**Any dream will do?[[1]](#footnote-1) The role of theory in post-experience management learning interventions**

**Marian Iszatt-White, Lancaster University Management School**

m.iszattwhite@lancaster.ac.uk

2nd Post-Experience Education Symposium – developmental paper

Word count: 3,196 (excluding references)

**Key words:** Theory; experience; reflection; discussion; post-experience management learning

**Introduction**

Current preoccupations of relevance, reflexivity and sustained learning in management education have resulted in calls for innovative learning formats and tools (Lepisto and Hytti, 2021), with co-constructed coaching as a leadership learning intervention (Kempster and Iszatt-White, 2013) being proposed as one response to this call. Based on a study with Executive MBA students, Kempster and Iszatt-White suggested that what participants valued as a source of learning was not so much the theory input to the co-constructed coaching process as the reflective discussions with colleagues which followed. Theory tended to act as ‘scaffolding’ for these discussions rather than generating insights in and of themselves. Participants often adapted the theories, or elements of them, to fit their own experiences and needs rather than seeking to thoroughly understand or apply them. It can be expected that this perception of theory as an adjunct to leadership learning rather than a source will have resonance for other aspects of post-experience management education, particularly those that relate to the so-called ‘soft skills’ with which managers will have engaged over a number of years. The development of effective practice in relation to these skills requires a pedagogy that can surface tacit knowing generated from participative situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991), and convert it into explicit knowing, when the processes of such learning are not easily recalled, revealed and examined. Much research has pointed to this type of learning as a process of gradual becoming through the milieu of naturalistic experiences (Burgoyne and Hodgson, 1983; Kempster and Stewart, 2010), and suggested that it is this becoming that shapes everyday situated leadership/management practice. It therefore seems fundamental to designing post-experience management education that we should reveal and explore how the underlying and subterranean aspects of naturalistic and emergent learning can be surfaced and examined if practice is to be understood and developed.

The findings from Kempster and Iszatt-White’s (2013) work stand as a counter-point to the near-ubiquitous commercial application of management theories/models/instruments as tools/frameworks around which to build saleable leadership/management learning interventions – e.g. Hay McBer’s competences model; the 16PF personality psychometric, the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire, etc. This prevalence is equally noticeable within post-experience education in HE. Whilst the advent of the ‘flipped classroom’ has recognized the value add of face-to-face engagement with and between students, over and above the input of theoretical expertise and self-assessment measures (such as psychometrics), the notion of ‘research-led teaching’ and the theoretical expertise of the academic are still perceived as the bedrock of the Higher Education offering.

This raises the question of why management academics (and academic management journals) are so fixated on the development of leadership/management theory when a) this doesn’t seem to be what post-experience management education learners value in a learning intervention; and b) theories appear to be inaccessible to practitioners/learners, who thus adapt them for their own use rather than critically understanding and applying them. This process of adaption rather than adoption suggests that management theories are at least partially interchangeable as scaffolding for learning and hence that any broadly credible theory/framework/tool (i.e. the ‘dream’ of this paper’s title) can be effective as a vehicle for facilitating post-experience management learning (Kempster and Iszatt-White, 2013). The corollary to this suggestion concerns the skills required to facilitate learning through opportunities for programme participants to reflectively engage with surfacing learning from their own experiences, and the implications of this for the design and delivery of post-experience management education. There are also important implications for academics who are thus required to adopt the role of ‘guide on the side’ rather than ‘sage on the stage’, with the consequent issues of ‘identity undoing’ which this shift occasions (Iszatt-White, Kempster and Carroll, 2017). In response to these concerns, the current paper explores the relationships between theory, experience, reflection and discussion in post-experience management learning interventions, and the implications for the design and delivery of post-experience education. It goes on to consider the potential implications of this study for post-experience education scholarship.

**Theoretical underpinnings**

Drawing from both critical and social constructionist perspectives, Cunliffe (2002) suggested that reflexive dialogue’s incorporation into management learning would provide a means of developing more critical and reflective practitioners. Thus positioned, learning is framed as an embodied rather than a purely cognitive practice. It is undertaken from within the learner’s own experience, in which the learner is ‘struck’ (Wittgenstein, 1980: 85) by a spontaneous emotional, physiological and cognitive response to events or relationships occurring around them but which they cannot quite grasp in the moment. This notion of being ‘struck’ should be understood as ‘an anticipation of unfolding understanding, of making new connections between tacit knowing and explicit knowledge as we construct our sense of situations in ways not visible to us previously’ (Cunliffe, 2002: 42). In being struck, we are moved to critically reflect upon and explore these new connections with a sense of questioning our current ways of being and understanding. What occurs here is not the ‘outside in’ (Baker and Kolb, 1993), reflective learning of ‘theoretical insights or major intellectual breakthroughs, but moments in which we … “understand something that is already in plain view” (Wittgenstein, 1953: 89) and the difference this new understanding may make to our lives’ (Cunliffe, 2002: 57). There is an inherent vulnerability in opening oneself up to this kind of learning (Hibbert et al, 2022), which it is the role of the learning intervention to make feasible (and bearable) for the participant.

At the same time, another element of the dialogic process is highlighted by Corlett (2013: 453) as ‘the telling, re-telling and recalling’ of experiences through which participants are said to engage in critical self-reflexivity, thus raising awareness and creating the possibility of change’. The dialogic learning process connected with the moment of being struck is anchored in the storytelling experience (Ramsey, 2005). The story is an embodied dialogic process in which meaning making (Dachler and Hosking, 1995), order creation (Cunliffe, 2002, 2008) and the process of ‘becoming otherwise’ (Fletcher and Watson, 2007: 11) emerge. It is often the ‘sticky moments’ (Riach, 2009: 361) of these stories – those relating to contentious or controversial points or moments of discomfort – that are most productive of reflexivity. This introduces another element of reflexive dialogue, that of disruption. The discomfort encountered is the ‘disruptive’ (Hibbert, Coupland and MacIntosh, 2010: 55) forerunner to the ‘clearing out’ or ‘unlearning’ (Antonacopoulou, 2009: 422) of existing knowledge and the questioning of assumptions and perceptions to make room for new insights. Support from a trusted other (Corlett, Mavin and Beech, 2019) can facilitate the dropping of defensive identity work through which the vulnerability of such sticky moments is usually concealed.

Drawing these elements together reflects a sense of what Baker, Jensen and Kolb (2005: 411) delineate as ‘conversational learning’: where dialogue has its roots in ‘opposing voices in search of [understanding]’, conversation is more collaborative and consensual in its interactions, with learning constituting a practice of co-creation (Parker, Racz and Palmer, 2020). The emphasis here is not on the internalization of theoretical knowledge: rather it is an embodied experience of being struck through a dialogic process of disruption that leads to the surfacing of tacit knowing, the questioning of assumptions, and the crafting of an emerging relational understanding of the becoming self.

This framing of reflexive dialogue gives rise to the question of the role played by theory. Support for its use as a component of reflexive dialogue is suggested by Kempster and Iszatt-White (2013), whose co-constructed coaching intervention was grounded in an explicit use of theory as a vehicle for prompting and directing participant dialogue. The theory here is seen as an important mechanism to surface and articulate implicit knowing to enhance action (similar to Cunliffe, 2008). This melding of theory and practice into a mutually supportive dialogic process is in line with Perriton and Hodgson’s (2013) notion of theory as a catalyst to an individual’s sensemaking process. For Cunliffe (2002: 36) theory in reflexive dialogue is linked to ‘constructing dialogical opportunities for learning’ in order to construct ‘practical theories’: that is, ways of accounting for and shaping our experiences from within experience itself through talk both within and about practice. Gray (2007: 506) provides an example of a conversation tool – specifically, the repertory grid – as a prompt for dialogic learning. In a similar way Baker et al. advocated the use of theory within physical, temporal and emotional ‘conversational spaces’ (2005: 416). Extending the role of theory in designing reflexive dialogue, Kieser and Leiner, (2011:23) suggest the necessity of partnerships to ‘productively antagonize each other’ with theory as a form of ‘moment-by-moment provocat[ion]’ to generate ‘intense dialogic encounters’ (Beech et al, 2010: 1361). Such a partnership engaging in reflexive dialogue using theory is enabled by ‘a “space” for support, challenge, exchange and experimentation’ (Marcos and Denyer, 2012: 443). What is suggested to emerge is a ‘negotiated narrative’ (Watson, 2001: 385): a process where academic concepts and theories are engaged with alongside experience-based manager narratives to generate effective ‘real world’ learning (Fletcher and Watson, 2007).

The current research suggests that this literature has overstated the use of theory (Kempster and Iszatt-White, 2013). Academic theory is arguably ‘indigestible’ (Markides, 2011, cited in MacIntosh et al, 2012: 374) to managers and the assumed dialogic space is most fragile (Marcos and Denyer, 2012: 1). Where theory – or at least the language of theory – is used by managers it may be nothing more than a proxy for existing knowledge structures (Probert and Turnbull James, 2011) or to legitimise practices or emerging ideas. Thus in the context of reflexive dialogue Ramsey’s notion of ‘provocative theory’ (Ramsey, 2011: 469) appears most instructive. ‘Theory […] does not stand free, available to be applied but rather is both an instigator and product of relationally-responsive, improvisational practice’ (Ramsey, 2011: 474). The research is thus concerned to discover how reflexive dialogue occurs and the extent to which theory is a ‘hand-maiden’ to Shotter’s (2006) notion of dialogic ‘withness’; that is, whether theory acts as a shared language and mutual prompt to inquiry within the dialogic ‘withness’ and to the surfacing of deep reflexivity – and whether it is fit for purpose in providing managers with ‘threshold concepts’ (Meyer and Land, 2003: 412) that are the ‘conceptual gateways to open up previously inaccessible ways of thinking’ (Yip and Realin, 2011: 335). It also considers how experience and reflection play a part in the interplay between theory and discussion for post-experience leadership learners.

**The study**

The study examines the development of reflexive dialogue – aimed at ‘reconstruct[ing] learning as a reflective/reflexive dialogue in which participants connect tacit knowing and explicit knowledge’ (Cunliffe, 2002: 35) - within a post-experience education context, and explores participants’ perceptions of what and how they learned from a leadership learning intervention. The context for this study is a leadership module on the Executive MBA within the author’s home institution. The first phase of the research worked with a cohort consisting of 16 students whose demographics were as follows: a mean age of 35; 14 years average work experience; four nationalities (British, Indian, Spanish and Russian); seven sectors (energy, banking, retail, logistics, telecoms, health and local government) and with a gender split of 3 female and 13 male. The module had a number of elements, a significant one being participation in a co-coaching process with the stated objective ‘to provide a framework within which leadership knowledge and experience can be explored and articulated, in order to gain a deeper and more grounded understanding of individual leadership practice and of leadership practice generally’ (Leadership as Practice Module Outline). The second phase of the research will be conducted with a similar cohort undertaking the same module in the current academic year.

The designed pedagogy for the module was to place the student managers into pairs to become co-coaches and discussants. The focus of the pair was to help each other examine past influences on their own leadership development/practice and/or current leadership challenges in their working contexts. The discussant was to interrogate their partner’s challenge through applying relevant theory. It was a transparent aspect of the module (as set out in the module outline document and verbally briefed and re-briefed at regular intervals during the module itself) that the culmination of the co-coaching process would be a credit-bearing written assessment concerning the writer’s leadership practice. In the first cohort, this assignment comprised two stages: first, a reflexive essay on their partner’s leadership challenge as explored through their co-coaching sessions, drawing on relevant theory used during the sessions (2000 words); second, after reflecting on their partners insights from stage 1, a written commentary on their learning and forward-looking reflections on intended actions with regard to their leadership practice, again drawing on theory as relevant (1000 words). The requirement of the learning partner to write a section on their co-coach’s challenge was intended to enhance engagement with the process and generate a sense of mutual dependence. Each would need the other’s reflective essay to write up their reflections. Whilst the assignment was positioned as a reflective piece of work, it was made clear it should still draw critically on relevant leadership and management learning theory. For the coming cohort, the reflective nature of the assignment will be retained, but the requirement for written input from the authors’ co-coaching partner will be removed as this proved hard for participants to coordinate in the context of short assignment deadlines and busy working lives.

The author is involved throughout the module in supporting the co-coaching process through regular re-briefings of the aims and assessment format, and as additional tutor support to the co-coaching pairs. The original module consisted of 10 half day formal inputs undertaken over a period of approximately 16 months. Time was also given within all modules for the co-coaching pairs to meet. The managers were encouraged to capture on-going insights and reflections on the co-coaching discussions in a learning journal. The assignments produced at the end of the module, together with the learning journals, formed part of the data set contributing to the study. In addition to the assignments and learning journals mentioned above, the data for the study consisted of three one-to-one semi-structured interviews conducted (by skype or telephone) with each participant manager, one after the module introduction, one mid-way through the module and the final one after submission of the assignment. The interviews explored what the participants’ were examining in their discussant pairs, their experience of undertaking this process and their perceptions of the learning they had obtained. An initial focus of the interview questions was the role of theory in supporting the development of critical depth in their understanding of their own leadership practice. This focus changed in response to a developing understanding of how the process was progressing based both on early interview data and regular engagement with the managers, which showed theory to have occupied a provocative role rather than having been internalized as a form of learning. The final interviews probed their reflections on their application of theory during the co-coaching process, the extent to which they chose to include the module tutor in their dialoguing process, and in particular their conversations and what prompted the most useful or in-depth learning.

Based on the findings from phase 1, the second phase of the research has shifted its focus in order to try to access ‘in the moment’ usage of theory in the course of co-coaching conversations. This coincides with a shift from a ‘strand’ to a ‘block’ module format. The new module will utilise a flipped classroom approach to provide rich theoretical and other resources online prior to an intensive 3-day face-to-face workshop. Whilst the online leading period will involve online discussions and activities, the co-coaching activity itself will be undertaken during the face-to-face workshop. It is hoped that this more intensive experience will aid the development of deeper reflective relationships and support the prior internalization of relevant leadership theory. The aim is to see whether this flipped format tips the balance towards a great - or just different - use of theory in the co-coaching discussions.

**Findings and implications for post-experience management education**

In many respects, this study is a ‘game of two halves’: the first phase set up the (unanticipated) problem, which the second phase is now seeking to explore. Drawing on the analysis of the ‘in vivo’ data from the forthcoming EMBA cohort, the paper will explore the relationships between theory, experience, reflection and discussion in post-experience management learning interventions, and the implications for the design and delivery of post-experience education. It will demonstrate that the co-coaching pairs formed as a learning intervention provided a supportive social context in which participants felt able to show vulnerability (Hibbert et al, 2022) in relation to their formative experiences and to develop mutual trust in exploring alternative ways of conceptualizing and responding to these vulnerabilities (Corlett, Mavin and Beech, 2019) that were not reliant on the theory inputs as a source of learning. Within the co-coaching relationships that developed, participants reflexively co-created (Parker, Racz and Palmer, 2020) deeper understanding of their past experiences and utilized this as a platform for enhancing future practice. This process of co-creation drew on an implicit principle of treating each other as ‘experts in [their] own practice’ (Larsson and Knudsen, 2022: 291) more heavily than on the insights to be derived from the application of theory. By learning together with others who had been through similar experiences, or who operated in similar contexts, the co-coaching partners developed learning ‘micro-communities’ (Beech, et al. 2021) that subsisted well beyond the conclusion of the module, and even the programme. The paper will consider what these findings mean for the role of theory in post-experience education scholarship, and the possibility that we are currently looking in the wrong direction when seeking the USP of Higher Education in terms of our ability to add value in post-experience education interventions. It will consider ways in which we might recalibrate the role of theory in leadership learning - and the tutor identity issues which this recalibration raises – at the same time as exploring what this might mean for tried and tested models of learning, such as Kolb’s learning cycle (Kolb, 1984). It will also revisit the needs of post-experience management learners – in particular in relation to the importance of instantly transferable knowledge that they can apply back in the workplace – and the implications of this in terms of ‘satisficing’ (Simon, 1976) and the diminishing marginal returns of addition theory inputs. As noted by one of the reviewers of this paper, we can look to Simon and Garfunkel for another musical trope to capture this participant behaviour: ‘All lies and jest ‘til a man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest.’[[2]](#footnote-2) Finally, the paper will consider whether the frame of reference provided to management learners – i.e. that of developing personal practice – plays a significant role in the salience of theory to their reflective dialogue with co-coaching partners. It is hoped that this bricolage will be productive of a coherent perspective on the role of theory – along with experience, discussion and reflection – in post experience leadership learning interventions that will guide academics in developing new and better ways to supporting this type of learning.

**References**

Antonacopoulou, E P (2009) Impact and scholarship: Unlearning and practising to co-create actionable knowledge. *Management Learning*, 40(4): 421-430.

Baker, AC, Jensen, PJ and Kolb, DA (2005) Conversation as Experiential Learning. *Management Learning,* 36 (4) 411-427.

Baker, A and Kolb, DA (1993) Diversity, Learning and Good Conversation.’ In RR Sims and RF Dennehy (eds) *Diversity and Differences in Organisations.* Westport, CT. Quorum Books.

Beech, N, Brown, A, Coupland, C and Cutcher, L (2021) Learning from difference and similarity: Identities and relational reflexive learning. *Management Learning,* 52(4) 393-403.

Beech, N, MacIntosh, R and MacLean, D (2010) Dialogues between Academics and Practitioners: The Role of Generative Dialogic Encounters. *Organization Studies,* 31(9&10): 1341-1367.

Burgoyne, JG and Hodgson, VE (1983) ‘Natural Learning and Managerial Action: A Phenomenological Study in the Field Setting’, *Journal of Management Studies* 20(3): 387–99.

Corlett, S, Mavin, S and Beech, Nic (2019) Reconceptualizing vulnerability and its value for managerial identity and learning. *Management Learning,* 50(5) 556-575.

Corlett, S (2013) Participant learning in and through research as reflexive dialogue: Being ‘struck’ and the effects of recall. *Management Learning*, 44 (5) 453-469.

Cunliffe, A (2008) ‘Orientations to Social Constructionism: Relationally Responsive Social Constructionism and its Implications for Knowledge’, *Management Learning* 39 (2): 123-139.

Cunliffe, A (2002) ‘Reflexive Dialogical Practice in Management Learning’, *Management Learning,* 33(1): 35-61.

Dachler, HP and Hosking, DM (1995) The primacy of relations in socially constructing organizational realities. In Hosking, DM, Dachler, HP and Gergen, KJ (eds) *Management and Organization: Relational Alternatives to Individualism.* Aldershot: Avebury. Pp 1-28.

Fletcher, DE and Watson, TJ (2007) Entrepreneurship, management learning and negotiated narratives: ‘Making it otherwise for us – Otherwise for them.’ *Management Learning*, 38 (1) 9-26.

Gray, DE (2007) Facilitating management learning: Developing critical reflection through reflective tools. *Management Learning*, 38: 495–517.

Hibbert, P, Beech, N, Callagher, L and Siedlok, F (2022) After the pain: Reflexive practice, emotion work and learning. *Organization Studies,* 43(5) 797-817.

Hibbert, P, Coupland, C and MacIntosh, R (2010) Reflexivity: recursion and relationality in organizational research processes. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, 5 (1) 47-62.

Iszatt-White, M, Kempster, K and Carroll, B (2017) An educators’ perspective on reflexive pedagogy: identity undoing and issues of power. Management Learning, 48(5) 582-596.

Kempster, S and Iszatt-White, M (2013) Towards co-constructed coaching: Exploring the integration of coaching and co-constructed autoethnography in leadership development. *Management Learning*, 44(4) 319-336.

Kempster, S and Stewart, J (2010) Becoming a leader: A co-produced autoethnographic exploration of situated learning of leadership practices. *Management Learning*, 41(2): 205-219.

Kieser, A and Leiner, L (2011) Collaborate With Practitioners: But Beware of Collaborative Research. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 21(1): 14-28.

Kolb, D (1984) *Experiential Learning*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. Prentice Hall.

Larsson, M and Knudsen, M (2022) Conditions for reflexive practices in leadership learning: The regulating role of a socio-moral order of peer interactions. *Management learning,* 53(2) 291-309.

Lave, J and Wenger, F (1991) *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lepisto, T and Hytti, U (2021) Developing an executive learning community: Focus on collective creation. *Academy of Management Learning and Education,* 20(4) 514-538.

MacIntosh, R, Beech, N, Antonocopoulou, E and Sims, D (2012) Practising and knowing

management: A dialogic perspective. *Management Learning*, 43(4): 373-383.

Marcos, J and Denyer, D (2012) Crossing the sea from They to WE? The unfolding of knowing and practising in collaborative research. *Management Learning,* 43(4) 443-459.

Markides, C (2011) Crossing the chasm: How to convert relevant research into managerially useful research. *Journal of Applied Behavioural Science,* 47(1): 121–134.

Meyer, JHF and Land, R (2003) Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (1): Linkages to ways of thinking and practising. In C Rust (ed) *Improving Student Learning: Diversity and Inclusivity.* Oxford. Oxford Brookes University. Pp 412-424.

Parker, S, Racz, M and Palmer, P (2020) Reflexive learning and performative failure. *Management Learning,* 51(3) 293-313.

Perriton, L and Hodgson, V (2013) Positioning theory and practice question(s) within the field of management learning. *Management Learning*, 44 (2) 144-160.

Probert, J and Turnbull James, K (2011) Leadership development: Crisis, opportunities and the leadership concept. *Leadership*, 7 (2) 137-150.

Ramsey, C (2005) Narrative: From learning in reflection to learning in performance. *Management Learning*, 36 (2) 219-235.

Riach, K (2009) Exploring participant-centred reflexivity in the research interview. *Sociology*, 43 (2) 356-370.

Shotter, J (2006) Understanding process from within: An argument for ‘Withness’-thinking. *Organization Studies*, 27 (4) 585-604.

Simon, HA (1976) *Administrative behaviour: A study of decision-making processes in administrative organizations*. New York: Free Press. (Original work published 1947)

Watson, TJ (2001) Beyond managism: Negotiated narratives and critical management education in practice. *British Journal of Management*, 12 (4) 385-396.

Wittgenstein, L (1980) *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, vols 1 and 2.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Yip, J and Raelin, JA (2011) Threshold concepts and modalities for teaching leadership practice. *Management Learning*, 43 (3) 333-354.

1. Andrew Lloyd Webber (1968) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Simon and Garfunkel (1968) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)