maria recognized the importance of further specifying her development goal: "[…] it was helpful to turn it into a specific project," she said, emphasizing the importance of involving her colleagues in creating the procedures for onboarding new colleagues: "[…] I really, really want them to be engaged in it. It shouldn't just be some materials that I develop on my own."

Maria realized that if she should succeed in involving her colleagues in the co-creation of new knowledge "from within" the department, she would have to revise her own expectations of the final outcome and work from a more process-oriented way, as she said: "You have to start by figuring out… well, is there something here that's not

open, or is everything open, because it doesn't make sense to go into it with the intent to ask open questions, if you've already decided something in your mind."

During the project, Maria learned that her colleagues had different approaches and learning styles and that it's important to embrace diversity and meet each colleague at eye level "from within" their individual circumstances to succeed with the onboarding of new employees. As she said, "[…] you need to have different approaches along the way […]".

In the subsequent sessions, Maria facilitated dialogical learning processes at staff meetings, and she and her colleagues co-created new knowledge about how they could collaborate on the onboarding of new colleagues in more successful ways. In the dialogues with the *reflecting team*, Maria emphasized the importance of strengthening collaboration in the department. Among other things, Maria talked about taking ownership and using different dialogical approaches to enable her colleagues to become more actively involved and feel they have a genuine opportunity to express themselves.

Through experimental actions, subsequent response, evaluation and reflexive dialogue, Maria realized that, to succeed in creating a shared foundation for onboarding new employees, she needed to facilitate dialogically based processes focusing on co-creation and learning among current and future colleagues rather than elaborating on a completed manual. In this context, Maria talked about commitment as a key factor:

Facilitator:	What is the risk if it's just you or two others preparing all the materials? What would be the worst-case scenario?
Maria:	Well, then there would be no commitment, really.
Facilitator:	So, no one would take the material into use?
Maria:	Exactly, no one would use it.

In the action research project, a space for recognition, dialogue, learning and reflexivity was created, where Maria had the opportunity to train and develop professional, dialogical, and relational competences. In her role as an action researcher, Maria expressed a sense of empowerment and began to facilitate reflexive dialogues with colleagues in her department. She and her colleagues jointly discussed and co-created new solutions to organizational challenges. Maria began to involve her colleagues in the

development of a new procedure and practice for the onboarding of newcomers to the organization. In collaboration, they developed new ideas, tried out new initiatives and adjusted these initiatives in accordance with the response and feedback they received from other colleagues involved. As Maria expressed it, "[…] before, I was just someone who had a lot of opinions, and the others had a lot of opinions, right? But now, I've actually taken the lead on this, and that gives a mandate, which is super good […]".

Approximately one year after the project had ended, Maria made the following comments in a follow-up interview conducted by one of the process facilitators:

Facilitator: ... In the project you facilitated organizational development and learning in your own department. And then I was thinking if there have been any situations where you have done that after the end of the project. Did you have the opportunity to do so?

Maria: Well, I think that in one way or another I do that a bit all the time, so it's not because I'm thinking that there is a concrete subject, but I think that I have it with me in my luggage in the ways I approach the discussions and our work in practice...

Facilitator: Yes?

Maria: Because I've become trained in thinking and asking more openly, and in that way, I also think that I'm on a good track concerning the facilitating of dialogues, because I suddenly create the opportunity for everyone's contributions, they become really important…

As we can see in this excerpt, Maria says that she has become more aware of herself as a facilitator in her daily practice and the importance of "thinking from within" the department, asking open questions and creating opportunities for her colleagues to express themselves and contribute to the discussions in the organization. This may be viewed as an important achievement in relation to the journey and process of organizational learning. It also seems that Maria has been inspired by some of the theoretical concepts that were introduced in the project, such as the term "withness-thinking", because later, in the follow-up interview, she comments:

> "I've been thinking that some of the concepts that really have made sense to me
> are concepts like "relational coordination" and "withness-thinking". We often talk
> about collaboration, but sometimes it's very helpful to make use of other concepts
> and words to understand what it means to collaborate around our pedagogical tasks,
> so these terms have created a lot of value for me".

Findings and Learning Points

As a reader, you may ask: "What were the outcomes of the project?" A key point is that this action research project focused on creating organizational learning, development and change "from within" the organization itself. In Shotter's words, the process was based on knowing "from within" (Shotter, 2006), by creating a specific dialogically based learning space facilitated by the two internal consultants and the two researchers from the university. Through process facilitation, within the frame of action research, and through the use of a *reflecting team*, a learning community was co-created, which was directly connected to the organization's daily practice. This frame provided the co-researchers with courage and agency, enabling them to experiment with new actions in their daily practice and dwell on learning processes *from within* the organization. Based on this experience, we believe that it is crucial that the process be rooted in the participants' own ideas and wishes for development and learning, and that the facilitators, as well as the co-researchers, are willing to work from an understanding of organizational learning as a relational, dialogical process *from within* the organization, which differs significantly from more top-down-oriented approaches based on the idea of knowledge transmission. Throughout the project, the process was evaluated by the co-researchers after each session and through focus group interviews at the end of each subproject, where they emphasized that working with action research had led to learning and development at personal, departmental and organizational levels. This included:

1) increased reflexivity in the dialogues;
2) a greater sense of agency and empowerment;
3) strengthened collaboration within and across organizational units (teams and departments);
4) enhanced competences to participate in – and facilitate – dialogical processes;

5) strengthened collaboration in the relationship between leaders and employees; and

6) learning and professional development across professional disciplines and physical locations.

It should be emphasized that, to be able to work "from within" an organization, we find it crucial to distinguish between a mechanistic and a process-oriented mindset. This requires a shift from a focus on entities to wholeness, embracing diversity and cross-disciplinarity, and from quantity to quality, from structures to process, from knowing as transmission to co-creation and from Cartesian certainty to curiosity. It also requires a loss of control and the ability to "go with the flow", because learning in a process understanding can be neither predicted nor controlled but will always be in constant movement. Furthermore, it requires process facilitators to be capable of embracing complexity and working from an integrative, systemic, and process-oriented mindset, rather than focusing on learning as a linear process. When working from a dialogically based approach in groups, an open space for complexity and unpredictability must be created. In other words, convergence must be embraced along with divergence, polyvocality, diversity, disorder, and ambiguity. Most crucial, though, is the ability to "be with" the participants and try to connect to them and understand their relationship with their surroundings.

Finally, it is important to emphasize the development of an integrative understanding based on connectedness and mutual dependency among the participants – both employees and leaders. Such a development requires ongoing dialogue and shared reflection, something that action research, as a methodological approach and a theoretical framework, can offer, when processes are facilitated in smaller groups (we recommend around seven to nine participants in each group). We learned from the project that action research can not only work well to facilitate learning but can also foster a culture of co-creation and shared responsibility, enabling an organization to navigate complexity and create meaningful and sustainable change from within.

Conclusion

The overall conclusion of our study is that action research can be used for much more than just developing competence in organizations, while the project has shown that situated *dialogic action research* can also enhance organizational learning and strengthen relational coordination and collaboration across structures, units, professional disciplines and physical locations. It is crucial that the process be rooted in the participants' own ideas and wishes for development and learning, and that both the facilitators and the co-researchers are willing to work from an understanding of organizational learning as a relational, dialogical process *from within* the organization, which differs significantly from more top-down-oriented approaches based on the idea of knowledge transmission.

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