

# ‘A room with a view’ Emphasizing experiences: A study of mid-level leaders practice with mentoring

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**Summary:** This paper describes a study of how the phenomenon of reflection on experience contributes to development of practical knowledge. Reflection on experiences and reflective practice are frequent themes in research reports and within Health and Social Workers’ practice, as well as in different post-educational programmes in mentoring. Data were collected through two focus-group discussions with twelve mid-level leaders in Norway. In addition, the analysis was inspired by an interpretation drawing on hermeneutic phenomenology. The results show what a leader can adapt and learn from mentoring in a practical training programme, and how to use this mentoring to develop practical knowledge within the organisation. The study concluded that there is a need for mentoring in practice, a room for critical reflection on experience and practice within a health organization. Practitioners have to be critical and reflective on their judgment in action, or ethical dilemmas of clinical experiences that filter and mirror their practice.

**Keywords:** reflection, wisdom; practical knowledge; decision-making; mentoring in practice

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## Introduction

The aim of this study is to achieve better knowledge of how mentorship based on critical reflection and dialogue can contribute to develop personal experiences as practical knowledge. Experience from practice may be articulated from tacit knowledge into practical knowledge within an organisation (Benner, 1994; Carlsen, 2006; Polanyi, 1983).

The status of practical knowledge as skills and wisdom has been discussed since the days of Aristotle (1998). He said that 'wisdom can only be learned by acting wisely'. What is morally right will also be professionally sensible for the people concerned. He stated that a precondition for developing wisdom through experience is that a person establishes and consolidates good behaviour and habits (Aristotle 1998).

The study seeks a deeper understanding of how experience needs to be reflected upon, and how this reflection through a critical dialogue develops into new knowledge within health organizations. Amin and Cohendet (2004) emphasize that:

The interplay of different types of knowledge along two main dimensions as the 'epistemological centre', centred around the critical assumption that human knowledge is created and expanded through social interaction between tacit knowledge and codified explicit knowledge and 'the ontological dimension', which is concerned with the interaction of knowledge held at different levels (individual, group, organizational, and inter-organizational) (2004:5).

Fejes (2008: 243 -250) suggests that a discourse analysis of reflective practice may encourage nurses to reflect critically on themselves as practitioners and help them to be aware of and understand the meaning of their own knowing and knowledge in practice. In accordance with Martinsen (2006) and Benner (1994), knowledge is developed through experience and reflection on actions as an embodied mind. In this paper we try to emphasize that the human being is intentional and reflective and always, implicitly or explicitly, is related to itself and the other (Arendt 1978). In spite of the rich debate on the reflective practitioner in the work of Schön (1986, 1991), Ixer (1999) argues that there is no theory of reflection that can be accurately assessed concerning the nature and practice of reflection in social work. He argues that Schön's

own ideas tend to lack practical applications and need to be superseded by new theories (Ixer, 1999).

The data from this study is collected from a post-graduate study of Mentoring Vocational Practice for health- and social workers. Mentorship is here seen as a social cultural interaction involving dialogue in a group, where the participants reflect upon their knowledge in action, in terms of both tacit knowledge from experience and critical reflection on explicit knowledge in action (Olson and Connelly, 1995). Most of the students are mid-level leaders within different health organisations. The programmes consist of storytelling in which the students were asked to describe their experience. Bolin and Fog (2007) have looked into the context in which storytelling takes place in small groups and how the students learned from critical reflections on experiences from practice. They argue that storytelling in the form of narratives can be used to bridge theory and practice.

Such storytelling was based on their own judgment in action and could involve either a problem or a dilemma encountered in practical work (Benner, 1994; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Schwandt, 2004). On the basis of her own experience and opinion, the practitioner is asked to reflect critically on the situation in question. In other words, she is asked to put her practical experience into words, so that both her experiences and judgment can be articulated. The dialogue depends on trust within the relationship, and the situation requires that the participants are engaged in a discourse connected to practice and reflection in the storytellers experience and judgement from her practice (Martinsen, 2006; Fejes, 2008; Wackerhausen, 2008). The intention of this type of mentorship is a dialogue based on trust to pose critical questions that help the practitioner to reflect upon and interpret her own judgment in action that gives her a better understanding of her own work and experiences (Benner, 1994; Lam et al., 2006; Schön, 1986, 1991; Schwandt, 2002). The mentor's responsibility is to ensure that the dialogue becomes a discussion based on critical reflection, in which the sequence of events and learning is placed in a context of reflection (Benner, 1994). Cooper (2007) discusses how to analyze practitioners stories and she maintains that reflection mirrors the practitioners' expertise.

Learning in this mentor programme is associated with practice as situated action and grows out of socio-cultural theories of learning, and as Lave and Wenger (1991:50-51) consider:

A theory of social practice emphasizes the relational dependency of agent and world, activity, meaning, cognition, learning and knowing... One way to think about learning is as the historical production, transformation, and change of persons.

## **Purpose**

The aim of this study was to gain more understanding of how the phenomenon of reflection on experiences contributes to the development of practical knowledge in leadership.

## **Methods**

The study is based on data from two focus–group discussions. Kruger (1994), maintains that focus-groups give a homogeneous group an opportunity to reflect upon various perspectives in their own and other members of the group's common or different experiences.

## **Participants**

We selected respondents from an interdisciplinary group of five health and social workers, and one group of seven registered nurses. The twelve participants worked as mid-level leaders within different health organisations. The informants had much in common; experience as leaders in different health organisations, and experience from a programme in mentoring. They have approximately eight years of experience as mid-level leaders. The first group was an interdisciplinary group of five mid-level leaders who participated in a part-time programme in mentoring. The second group comprised seven registered nurses working as mid-level leaders at two different hospitals. In both studies I selected informants who could give broad-based and accurate information from the field. All the informants I interviewed had at least eight years of experience as mid-level leaders.

## **Data collection**

The aim of the focus group discussions was to obtain as rich a knowledge as possible of their narratives and experiences from the dialogue within the mentoring process. The semi-structured and open-ended interviews were conducted to shed light on the participant's reflection on and in actions as mid-level leaders. The focus group interviews lasted from 45 to 75 minutes, and were tape-recorded. After the interviews were conducted, a verbatim transcription of each tape was typed and categorised.

## **Data analyses**

The phenomenological-hermeneutic analyses are inspired by Krüger (1994), and Benner (1994), and were performed in the following steps; the interviews were firstly read in an open-minded way to get a sense of the whole. The interview transcriptions were analysed repeatedly to ensure that the intentions of the informants and the components of mentoring were present. This includes an understanding of embodied knowing, skills and ethical considerations. A systematic moving from the parts back to the whole text allows me to look both for topics that were unique, and for topics that were common for the field of study.

Interpretation of the material was conducted in accordance with qualitative methods for text analysis, inspired by Krueger (1994) and Benner (1994). Interpretation is a complex multi- faced interactive act of constructing meanings out of the informants' experiences and the perceptions of their working conditions. The analyses were carried out and done in the following steps. First, each interview was read separately to give a sense of the whole of the informants' experiences. In these separate reflections we had to maintain a necessary distance to the text in order to interpret their meaning and understandings. Second, we then marked the text independently. Third, the marked texts were written into different main themes for each interview. The analysis is analogue to a phenomenological way of interpreting, in which the evaluation stresses self-reflection and arguments in order to obtain insight. According to Benner (1994) a phenomenological approach focuses on the participants' experiences, both as individuals and as group members. The process of analysis was an open reading

of the different contexts, meanings and understandings of the specific cases or experiences, expressed in different ways in the situation. The different contexts had to be held together to interpret how the similar in the dissimilar revealed itself in different ways. We seek to assess and understand the text in its own terms, and get the meaning within the text. This way of interpretation is equivalent to what Benner (1994) maintains that analyses are triangulation of data, which contributes to strengthen the validity of research.

## **Ethics**

The participants received written information stating that they were free to withdraw from the study at anytime. They were informed and accepted the ethical confidentiality and anonymity by using their experience in this study (Smith, 1992).

## **Results**

We find that the mid-level leader experiences from the mentor programme uncovered the following two major dimensions. Firstly, emphasis on experience helped them to be conscious of their own and others knowledge as leaders. In the mentor programme they have been aware that experience depends on ethics, skills and theoretical understanding. In the dialogue with the mentor there was an ethical dimension in their storytelling.

After the introductory course, where they have discussed trust, we find that in the storytelling they neither speak explicitly of ethics, nor mention the 'moral' as an important part of their practice. But the meaning of the dilemmas as leaders gives a perspective of their interpersonal relations with the employees, and the judgments within their practice represented professionalism as an employer. This professionalism included ethics, skills and theoretical understanding as leaders. Secondly, we find that there is a need for a transdisciplinary leader forum; a room with a view to emphasising their experience, and to continuing mentoring in practice, and hopefully to developing a new kind of knowledge within an organisation.

## **Emphasizing experience**

A result of this study shows that if the participants should emphasize their experiences through mentoring it requires that the whole group is engaged in the context of mentoring as a situated practice. The informants suggest that a mentoring process depends on openness and trust. As one of them said:

*When we started in this mentor group we talked about ethics, trust and silence. This agreement upon ethical rules is important in order to establish confidence within the group. If we had not discussed this subject at the beginning of the programme, I don't think that openness within the group could exist. Trust is essential for openness and self-confidence within in a group process.*

A leader does not become wise only through her experiences, but must also be able to reflect upon her own experiences in practice to see what is right for the situation, as one of them said. In the dialogue with a mentor she had an opportunity to reflect upon her knowing in action. The silence in the room, and the time of reflection gave her courage to rethink and 'mirror' the situation, and that helped her to become conscious of her own experience as leader. Her experience from the mentor programmes can be represented by the following;

*The self-confidence within the group and our open minds helped us to see and understand the organization as one unit. I believe in this kind of meeting places for leaders, but we have to give it higher priority.*

*I think it is important that we have had the opportunity to tell our stories without any kind of interruption, because we then have the chance to explain to the others our experience from the whole story from the beginning to end. Storytelling is a time of calm and stillness which gives confidence to tell and reflect upon experience.*

## **A room with a view**

The second dimension uncovered was the extent to which mentoring depends on being dialectic in the transfer of experience. One of the informants put it this way:

*I think it is the room, the situation and the feeling of a silent engagement from the group that gave me the inspiration to describe how it really is to be a leader. In my job it rarely happens that we talk about our own or other colleagues' experiences. My working days are very busy and the communications are full of interruption. In this group I have learned to focus on other people; who they are, what they say and what they stand for. I think my whole body is aware and engaged in the situation. I concentrate on the here and now. My own frustrations are set aside, and my attention is on the storyteller and her feelings and the meaning within her story. It is the person and her context I'm interested in. She must feel that my attention tries to grasp her own understanding of her experiences.*

Here follows one opinion on reflections and experience:

*My experience from this group is that we always had something to talk about; dilemmas at work, continuous changing processes within our organizations, and at the end we gained a deeper understanding of each others practice as leaders. The self-confidence within the group and our open minds helped us to see and understand the organization as one unit. I believe in this kind of meeting 'place' singular for leaders, but we have to give it higher priority.*

An informant argued that an essential approach in mentoring is to make practitioners aware of and able to describe the knowledge they have gained as leaders through experience:

*I think for me this mentor programme has been an important contribution to my personal and professional development. I feel that I have acquired a deeper appreciation of my own experiences, and I have given more attention to my colleague experiences and opinions.*

Such a dialogue requires a capacity for critical reflection, which makes practitioners more conscious of their moral, relational and practical knowledge. If the practitioner's opinion and insight are to be described and expressed on the basis of critical reflection on the case, the mentor must possess sufficient perspective and professional insight to enable the practitioner to express her opinion and insight independently of those of the mentor.

The findings confirm that there is a need for a broader co-operation within transdisciplinary leader teams to share and develop knowledge from experiences in order to handle dilemmas and challenges.



## **Discussion**

The discussion of the findings is related to the leaders' reflections on their knowledge in actions, and how these possible course of action lead to assessment and decision-making for them as leaders.

### **A room with a view of self-confidence and judgment**

The leader's knowledge is articulated in the context of their experiences within a setting of mentoring. In the dialogue between experiences and personal knowledge, the participants have an opportunity to make their knowledge explicit. This is in accordance with Schön (1991), who claims that critical reflection upon experiences as a dialogue should be structured in such a way that the practitioner, if possible, arrives at an understanding of the important points based on her own judgment and reasoning.

We find that the mentor and the group of leaders must be aware that perceptible understanding is of basic importance to sense the meaning of one's own and others experiences (Greenwood, 1993; van Manen, 1990). When making use of experience and narratives in dialogues, with the intention of describing the situation as it was, their reflections concentrated on lived experience. This form of expression - lived experiences - is not part of the systematic professional vocabulary, which appears to be inadequate because it imposes artificial limits on life. Everyday speech, on the other hand, is spontaneous; it reflects an immediate response and offers opportunities for expressing subtle differences, diversities and accurate descriptions (Ricoeur, 1980).

Argyris and Schön (1978) argue that leader competence is correlated with both the experience gained within an organisation, and the way in which these experiences are reflected upon. This indicates that experience is gained by learning to pay attention to what leaders are expressing in their practice, and their perceptible understanding of their own judgment through a critical and concrete reflection.

Being a reflective practitioner, and learning the right and proper actions in a professional practice depends on acting from wisdom, in order for the actions to correspond with what is wise and professionally appropriate in the situation. According to Aristotle wisdom must be

learned, it is not given, and the source for learning is in the person's life or work situation (Aristotle, 1998).

Wenger (1998) argues that this issue of learning in social contexts is essential for individual and groups. People develop knowledge and learn through their participation within an organisation. Empirical research in approaches to develop knowledge in firms and organisations shows that a professional judgment, which includes both explicit knowledge and tacit knowing in the form of skills and know-how. This knowledge has both individual and collective aspects and is often context dependent. (Amin & Cohendet, 2004; Carlsen, 2006; Finstad, 1998).

The informant's feedback underlines the fact that mentoring must be given a higher priority within an organisation. The mid-level leaders on wards felt that they are often left to themselves to manage their own situations. There was a limited opportunities to reflect upon and to discuss one's experiences with other leaders or the manager in charge.

Mentorship, as described in this paper may give the leaders an opportunity to develop wisdom in their professional practice. An organization ought to require for a broader co-operations within transdisciplinary leader teams to share and develop knowledge in order to be handle dilemmas and challenges in a new way, based on knowledge developed through experience in practice.

### **A transdisciplinary leader forum**

The findings presented here give us a clear indication of the desire of both groups of leaders that knowledge and experience ought to be shared in a process that develops and cultivates transdisciplinary thinking and practice. This practical knowledge appears in practice as concrete and depends on the particular context and situation (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986; Schön, 1991). In the context of mid-level leaders managing on wards as professionals in charge, the leaders must have evidence-based science, technical skills and ethical judgment at their disposal to be able to lead a complex organisation. Gibbons (2002) argues for a shift toward a new mode of knowledge production which can replace and reform practice. He suggests that there is a need for a room of broader co-operation within transdisciplinary leader teams, to share experiences and develop knowledge in order to be able to handle dilemmas and challenges. Gibbons et al. (2002), claims that the new production of

knowledge is reforming institutions, practice and organisations. They argue that we have to rethink inter-disciplinary knowledge through networks and dialogues in order to create transdisciplinary knowledge within an organisation.

According to Gibbons et al. (2002) trans-disciplinarity may be achieved through the establishment of a research group with a variety of different disciplines. In the present context, it meant a group representing different disciplines with the capacity to share and develop knowledge based on experiences as a leader.

We suggest that a transdisciplinary group of mid-level leaders have the opportunity to build networks. According to Barnes (1954), who compared a network with fishing net, each person's identity is bound to a plurality of social groups, such that social networks extend across many people in a society. Such networks intertwine within a society and people and connect people both geographically and socially. These cross-cutting ties and groups are ones in which not only friends and enemies, but also leaders and followers are inextricably mixed.

The challenges and problems within organisations cannot be resolved just by one person as a leader, or by one discipline. Amin and Cohendet (2004) also argue for learning new knowledge through network building. The practices of knowledge are here seen as a social and organizational capital which should be taken care of. It will create a bridge between people and form a reservoir of different types of knowledge.

The leaders argued that disciplinary knowledge and expertise are resources that need to be shared through networks and dialogues. We think in accordance with Barnes (1954) that a network is not fixed, for hopefully new ties may be formed in reference groups with transdisciplinary leaders so they have the opportunity to develop new knowledge from practice. This finding is correlated to other studies showing the central role of knowledge gained through personal experience in learning leadership (Carlsen, 2006; Finstad, 1998). The knowledge is developed through practical experiences as an embodied mind. These results support the claims made by Gibbons et al. (2002), who argue for a shift towards a new mode of knowledge production which can replace or reform practice. This issue is essential in order to develop new knowledge within health organisations, dealing with patients' illness, the employees and professional leadership problems. The challenges and problems within an organisation can not be solved by only one discipline; there is a need for a new knowledge within

organisations. A type of knowledge based on the phenomena of learning through experience from working related jobs, and by paying attention to experience through reflection (Fejes, 2008; Ixer, 1999; Cooper, 2006/2007; Schön, 1991; Wachterhausen, 2008; Wenger, 1998).

## Conclusions

In spite of all the participants' positive experiences with mentoring in practice, this was a new way of thinking. The lack of time and resources in the health organisations hinders the prioritisation of this kind of reflection and mentoring. In reflecting on ethics and complicated decision making processes, it is essential to reflect on one's own experiences with a mentor. If the aim of the mentoring in practice is to develop new knowledge, an organisation ought to establish transdisciplinary leader groups from the field. I suggest that mentorship, as presented in this paper, is one way to bridge the gap between theory and practice, or between the manager in charge and the mid-level leaders on ward in health organisations.

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