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# Becoming a leader: A co-produced autoethnographic exploration of situated learning of leadership practice

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## Abstract

The article examines the development of situated leadership practice through an autoethnographic study of the first three months of being in the role of a chief operating officer. The argument for using an autoethnographic approach is in response to the dearth of in-depth research on the development of leadership practice from a relational, social and situated perspective. The article makes a contribution to management learning by exploring aspects of situated curriculum within a manager's legitimate participation influencing the development of situated leadership practice.

## Keywords

autoethnography; leadership practice; legitimate participation; situated curriculum

## Situated leadership practice

There is a dearth of in-depth contextualized empirical research on becoming a senior manager (Kempster, 2009; Lowe and Gardner, 2000; Waldman et al., 2006). Through an examination of the first three months of James Stewart (second co-author) being appointed as a chief operating officer, we seek to provide a glimpse of the complex situated process associated with the development of leadership practice through an examination of situated curriculum. Gherardi et al. (1998: 279) define situated curriculum as an order or pattern of activities that enable a 'novice' to becoming a fully participating member practising a particular role. The contribution the article makes is to reveal something of the nature of a situated curriculum shaping the development of a manager's situated leadership practice.

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Gherardi et al. (1998) have highlighted the tacit nature of situated learning and associated situated curriculum together with the methodological difficulties of revealing such learning and associated development of situated practice. To help overcome this obstacle we have examined James's initial period as a novice chief operating officer through an autoethnographic approach. Such an approach has been used in a range of contexts such as: teaching (Raab, 1997); research (Conle, 1999; James, 1999); parental relationships (Ellis, 2001); and career development (Keefe, 2006). What is common to all of these autoethnographic accounts is that they draw on experiences of academics in particular contexts. There is an absence of autoethnography from practising managers. In part this may reflect issues of confidentiality or difficulties of become published; but importantly it also reflects difficulties of practitioners reflecting on situated experience and associated tacit knowledge.

Autoethnography encourages the researcher to adopt a hyper-reflexive stance (Hayano, 1979) where the autoethnographer is encouraged to conduct a study within a study that involves depth of self-disclosure and analysis (Ellis, 2001). In this way two aspects occur: reflection inward and observation outward (Parry and Boyle, 2009). The contribution to management learning is drawn from the observation outward by examining the inward reflections through an exploration of situated curriculum. Ellis (2004:198) metaphorically describes these two parts as a sandwich—the bread as the interpreted observations, and the tasty filling the reflections on the experience.

The article first reviews notions of practice and how leaders learn their practice of leading; a connection is strongly made to situated learning and in particular situated curriculum. We outline the nature of autoethnography and review our underpinning epistemological and methodological principles. Subsequently we outline a story of developing situated leadership practice constructed as a serial narrative (Czarniawska, 1997) that identifies aspects of a situated curriculum involved in developing senior leadership practice. The article concludes through a critical discussion on the significance of situated curriculum in the development of situated leadership practice. Prior to exploring situated leadership learning we wish to introduce the central character of the autoethnographic plot and the context in which his leadership practice has been developed.

## The leadership context

The 'meat' of James's autoethnographic sandwich is a recollection of serial episodes from December 2006 to February 2007 when he commenced the role of chief operating officer. The first episode of the autoethnography provides a brief overview of the central character, the organizational context and the appointment process.

### *From a colonel to a chief operating officer*

At the conclusion of my career in the Marines as a Colonel I experienced a brief period in consultancy, following which I was appointed as Director of Programmes for a company in Manchester. Unfortunately, my new-found career was short-lived when this company collapsed and went into administration. However, having developed a strong relationship with a director (now the CEO) and seizing upon the opportunity, we [consortium of people in management roles] purchased [the organization] from the liquidators in 2003. By aggregating financial service products, the business model generates large volumes of consumers searching for financial products online, and introduces them to financial institutions with which the company has commission arrangements. We experienced high revenues and rapid growth. Within six months we achieved break even. By the end of our first year of trading two syndicates of business angels, working together in close cooperation, invested millions of [pounds of] initial funding support.

The strategic imperative was to grow and sell the company at the end of its 3rd year of trading. However, our 3rd year witnessed sustained competitor pressure, combined with growing concern over the levels of UK unsecured consumer debt. Falling revenues month by month, high overheads and cash flow problems were indications of the crisis that loomed. This was the context when I was asked to join the Board in December 2006.

*I feel like the new boy all over again!*

On reflection of my first hour of my first day I vividly recall mentally convincing myself that the role of chief operating officer should be relatively straightforward. After all, I've exercised my leadership skills at every level within the Royal Marines and more recently in the business context. Whilst I'm confident of my proven leadership strengths in one context, I sense a feeling of loneliness as I contemplate my new challenge, that feeling of being the new boy all over again. What must I do to ensure success in this role? What's different and what is expected of me?

It just seems like yesterday and I still recall the moment where discussion of the appointment evolved into reality. It came quite out of the blue. It was in early December at the Christmas party; the discussion around the appointment coincided with a fantastic meal in a great restaurant. Our Non-exec Chairman, Financial Director and two of the principal investors were all there; I was invited to represent the CEO in his absence. Was this by chance? I thought it was about making up numbers but clearly my presence on the night was contrived. They were still concerned about management performance; the Chairman focuses on me: 'We are not convinced that the CEO alone has the time or indeed has the right blend of operational skills necessary to deliver the key operational targets. We think you have a crucial role to play'. The Non-exec Chairman leans over, glass of Chardonnay in hand: 'We need someone who not only has the strength of leadership and trust to implement the strategy but also we need somebody who can really lick the management team into shape. Lead with a firm hand; do whatever is necessary for a trade exit. James, we see you playing a significant role—so we are creating the role of chief operating officer'. And it was a done deal. The meal and banter continued and by the time we had departed the restaurant the Non-exec Chairman had notified me that details of remuneration and contract would be discussed the following morning before their departure.

So here I was first day back as the new chief operating officer. Do I have to dress differently, perhaps act or behave differently in some way? What will the issues be and how should I handle them? What do you have to learn and how do you learn this?

This diary extract concludes with James at the beginning of an anticipated journey—but very much unaware of how or what will happen to shape his learning. James has described the organizational 'crucible' in which his learning is to occur. Such crucibles contain the dynamic shaping leadership and management learning. The high level understanding of naturalistic leadership learning (Burgoyne and Stewart, 1977) suggests that it is on-the-job experience and contact with key people in the workplace that act as the primary sources of development (cf. Bennis and Thomas, 2002; Burgoyne and Hodgson, 1983; Davies and Easterby-Smith, 1984; Kempster, 2006; Luthans and Avolio, 2003; McCall, 2004; McCall et al., 1988 ). These are the headline features of experiential or naturalistic leadership development. However, Kempster, (2006) argues that these headlines obfuscate the intricate detail of leadership learning that occurs through situated learning. In a metaphoric sense, using the postulated explanation of unaccountable mass in the Universe, situated learning is the 'dark-matter' influencing the development of leadership practice. We hope to reveal something of this 'dark-matter' by exploring notions of situated curriculum.

## How do leaders learn their situated practice of leading?

There is an emerging consensus that within the field of leadership there is limited understanding of the influence and connectivity of context and processes that shape the development of leadership practice (Conger, 2004; Day, 2000; Kempster, 2006; Lowe and Gardner, 2000). The interrelationship of the contextual nature of leadership learning in leader-led relationships and the enactment of leadership practice suggests that one informs on the other.

Learning, thinking and knowing are relations among people in activity in, with and arising from the socially and culturally structured world...This implies that understanding and experience are in constant interaction—indeed, are mutually constitutive (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 51–2).

Emphasis here is toward learning and practice that is constituted within and from contextualized activity. Leadership learning and leadership practice thus become an intimate connection between local knowledge and local action (Abma, 2007), akin to being two sides of the same coin. Context then is vital to understanding learning and practice (Antonacopoulou, 2006). To understand this situated interrelationship of leadership learning and leadership practice we suggest that a detailed and contextualized understanding of the nature of the situated curriculum (Gherardi et al., 1998) within the process of legitimate participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991) may provide insight into the development of local leadership practice.

Practice and culture are interrelated, that is both informing and being informed by the other; but the two are not the same phenomenon (Schatzki and Knorr-Cetina, 2001). Practice can be understood both as explicit activities and routines as well as the tacit and implicit assumptions that guide local action (Orr, 1996). We use the term practice in this paper to relate to the micro activities of action that generate specific outcomes. The activities of practice are shaped through cultural and social assumptions and beliefs at both a societal and local (organizational) level: 'it is the historical and social context that provides structure and meaning to what we do' (Handley et al., 2007: 179). Practice draws on technical as well as social knowledge. It is both a skill and an identity, perhaps even a craft—learnt formally and informally—but predominately through participation in local contexts. Situated leadership practice is thus the day-to-day enactment of seeking to lead in a particular context. It is through role participation that newcomers gradually develop the practices of the community (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 95). Orr's (1996) work is helpful in this regard as it illustrates limitations of respondents being able to describe their practice; captured as 'thin' descriptions. This was in contrast to the 'thick' descriptions obtained through observation and participative discussion as they enacted their practice. The importance is to emphasize the tacit element that in part constitutes practice.

Gherardi et al. (1998: 274) describe situated learning as being 'capable of participating with the requisite competence in the complex web of relationships among people and activities'. Participating in a practice becomes a way to acquire knowledge-in-action as well as sustaining or changing the practice of the organization (Gherardi, 2000: 215). The notion of 'becoming' similarly relates to a journey through which practice is developed as a result of participative engagement. Such a journey has been described as 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 29) where a newcomer progresses from a novice to a master through involvement in a community's practice. The legitimacy of the role is significant as it enables access and opportunities for participation in relational activities. The degree of legitimacy accorded to an individual through their journey affects the range of learning opportunities and knowledge in action offered to them. With respect to leadership, non-managers and managers could be seen to have different pathways and learning

experiences as a result of different opportunities offered through role requirements, participation and legitimization. For example, being given the role of a manager provides opportunities to observe notable others through participation in meetings (Handley et al., 2007; Kempster, 2006). The sense of identification as a manager by the 'novice' engages the person in developing a sense of their social identity through Alvesson and Willmott's (2002: 627) dual notion of 'identity regulation' and 'identity work'. The former relates to mechanisms emanating from within the organization; the latter from the individual managers' efforts to revise their sense of themselves in relation to others. The legitimate role provides both observed and enacted learning opportunities, alongside processes of identity construction that help to inform on the development of their practice (Handley et al., 2007; Kempster, 2006).

The role and pathway of participation enable engagement with a 'situated curriculum' (Gherardi et al., 1998: 279) which 'emphasizes the fact that its content is closely related to the specific set of local material, economic, symbolic and social characteristics of the systems of practices and work activities' (p. 280). Gherardi et al. see such a situated curriculum as a pattern or order of activities that enable novices to engage with a specific community in the process of legitimate participation along a pathway that enables them to become full members; although they do not provide examples of such a curriculum for managers. We suggest that in the context of a manager's legitimate participation it is likely to take the form of many formal aspects such as: meetings, communications through various media, appraisals, presentations, crisis handling and so forth. Similarly there would be informal aspects such as structuring meeting agendas, ad hoc corridor discussions, tone and intimation of voice, calmness, dress attire and so forth. This article seeks to make a contribution by exploring such aspects of a situated curriculum in regard to the development of leadership practice, and whether Gherardi et al.'s (1998) notion of an apparent order or pattern can be illuminated.

The need for greater contextualized appreciation of the phenomenon of leadership practice and leadership learning outlined by Parry and Boyle (2009) builds on earlier calls from Bryman (2004) and Day (2000) for the use of alternative research approaches to help reveal more of the complex situated process of both leadership learning and associated leadership practice.

## The autoethnographical approach

What can we learn from autoethnographic accounts about leadership learning and leadership practice if it is simply the reflections of James? How is such an autoethnographic account valuable?

The traditional positivistic epistemological tenets of reliability, validity and generalization are treated very differently within autoethnography (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). The autoethnographic account seeks to illuminate the experience of history through a narrative. Examining autoethnography along a continuum of science, looking at facts at one end, and art as the exploration of the meaning behind the experience at the other end, we will position the story in the middle—building out from a detailed diary towards a thematic co-constructed story. Reliability needs to reflect honesty and truthfulness (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005); in this context an honest and truthful account of becoming a chief operating officer. Bochner (2001) argues that reliability is anchored through the narrative being interconnected with life. Through the process of writing the narrative, Bochner argues that the autoethnographer generates a deeper understanding and meaning of their experience (2001: 153). In this way writing becomes a process of inquiry (Richardson, 2000). Later in this article we explore a critical interpretation of such a deeper understanding of self through writing.

For validity the story needs to have verisimilitude: 'evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is life-like, believable, and possible' (Ellis and Bochner, 2000: 751). As a consequence issues of reliability and validity must resonate with the reader. Boyle and Parry (2007: 6)

argue that generalization needs to be detached away from issues of ‘n’ number: ‘We would suggest that the critical “n” factor is the number of people who read the research, rather than the number of people who are the subjects of the research’. Similarly Ellis and Bochner (2000) suggest that generalization is tested by readers as they determine if it speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know. Stake (2005) interprets such generalization as naturalistic: a sense of empathetic appreciation from one world to another that provides a vicarious experience for the reader—in this case appreciating James’s experience of becoming a senior business leader. For us the goal of the autoethnographic account is to provide an illumination of situated curriculum within legitimate participation that is part of the complex background process of situated learning associated with the practice of senior leadership.

### *Method of approach*

Back and forth auto-ethnographers gaze. First they look through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience and then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations (Ellis, 2004: 37).

We have described the case for utilizing an autoethnographic study. We wish to briefly outline the method of co-constructed autoethnography (Ellis and Bochner, 2000) used in this research. The focus of the study, the *ethno*, is James within a specific culture. The approach places emphasis on the writing and describing, the *graphy* of the three months from December 2006 to February 2007. The spirit of this *ethno-graphy*, in the form of reflecting critically on the self within a social context (Reed-Danahay, 1997; Tierney and Lincoln, 1997), leads to a creative aesthetic narrative (Boyle and Parry, 2007). Autoethnography does not merely require us to explore the interface between culture and self, it requires us to write about ourselves. It is the conscious experiencing of the self as both inquirer and respondent, as teacher and learner, as the one coming to know the self within the process of research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). It is through this conscious exploration we sought to illuminate situated curriculum and the complex processes of relational and situated learning of leadership practice through a reflexive, episodic self-narrative. Of significance to the method of co-constructed narrative is the notion that narrative and life can be seen as inextricably connected. Thus, the story of James will be more than a process of recounting and reflecting, but also helps develop a narrative, social and relational sense of himself within a particular context.

Ellis argues that an important aspect of autoethnographical research is through a continual re-appraisal and interpretation of the story through theorizing. Returning to Ellis’s (2004: 198) notion of a ‘theoretical sandwich’, the theoretical part of the ‘sandwich’ draws upon Lave and Wenger’s (1991) notion of legitimate peripheral participation (extended in Wenger, 1998) and Gherardi et al.’s (1998) associated notion of situated curriculum.

### *The co-produced narrative*

Bryman (2004) argues that too few qualitative studies make explicit the detail of their analysis, and we hope to not fall short in this regard. Gathering the story is familiar and comparatively easy; the problem usually arises at the stage of analysis (Etherington, 2006). The difficulty of analysis in autoethnographic work reflects the iterative and reflexive process of building the story. However, this does not mean that the work of co-produced autoethnography should lack rigour, reliability



and validity. We have previously stated the assumptions guiding reliability, validity and generalization for this autoethnographic work: our desire is to produce an honest, reflexive narrative that has verisimilitude and can, in part, produce a vicarious sense of experiencing the situated learning of a senior manager through revealing aspects of situated curriculum.

We sought to create a co-produced narrative ‘sandwich’ (Ellis, 2004). The role of Steve (first co-author) was to interrogate James (second co-author) by examining the emergent narrative through two themes: legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and situated curriculum (Gherardi et al., 1998). Four cycles of narrative writing, describing and critiquing occurred until James felt that the narrative was, in a theoretical sampling sense, saturated and further iterations would undermine issues of reliability and validity; and for Steve, insights into situated curriculum within legitimate participation had emerged. Through this repeating process of creating a narrative and then having that narrative examined in detail, James became highly reflexive of himself as both inquirer and respondent: coming to know himself within the process of research—similarly argued by Cunliffe (2002) in the context of teacher and student.

The next section is structured as a set of serial stories, the autoethnographic ‘meat’ of the sandwich. Each of these stories will be critiqued to reveal insights into situated curriculum and legitimate participation that contributes to our understanding of the development of situated leadership practice.

## Becoming a chief operating officer

The story of James examines his journey of legitimate peripheral participation and the activities of the situated curriculum that he learnt in order to become a full member of the senior leadership team. The journey illustrates a serial story (Czarniawska, 1997) of becoming in terms of ‘participating with the requisite competence in a complex web of relationships’ (Gherardi et al., 1998: 274).

### *6 January, 9.15: ‘And the men who spurred us on’ (The Who: Won’t get fooled again, 1971)*

Then it all began with the telephone ringing. I lift the receiver; it’s a call from a leading member of our investor team: ‘Good morning James, trust you had an enjoyable Christmas’. The opening pleasantries evaporate as the conversation focuses on the pre-Christmas investor concerns; pressure on the Board to re-structure, creation of the appointment to align the strategy and E2E operations, get a grip of the senior management team and address the concerns over individual management performance and of course, preparing the business for exit. He continues: ‘Yes we’ve had some interesting discussions in a number of areas over the Christmas period and we now think there is a role for a new chairman to support the CEO at the strategic level’. I listen intently, this is breaking news! No mention of this before Christmas or indeed any indication from the CEO. Perhaps he did not know anything about it? If that’s the case confidence in the CEO may have deteriorated somewhat, but surely he’s not going to be ousted? I’m clearly not going to get a honeymoon period! I find myself slightly uneasy as I try to analyse my response whilst in the process of responding. It’s not that I feel out of depth and neither do I feel intimidated; it’s more a case of trying to quickly come to terms with a higher more confidential form of discussion that I had not been previously party to; I guess I should have expected conversations of this nature to occur—it comes with the territory when you step up a level. I’ve been given access to a new community that sits higher up than the community of managers within the business that I’ve always dealt with.



The confidentiality and potential impact on the business made the nature of the conversation so very different to other conversations. Being in possession of information and knowledge that would trigger all forms of rumour mongering at all levels across the business should it be leaked. So I'm now trusted with information that previously would have been denied to me—my views are now actively being sought as a new member of the Board. I'm now trusted not to disclose this information, not even to the CEO. Such trust and knowledge must be handled in a different way; it's for my ears and mine alone. I resist the temptation to run to my nearest colleague and 'spill the beans' as well I might have done prior to my appointment previously. So now I'm beginning to have to think and act like a chief operating officer, and I have to address the issues emanating from my need to build loyalty to the Board. Equally, I sense the need to avoid Board loyalty being viewed as disloyalty to the CEO. I still have my strong moral feelings over the potential impact on both the CEO position and in particular, the detrimental impact on my personal loyalty to him. A new set of conflicting issues of ethics, loyalty and ambiguity are swirling around my mind and this feels very different—it very much feels like I'm learning as I go. I'm trying to hide this but I wonder whether others realise.

The story illustrates Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of legitimate peripheral participation. The legitimacy of the role provides for James access to a situated curriculum (Gherardi et al., 1998). The notion of situated curriculum is seen to provide situated opportunities that allow the 'novice' to engage with others who are active members of specific communities. The opening of the story identified the specific community as being the 'senior management board'. The telephone conversation with one of the investors illustrated the welcoming of the novice into the community and a sense of expectations, privileges and constraints offered up in the conversation. This was very much a new experience for James as expressed with his novel discomfort that such expectations brought. Wenger (1998: 152) talks about how the legitimate peripheral participation within particular communities is interconnected with notions of identity construction. James exhibits a strong sense that although he has put on the clothes of the senior manager he is uncomfortable wearing these and wonders whether others can see that they do not fit. He has moved out of one community (the middle management group) and entered a new community (the senior management board). He is searching to understand the nature of this identity in this situated community. The opening dialogic exchange (Cunliffe, 2002) with the investor has begun to catalyse a need within him to construct this new identity and such an exchange is an aspect of the situated curriculum. A further and connected aspect of the situated curriculum is the different nature of the leader-led relationship.

#### *10.45: 'Take a bow for the new revolution'—Informal meetings with key colleagues as an explicit aspect of situated curriculum*

The CEO is slumped behind his desk. 'Guess what, I've just had a call from [investor].' 'Yep, so have I' I reply. I know this man and I can see that his mind is certainly not focussed on the business. I've learnt a lot from him over the last two years. It's funny in a way. Previously, I would meander into the office in an almost casual way; but this morning I sense a subtle difference. We certainly exchange the morning greetings in the same familiar manner and indeed our conversational style has the pretence of being as relaxed as ever. But I sense he's attempting to analyse the impact of this breaking news on his role (or future) in the business. 'I guess it's a *fait accompli*; it's all been planned behind closed doors with no input from the senior management team or indeed the minority shareholders' he comments. I listen carefully to his concerns as he voices a pessimistic future. I'm struck by his negativity in a way that I've not noticed before. I palpably sense that our relationship is changing as we chat. He listens to me more intently and acknowledges my points; it's as if he is recognising that I hold a different position and that my views may impact in a different way. I think we both recognise that I now

have access to what the CEO has, insider Board information, influence at the strategic level and access to all at the highest level. For the first time we appear to be holding a discussion between equals. I stand up and conclude the conversation: 'Well upwards and onwards as they say, not much to be done until we know more and we still need to hit targets'.

I now have a sense for the first time since being a Colonel in the Marines of being responsible for leadership of the organisation. Looking back now the surge of confidence was a realisation that this is so similar—I just needed to be allowed to be a leader. I leave his office and chat to a few people on the way back to mine. They know of my new role. Even these conversations are different. It's like I'm changing but so are they in terms of relationships. There's a distance, and the normal interactions are a little false. We all seem to be adjusting to a new script that we are not familiar with. This morning when I arrived at my desk it didn't look any different and yet by lunchtime it is not the same place.

The meeting of these two colleagues is a situated opportunity. It is perhaps a most common aspect of a situated curriculum within an organizational setting. These two people have been working together for three years with an established structure of relationships and identities. The promotion of James triggers a restructuring of the nature of their relationship. The discomfort of this change is recognized by the 'novice'. The discussion in regard to privileged access to information confirms acceptance of James into the community. Such acceptance appears to allow him to experiment in the discourse to confirm the rebalancing of identities. The real-time change in the relationship between these two close colleagues reflects Cunliffe's (2002: 38) notion of 'being struck' in the moment: 'our knowing-from-within is continually being re-constructed and updated in once-occurrent relational moments and acts of being'.

The resulting dialogic exchange appears to greatly enhance James's confidence as he continues the participative path toward becoming a full member of the senior team. James acknowledges this journey with the phrase 'being allowed to lead'. Allowed in the sense of legitimacy anointed by the organization, but also in the sense of allowing himself to consider that he is a leader and can lead (hence the link to his identity as a colonel) in terms of narrative identity (Ezzy, 1998). This re-enforcement was captured by his interaction with his direct reports—and as such provides a further and repeatable aspect of the situated curriculum.

### *28 January: 'Smile and grin at the change all around'—Handling power and information as aspects of situated curriculum*

By the end of January the anticipated rumour mongering is rife amongst the senior and middle management teams and it is becoming increasingly hard to keep management focussed on the strategy, since the consensus is 'what's the point, the strategy will change anyway'. The CEO is becoming less and less prominent in his decision making. At our weekly meeting I decide that we must do something. I point out my concerns: 'It's becoming increasingly hard to keep the team focussed and it's not helped by the negativity of certain directors and the individual concerns over shares, options, roles and impending arrival of the new chairman. We need to elevate this to Board level'. The CEO seems pleased that I'm pushing the point and I wonder whether he sees this as a public sign of loyalty to him and the team. He agrees that we table the need for transparency 'voice our collective concern over the development of these small emerging yet distracting communities' he comments.

I sense that I'm becoming responsible for issues that are the CEO's. I seem to be filling the vacuum. For the last three weeks I have been out and about, pushing for targets, rewarding and punishing direct reports. It's

now more than an act of looking like a chief operating officer. I think they accept my authority but also trade with me in ways that I recognise but the stakes are much bigger. The access to decisions and influence are changing me and changing their relationship with me. I find the staff are now approaching me with an increasing number of personal and professional issues. It's almost like the 'messiah' has emerged within them to answer all the questions that they have never had answered or perhaps dared to ask?

I step out of the CEO's office as the Financial Director enters the room. After the meeting, two of the founding members of the company approach me for a chat (both non-statutory directors). 'What's the latest? Have you heard when the new man is arriving? You must know what's going on?' Now this is an interesting situation I muse to myself. Here we have two of our founding members who are entirely focussed on what's happening for purely personal reasons. 'Come on James, there are too many huddled conversations going on, we are all in this together. The Financial Director has now gone into the CEO's office. There's something going on!' I choose to side-line the questions to preserve the confidentiality implicit within my discussion with the investors but not without a degree of difficulty, after all these people are friends as well as colleagues. 'It's just the investor group pressing for information and updates on where we are with the strategy', I reply but I clarify further: 'As always, any involvement with these people normally results in change of some nature'.

Reflecting on these comments I realise that this was a watershed for me. Asserting confidence and being accepted by others, particularly directors and shareholders as a central player in a strategic community. I recall, with some comfort, at being strong in terms of integrity. But I also wonder whether I compromised some strategic aspects through loyalty to the senior team. I conclude the conversation: 'Listen guys, best thing you can both do is to get focussed on hitting your targets and managing your teams; we can deal with any investor fall out in the fullness of time and when we all have clarity as to what exactly is going on'. A disgruntled moan from both indicates their combined frustration and negativity.

James has become central to the activities of the senior team. The privileged information and involvement with key members of the team are recognized by more peripheral participants. They seek both information and advice from James. Such interactions are themselves examples of situated curriculum in the sense that such conversations become enactments of leadership that provide additional situated experience. The story reveals a shift in power within the discourses: in the formal team setting where James provides the lead role that would have previously been given by the CEO; and also within the informal chats with colleagues. Gherardi et al. (1998: 279) provide only limited explicit discussion of power within notions of situated curriculum. In the context of practising leadership, power is, in a sense, axiomatic. However, learning to handle such power, we argue, is a salient issue of leadership learning and thus part of the situated curriculum for the development of leadership practice.

### *5 February, 10.00: 'I'll tip my hat to the new constitution'—Observational learning as an important aspect of a situated curriculum*

I'm invited for a chat with the new Chairman on the morning of his arrival. It's about 10:15 in the morning and I have just made myself a strong cup of tea; my blue Staffordshire pottery mug remains an essential and only sense of stability in my business life! The Chairman is attired in his usual 'dogrobbers', blazer, slacks and open neck shirt. A small, thin but fit looking man. He adorns a casual style and wears a constant smile, which reflects an overt, amicable nature that comes across in conversation. 'Look James, come in and tell me all about yourself.' His opening comments exemplify his style. 'Listen, I have heard great things about what you've been doing. I'm confident about the future

of the company but we need to make some fundamental changes to the strategy and operations. We need to work together to put a few things in place.' I find myself listening but also seeking my own interpretation of his every word. His voice level is raised and he looks at me with a smile: 'Listen (becoming his favourite opening word), you need to work direct to me; never mind the CEO I will deal with him—I want to know (I'm sure he means control) everything that is happening in the business and we can all work together as a team'. I remember so well the feeling this conversation stirred in me. My fear was that this had echoes from the past. One particular leader who was selfish, forceful and autocratic; motivated by self-interest, fear and intimidation rather than by inspiration and team-work—that person was a bully and good at it. I worry that this might be the same.

Suddenly, the door swings open and the Chairman's 'shadow' ambles into the office without a knock or introduction. He's a quiet man of similar stature to his boss, and through his close relationship, a newly appointed fellow director of the business. A new learning experience unfolds before my eyes. Here we have a Chairman's right hand advisor who reports to no other. Indeed, this is one of the new communities within the business where access is denied to all. 'You can say anything in front of my man', says the Chairman. I wonder ...should I?

Afterwards, slumped back in my chair I note in my diary: 'this relationship will seriously complicate existing structures and I sense from my chat that there is the intent to break up existing relationships as a prerequisite to the forming of new relationships across the business. I know that the loyalty and commitment of the management and the staff will be tested to the extreme. I resolve within myself to ensure that my leadership and performance remains sufficiently robust to counter inevitable fall-out. I hope when the moment comes I show leadership'.

A significant part of the situated curriculum experienced by James was through access, observation and engagement with notable people in particular crucibles of organizational experience (echoing Bennis and Thomas, 2002; Kempster, 2006, 2009; McCall, 2004; McCall et al., 1988). Similarly Lave and Wenger (1991) describe processes of apprenticeship as observing the day-to-day activities of key people enacting a particular practice (1991: 56). In James's story he differentiates between the observed practice of his CEO (described earlier) and the interpretations of the leadership practice of the executive chairman. We argue that observation is a significant aspect of a situated curriculum shaping leadership practice. A corollary is the access and variability of notable people to observe through processes of legitimate participation. For example James would not have been able to contrast the practice of the CEO and the chairman in such a detailed and contextualized way if he was not in the role of the chief operating officer.

James has become a fully accepted member practising a particular role as a result of the access provided through legitimate participation and the associated pattern of activities that have formed the situated curriculum he has experienced. In this way he has become part of his social world. Yet through the telling of this story he has been able to know this social world. This last point orientates the discussion toward a critical interpretation of the autoethnographic exploration of the development of situated practice. In what way does James 'know this social world'? Is such knowing useful? What insights can be drawn from such a micro perspective to the development of leadership practice through illuminating aspects of situated curriculum?

## Discussion

Gherardi et al. (1998: 277), synthesizing work from a range of authors, emphasize the nature of communities of practice as 'an informal aggregation defined not by its members but by the shared

manner in which they do things and interpret events ... and the way in which certain things are done, and how events are interpreted'. The emphasis toward a relational perspective closely links to Cunliffe's (2008: 18) argument for relational social construction at the micro-level exploring 'how people within a particular setting create meanings inter-subjectively through their embodied dialogical activities'. This study has sought to provide a window into James's relational construction of learning to 'become' a senior manager, illustrated from a serial story (Czarniawska, 1997). (It should be noted that the serial episodes simply illustrate a glimpse of the learning that has occurred through these three months and are not in any way exhaustive.) The serial episodes have been examined to enable a situated curriculum to emerge that affected James. Emergent aspects of this situated curriculum included: observing and participating with notable people in formal and ad hoc meetings; access to information and coping with the consequences of such information; regulating information disclosure; coping with shifting identities within a specific context; coming to terms with the use of power; addressing conflicts of loyalty and conflicts of moral practice; and reassessing relationships, role expectations and responsibilities. Gherardi et al. (1998: 280) see a situated curriculum as having 'a recognisable pattern of order ... Individuals are often given a specific set of assignments and activities'. Our themes do not particularly suggest a pattern of order in terms of activities. Rather they appear to be a pattern of relational and dialogic activities infused with power and responsibility set within the legitimate pathway of participation as a senior leader. In a critique of situated learning, Contu and Willmott (2003: 283) emphasize that 'learning practices are enabled and constrained by their embeddedness in relations of power'. In this sense situated curriculum, within pathways of legitimate participation, needs to be understood as activities that enable a participant to become engaged and implicated in social structures involving relations of power (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 36). We have illustrated this through the three-month examination of James's insights into his narrative of 'becoming' an embedded member of the senior management team. His narrative of becoming is in itself unique. However, the insights from the autoethnographic narrative help us in our understanding of what a situated curriculum may involve in becoming a senior leader in this context. This has shown the significance and salience of Cunliffe's (2001, 2002, 2008) notion of relational learning and embodied dialogical practice. If Cunliffe's (2001, 2002) ideas of embodied dialogic practice are applied to the notions of situated curriculum we may have a useful way of understanding the 'becoming' process related to the development of leadership practice.

The notions of embodied and embedded draw the discussion toward a critical question: 'how do we know the social world?' James's learning has been made explicit through the co-produced autoethnographic approach. It has been most helpful to illuminate tacit processes of situated learning associated with his understanding and his sense of 'becoming'. The reflective dialogic process that has been part of the co-produced autoethnography, through structured probing and reflective questioning around the notion of situated curriculum, has unearthed a deeper appreciation of his journey. It has exposed a situated curriculum that was not known to him during the journey. In part the autoethnographic approach helps to address Cunliffe's (2008: 132) critical question: 'how do we surface the implicit knowing lying within action and articulate it in such way that our actions can be more knowledgeable?'

The analysis of James's situated relational learning in the form of situated curriculum has begun to expose the underlying issues of social, political, power and ethics embedded in contextual relationships. The examination has exposed Reynolds' (1998: 189) notions of criticality in terms of the taken-for-granted about both the practice and its social and institutional context; as well as conflicts of power and interest. This article can be criticized for being restricted in terms of moving beyond the micro construction of relational practice (Cunliffe, 2008) and not relating the arguments to wider

social, political and cultural processes (Reynolds, 1998). However, we have sought to illustrate the emancipatory potential for an individual manager to understand how his or her practice has been shaped by situated learning through illuminating aspects of situated curriculum; in particular, issues of power within relational dialogic processes. The co-produced autoethnography has helped a senior manager to recognise that 'experience is conditioned by, and an exercise of, power' (Vince, 1996: 115). Through such illumination we have shown how an individual manager has learnt about his or her relational practice and the underpinning aspects of communication shaping such relational knowing and practice (Cunliffe, 2008). In this way notions of critical self-reflection of leadership practice may be enhanced through an awareness of previously unacknowledged distortions between knowledge and power that affect relational meaning and practice in the act of leading.

## Conclusion

The article has addressed the need for an in-depth understanding of the development of leadership practice based on a relational epistemology where the knowledge of practice develops through situated activity. Scholarly attention to understanding situated practice has been limited (Bryman, 2004; Lowe and Gardner, 2000; Parry, 1998), partly as a consequence of the dominance of quantitative approaches to leadership studies, but also as a consequence of the tacit nature of situated learning shaping leadership practice. The opportunities to develop our understanding of leadership practice require innovative approaches to be explored to help reveal processes of situated learning. In this sense we hope this article may illustrate and encourage such methodological experimentation through outlining the application of co-produced autoethnography.

Through an autoethnography approach we have illuminated a senior manager's journey of situated learning. Through the serial narrative we have illustrated a glimpse of the situated curriculum associated with developing senior leadership practice. Such a curriculum appeared to place less emphasis on a pattern of ordered activities (Gherardi et al., 1998) and to be more oriented to a pattern of relational and dialogical engagements. Further research on situated curriculum applicable to senior leadership practice may be most helpful in assisting our understanding of the development of such practice. The process of undertaking a co-produced autoethnography as an organized reflexive dialogue (Cunliffe, 2001) has helped a manager understand the taken-for-granted and underlying power issues that shape relational meaning and practice. The account of James has illustrated Cunliffe's (2008: 133) argument that 'learning is a dialogical process: exploring the interplay of tensions, contradictions otherness as a means of opening possibilities for critical and self-reflexivity'. We suggest that such self-reflexivity on leadership practice is enabled through an appreciation of relational knowing that occurs through a situated curriculum.

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