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Published in Management Learning, 2016

Exploring how social poetics can be used to understand processes of management learning

Introduction

T: I think these days here have been good, I feel closer to being a Cullinanⁱ leader now

Several: Yes! ...

L: The Cullinan leader is beginning to come to me. It has been knocking since seminar 1 and 2...

The comments above are from top leaders during the third seminar of a year-long top leader competence development programme: 'The Cullinan Leader'. The purpose of this article is to explore what we can learn about management learning when social poetics is used as a perspective to make sense of how seven leaders constructed meaning with each other, with consultants and with other participating leaders and researchers about what leading in the Cullinan way is all about. The title of the programme, 'The Cullinan Leader', refers to the Cullinan diamond, which is a 3 carat diamond Sir William Crooke found in 1905 in South Africa after many years of searching in various diamond mines. The aim of the Cullinan approach is the development of high-level (extraordinary) leadership skills out of ordinary leadership skillsⁱⁱ, in this paper this approach is analysed from the perspective of social poetics and contributes to knowledge of the role that social poetics plays in management learning and education.

The article is based on a relational constructionism perspective, presenting and discussing how the perception and use of the concept 'Cullinany' continually changed and was reworked based on the conversations the seven leaders had with each other during the competence development programme. The purpose of this presentation is to initiate a discussion about how using social poetics as a perspective can enable us to construct new knowledge about how leaders learn during formal competence development programmes like 'The Cullinan Leader'.

Development and learning is seen as relationally responsive learning, and we follow Cunliffe's perspective (2008): 'Relationally responsive knowing and learning means thinking more reflexively about how we construct multiple and emerging 'realities', and selves with others, through our dialogue' (p. 135). By observing processes of relationally responsive learning, we also follow the research tradition of Cunliffe (2002), Hardy and Palmer (1999), Hosking and Bouwen (2000), Gergen (2001) and Shotter (2012). By following these researchers, we want to emphasise the dynamic and co-constructive process perspective on management development and learning.

Social poetics is a concept that several scholars have presented and used as a frame for understanding leading (Cunliffe, 2002a; McNamee, 2000; Shotter, 2011; Shotter & Cunliffe, 2002).

Social poetics is a view on communication that opens up for the ontological and reality generating aspects of language and it illustrates how people in-the-moment are able to co-construct their surroundings in transformative and reflexive ways (Cunliffe, 2002b; McNamee, 2000; Shotter, 2011; Shotter & Cunliffe, 2003). The article aims to enrich existing understandings of management learning by using social poetics as a perspective and by empirically illustrating how management learning is shaped both through the use of metaphors and by leaders engaging in reflexive critique with each other (McNamee, 2000). Our goal is to offer additional insights into how leaders learn, and inspire others to take part in further exploring how management learning processes can be understood from a perspective in which the ontological and social poetic aspects of language are assigned primacy.

A glimpse into 'The Cullinan Leader'

Before we continue the presentation of the theoretical and methodological foundations behind this article, we want to offer a glimpse into 'The Cullinan Leader', the cross-regional top leader competence development programme that makes up the empirical foundation of this article. 'The Cullinan Leader' was aimed at top leaders who wanted to develop their leadership approach in what the consultants that facilitated the programme called post-conventional, profound and sustainable ways. The concept Cullinany stems from a larger survey study in which approximately 600 leaders were asked to reflect upon their leading style and fill out a questionnaire. Based on their replies, seven leadership practices ranging from what was termed conventional or ordinary to post conventional and extraordinary leadership were formulated.

The survey showed that only 1% of the 600 leaders embodied practices that placed them at the top and made them a Cullinan leader: a leader who embodies charisma; creates social, material and spiritual transformation; explores existential questions, works with his personal leadership, challenges taken-for-granted assumptions and can communicate with both kings and common people. This survey and the story of the Cullinan diamond were used by the consultants as an appetizer for the program and the argumentation used to promote the program was that although only 1% of the 600 leaders in the conducted survey were ranked as a Cullinan leader, every leader embodies the potential to become a Cullinan leader *if* they apply themselves. And the ambition with the Cullinan Leader program was to invite leaders who wanted to develop these cullinan skills to engage in a process where they could transform their leadership style and –metaphorically speaking - make their employees and middle managers shine like the Cullinan diamond carved out of a mine by the leader.

Looking at the ambition behind the program one could question whether the idea of moving stepwise from a position as an ordinary leader to a Cullinan is tenable and would enable the participating leaders to create social, material and spiritual transformation in what the consultants referred to as a very complex and uncertain world. There is a contradiction between this rather stepwise learning progression that the program offered where predefined and fixed goals were incorporated and then the aim of engaging the participating leaders in a transformative individual and relational development of their leadership. It is also questionable how many of the participating

leaders believed that they during the year the Cullinan Leader program lasted would be able to turn charcoal into diamonds. However, the program's title and content represented something new, alluring and yet approachable for the participating leaders and it made it stand out compared to other top leader competence development programs.

In total more than 20 leaders participated in the programme, which consisted of four joined seminars and three five-group meetings, where the leaders (in groups of seven to eight) held in-depth discussions on relevant managerial challenges with each other. Some of these learning group meetings were facilitated by a consultant and some were unfacilitated and conducted by the leaders themselves. During the top leader competence development programme's seminars and group meetings, we were present primarily as observing researchers and had no influence on the design or development of the programme. Our participation was enabled by a shared interest in management learning under formal settings of both consultants and researchers. Besides observing the seminars and group meetings, we also held 1-3 individual research conversations with the participating leaders during the year-long programme.

The data for this article focuses primarily on communication between leaders in one of the three leader groups. The group consisted of seven leaders who held four facilitated and three unfacilitated meetings during the programme. During these meetings, the researcher who followed the group through the whole programme took notes that attempted to represent as much of the verbal and nonverbal communication as the researcher's note taking pace allowed.

Language as ontology and social poetics

The theoretical framework for this paper is anchored within an intersubjective perspective of social practice and, more specifically, relational constructionism (Gergen, 2009; Hosking, 2011, 2010; McNamee & Hoskings, 2012; Uhl-Bien, 2006). This is a perspective that assigns primacy to people's small, common and everyday communications and how these processes shape the continual becoming of understanding and knowledge (Gergen, 2010; Hosking, 2011). Gergen (2010) uses the metaphor 'confluence' to illustrate how people are always in the midst of '... turbulent streams or conversational flows' (Gergen, 2010: 2), where knowledge of what will be perceived as meaningful in a given situation depends on the supplementary actions of other people in the confluence and the actions they undergo (Gergen, 2010).

Life, knowledge and meaning are continually in motion and can be perceived as long and meshed lines of unique here-and-now situations in which people meet, communicate, generate knowledge and improvise their way forward (Shotter & Cunliffe, 2006: 133). Assigning primacy to language, dialogue and communication as a way to make sense of organisational life is a part of a broader linguistic turn within organisational studies (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Cunliffe, 2002; Ospina & Uhl-Bien, 2012). A turn in which organisational researchers acknowledge that the way people communicate within organisational settings plays a significant part in the becoming of organisational life.

Moreover, assigning primacy to language and communication is, from a relational constructionism perspective, a fundamental premise. Language, communication and in-situ local constructions of meaning between people is what constitutes knowledge, reality and what people perceive to be the possible spaces for action (Gergen, 2009; McNamee & Hosking, 2012). Cunliffe (2002) suggests perceiving language as ontology, because people's understanding and images of reality are generated through their everyday, contextual and in-situ uses of language. Meaning is, as Cunliffe (2002) writes, '... created as language plays through us...' (p. 129).

Perceiving language as ontology means acknowledging and embracing that language is indeterminate; it is creative and metaphorical, and it is an embodied practice (Cunliffe, 2002a). What we perceive as real, important, meaningful, etc., unfolds and is co-constructed as people communicate—people do not talk about a phenomenon or a process; they co-construct it as they communicate (Cunliffe, 2002a; McNamee, 2015).

Communication and relational construction of meaning

As people communicate they invite each other to figure out how to move forward in what they jointly and in-situ find meaningful based on their gestures and responses (Mead, 1986; Vološinov, 1986). The meaning people construct is, however, not steady; it is porous, dynamic, imaginative and unfinalizable (Bakhtin 1986; Cunliffe, 2011, 2002a; Mead, 1986; Vološinov, 1986).

This perspective on meaning construction presented here doesn't necessitate a tabula rasa. Even though language is indeterminate and self-contradictory, it also encompasses historicity (Cunliffe, 2011, 2002a). What people in a given here-and-now situation relationally construct as meaningful is not only based on the concrete situation, it is also embedded and embodied in historically and culturally shared practices, norms and understandings: 'The living utterance having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment ... cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads...' (Bakhtin, 1986: 276). People embody local and shared meaning structures, norms and practices that they draw on intuitively as they attempt to understand the given situation they are in (Shotter, 1996). To bring in the notion of embodiment is to move away from understanding construction of meaning and initiation of actions as cognitive processes going on inside the heads' of individual persons (Shotter, 1996). It is an invitation to instead explore how the way people construct meaning and act spontaneously, what they anticipate and take to be true are relating processes that often are expressed in ways people don't pay much attention to. They are taken-for-granted in people's everyday practice— they are embodied and are expressed as 'natural' ways to go on together (Shotter, 1996). They are interesting to explore here in relation to leading and management learning as we by exploring these can generate understanding about how the leaders jointly co-construct and alter chronotypical understandings and possible 'natural' and here-and-now meaningful ways to lead (Bakhtin, 1986; Cunliffe, 2002; Shotter, 2006, 2005a; Vološinov, 1986).

Social poetics

Social poetics is a view on communication that is congruent with perceiving language as ontology and understanding reality from a relational constructionism perspective (Cunliffe, 2002a; McNamee, 2015). There are, from our perspective, four features that are closely entwined and refine one another. Firstly, to work with and explore language and communication from a social poetics perspective means focusing on the imaginative, creative, sensitive and embodied features of language as people communicate. Poetics means to create and to '... give wings to the imaginative ... to engage in improvisation ... to give life to the relational engagement ... that creates the realities ... we study and live' (McNamee, 2000: 146). Attention is drawn to how people's relational engagement and the ways they communicate constitute local reality. It is a method for emphasizing how the ways people talk with each other and the actions they undergo are poetic, because they bring about certain local realities in favour of others (Cunliffe, 2011; McNamee, 2000).

The second feature is that social poetics is a way to understand organisational practice that embraces the in-situ, embodied and chronotypical relational constructions of meaning in which people continually engage (Cunliffe, 2002a; McNamee, 2000; Shotter, 2011; Shotter & Cunliffe, 2003). Social poetics embrace the dialectical relationship between historicity and the uniqueness of every situation people engage in as they communicate. It focusses on how people in-the-moment experiment, draw on their experiences, rework them and imagine what will come next as they jointly attempt to generate in-situ and 'chronotypical' (Bakhtin, 1981) understandings that constitute what is right and wrong here-and-now.

Thirdly, the method of social poetics revolves around acknowledging that there are many different and equally meaningful ways to understand and deal with a given experience or situation (Hosking, 2011, 2010). Understanding and coherence is local and illustrates how people in-the-moment co-construct their surroundings and the circumstances of their lives in different ways (Shotter & Cunliffe, 2002). This enables the study of this co-existing multiverse of potential ways to act and construct meaning as an ongoing process of co-constructing different organisational realities, all of which are possible and equally meaningful, and co-exist in perfect disharmony.

The fourth and last shared feature of relational constructionism—language as ontology and social poetics—embraces the transformative aspects of communication and being 'radically present' (McNamee, 2015). To engage in social poetics is to be in a 'not-knowing' (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992) position and to be curious about other ways to look at and construct the world in meaningful ways. To communicate, from a social poetics perspective, means perceiving everyday gestures and responses as invitations people give each other to slow down their immediate construction of meaning, be attentive to each other and their surroundings and make room for more reflexivity and different meaningful understandings and practices to emerge (Cunliffe, 2002b).

If people, through their gestures and responses, accept each other's invitations, they can jointly explore 'arresting moments' (Cunliffe, 2002a; Shotter, 2005). These are moments in which the things people are struck by and those that they take for granted are challenged; moments in which

people can embrace their differences and use them as a starting point to engage in explorative, imaginative, reflexive and context-sensitive dialogue, incrementally crafting new meaning and looking at organisational life through other metaphors and different perspectives (Cunliffe, 2002a; Hosking, 2010; McNamee, 2000; Shotter, 2011, 2005a).

Researching management learning through social poetics

The purpose of this article is to explore what we can learn about management learning when social poetics is used as a perspective. We have chosen this perspective because throughout the year during which the top leadership programme took place, we observed how Cullinany and the idea of what it meant to be a Cullinan leader was discussed and explored by consultants and leaders in different ways and this piqued our curiosity. Cullinany was presented as a metaphor by the consultants for leading in extra-ordinary ways where certain characteristics and practices like; disrupting norms and routines, creating conditions for creativity and connectivity etc. were identified up-front. But what caught our attention was how Cullinany became communicatively meaningful in various ways, depending on which leaders were together and the various conversations the leaders had with each other and with the consultants. Other concepts and metaphors were also used, but in this article we will focus on how the leaders constructed Cullinany in different yet still chronotypically meaningful ways throughout the year as this concept was the focal point of the program and what continually by both consultants and leaders were discussed, explored and constructed in various ways.

The data generated for this article stems from a longitudinal qualitative case study where we have conducted more than 30 exploratory observational studies and held more than 40 qualitative and individual enquiring conversations with the participating leaders (McNamee & Hosking, 2012; Robson, 2011; Shotter & Cunliffe, 2002). Using social poetics as our perspective enables us to explore how the leaders communicatively used language ontologically as they co-construct local and chronotypical realities that they found meaningful in-situ, and how these shifted. We could also make sense of the imaginative, creative and embodied ways these leaders communicated with each other and how this was used to generate Cullinan leading in meaningful ways. As a result, we were capable of focusing on how the leaders helped each other explore what they were struck by and their arresting moments.

The notion of metaphors and engaging in reflexive critique

We bring in two notions of social poetics that are aligned with the four features presented earlier. The first is, 'the use of metaphors that enable or provoke people to see new connections' (Cunliffe, 2002a). This notion of social poetics is brought in because Cullinany was presented by the consultants epistemologically as a metaphor for what they meant, described an extra-ordinary way of leading. The use of metaphors to make sense of organisations is well-known; Morgan (1980) is especially well-known and respected for his work with metaphors in organisations.

Metaphors are perceived ontologically in this article (Cunliffe, 2002a). This means that a metaphor—like Cullinany—is not perceived as a ready-made concept people use communicatively

to make sense of a phenomenon (i.e., leading). Cullinany becomes meaningful, embodied and pervasive based on how the leaders communicate and engage in joint social experiences (Cunliffe, 2002a). And as discussed later, Cullinany becomes meaningful in various ways that differ from what the consultants intended because the leaders communicate differently in various local interactions.

The second notion of social poetics we will use is poetics as ‘engaging in reflexive critique’ (McNamee, 2000). To engage in reflexive critique is a way to communicatively arrest the moments people are struck or moved by, and work with the transformative aspects of language. During the year the programme lasted, we experienced on several occasions the ways in which the leaders were radically present as they communicated and jointly challenged each other’s taken-for-granted assumptions and embodied meaning structures, and how they invited each other to open up for new meaning to be relationally constructed.

To use social poetics as a perspective is to engage in the co-construction and crafting of meaning and images

To use social poetics as a perspective and to acknowledge and embrace language as ontology means that we as researchers are not detached from the processes we try to make sense of. We are (hopefully) reflexively, imaginatively and in embodied ways contributing to crafting and co-constructing meaning as we write about our experiences during the programme and discuss these in ontological and theoretical ways (Cunliffe, 2002a; Gergen, 2014; McNamee, 2000; McNamee & Hosking, 2012). We know that what we present here is one of several possible living reconstructions of what can be learned about management learning based on how we present and discuss conversations and processes we have co-constructed during the year 'The Cullinan Leader' lasted (Cunliffe, 2011; Gergen, 2014; McNamee, 2000).

Despite the agreement that during the seminars and group meetings our role primarily revolved around observing the communication processes, we are aware that this does not mean that our presence was not noticed or did not affect the concrete processes and conversations between the leaders and consultants (Cunliffe, 2011; Robson, 2011). Several of the participating leaders spoke in different ways about how they felt that knowing that researchers were following the programme added an extra dimension to the programme, and how they felt privileged to be part of a research project. So despite our verbal silence during these seminars and learning group meetings, our presence influenced the communication and meaning construction processes (Cunliffe, 2002a; Gergen, 2014; McNamee & Hosking, 2011). In that process we have paid special interest to two aspects of doing longitudinal studies; building legitimacy and co-constructing trust (Johnson et al., 2010).

Before the first seminar was held we had introduced ourselves in writing to the participating leaders, so they knew who we were and what our research interest revolved around. The purpose was to give them a first impression of who we were that hopefully would legitimate our presence (Johnson et al., 2010). Following we have, by invitation, occasionally shared our understandings

about the processes being explored during the program to serve as a legitimate observant and a 'natural' part of the program (Johnson et al., 2010; Robson, 2011). Secondly, we have worked with co-constructing trust with the leaders as the program unfolded by retaining the leaders' anonymity throughout and after the program and at always respecting in empathetic ways the different local political agendas and opinions that through the program emerged and was talked about. Both the written presentation of our research interests, the feedback we have presented and the more intimate conversations we in breaks, break-out sessions etc. have taken part in have unavoidable influenced their understanding of what the program also would focus upon and how it unfolded (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Johnson et al., 2010; McNamee & Hosking, 2012)

In addition to our role as observers during seminars and group meetings, we engaged in 1-3 research conversations with each of the participating leaders. During these conversations, our meaning structures and taken-for-granted assumptions influenced how meaning and data for this article has been constructed. This raises some questions about how we include the voices of others and acknowledge the multiple possible ways to construct meaning (Cunliffe, 2002a).

Continual reweaving and re-construction is an integrated part of doing relational constructionism research. All the data we have generated and the data we present and discuss here are both socially constructed by us and represent local here-and-now interpretations that we have co-authored together with the leaders (Cunliffe, 2011; McNamee & Hosking, 2012). Our language, what we write about in this article and how we write about it, also express our local taken-for-granted assumptions and our embodied meaning structures, and therefore inevitably shape how meaning is constructed and images are crafted in the article (Cunliffe, 2002a).

The focus we have had on generating knowledge about management learning has made us prioritise some activities, conversations and constructions of meanings at the cost of others. In this process, we have aimed at enacting social poetics in three ways. Firstly, although we are the ones pressing the keys at the keyboard, we have tried to be attentive to and include both the leaders and consultants' local in-situ understandings and our own, and how these shifted and changed over the course of the year (Cunliffe, 2002a). Secondly, we have worked on combining the various local here-and-now understandings in constructive ways to engage in a reflexive critique about what we can learn about management learning when several local voices and understandings mesh together (McNamee, 2000).

Thirdly, we have tried to give wings to the imaginative by using images as we present the processes and conversations between the leaders in meaningful ways. By using images, we aim to invite the reader to take part in co-constructing spaces for imaginative, new and embodied understandings. Leaning on social poetics does not mean that data can be re-constructed in any way we as researchers see fit; considerable emphasis has been placed on ensuring that the chosen method supports what we set out to generate knowledge about, and offers an understanding that readers find trustworthy and credible (Kvale, 1992; McNamee & Hosking, 2012). In what follows, we are

inspired by Cunliffe (2002a) and have done what we could to remain attentive to the multiple partners and their local interpretations as well as ours.

Exploring how the concept ‘Cullinany’ is on the move

In what follows, we describe how the concept Cullinany was introduced and used by consultants, leaders and researchers in practice throughout the year during which the top leader competence development programme took place.

Excerpt 1: The introduction of Cullinany

The theme for the first seminar was 'Seeing the bigger picture', and under this heading Cynthia and Charles introduced a method of 'facing and dealing with the big issues'. They outlined how the participants would work on 'moving towards genuine inquiry'. It was during this seminar that the leaders who generated data for this paper met each other and the consultant Margaret, who was in charge of facilitating the first four group meetings during the year. The learning group consisted of: Steven the manager of a regional medical supply function; Christian, the director of a large entrepreneurial consultancy firm; Jenny, the HR leader of a Danish hospital; Emma, the chief surgeon at a Danish hospital; Laura, the head of the department of regional development in one of the Danish Regions; and Paul and Thomas, who are both directors of Danish hospitals. Jenny and Emma know each other, as they work together and the same goes for Thomas and Paul, who meet regularly—during regional board meetings, for example.

During the first seminar, Charles and Cynthia introduce the figure below that they believe represent the dimensions of leadership in complex times and illustrate the power of being an extraordinary leader. The purpose with presenting the model is both to present some of the central and desirable characteristics and concepts that define what Cynthia and Charles believe is a Cullinan leader and to argue how all the participating leaders during the program will be able to move closer to becoming a Cullinan Leader and master extraordinary leadership skills if they apply themselves. As they go through the characteristics of leading in ordinary and extraordinary ways Charles positions the Cullinan leader within extraordinary leadership and tells the leaders how a Cullinan leader is capable of 'generating social transformation' and can 'integrate material, spiritual and societal transformation through his leadership' and he refers to Martin Luther King, Mother Theresa and Ghandi as being Cullinan leaders:

Leadership in complex times

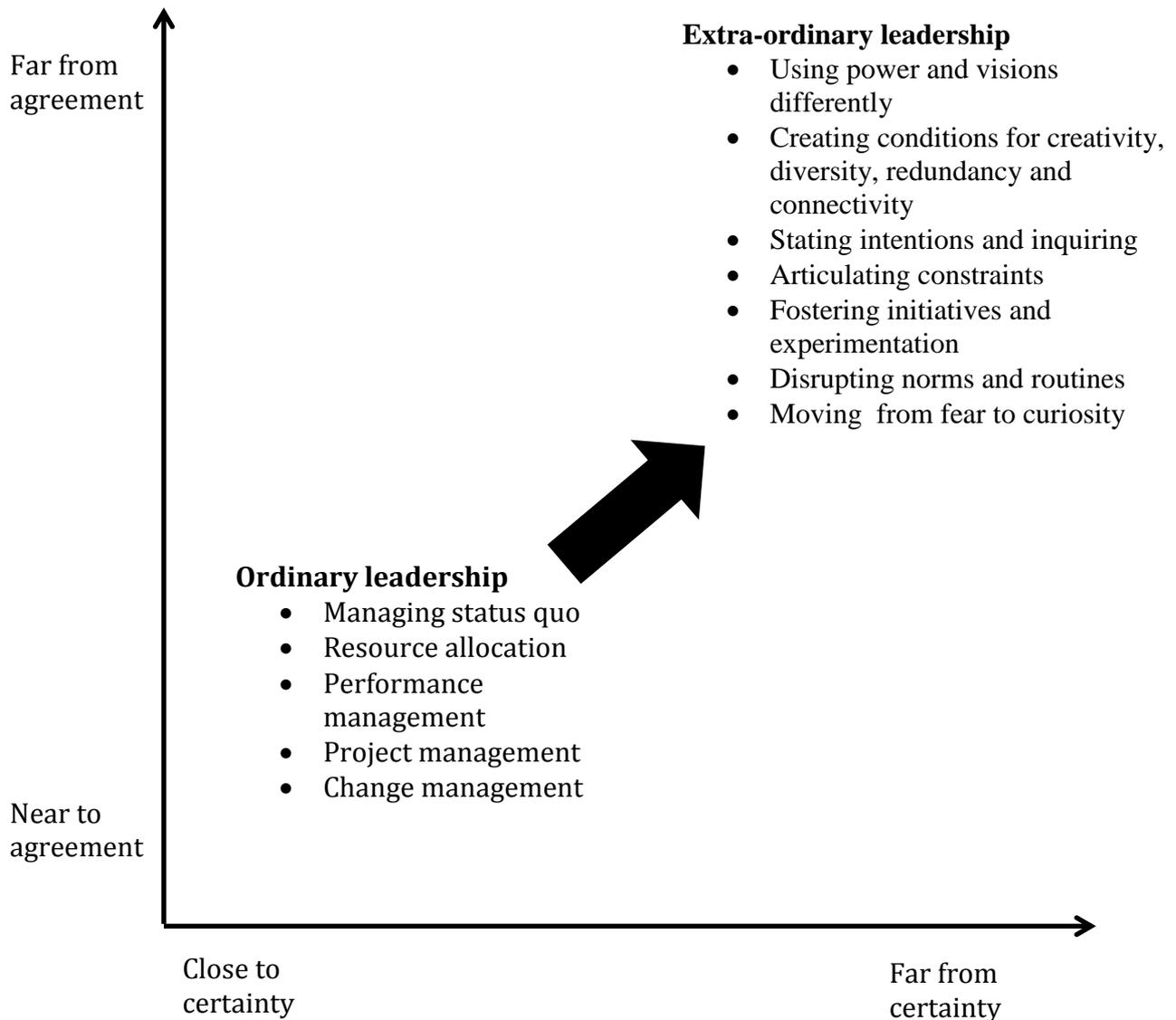


Figure 1. Leadership in complex times (reworking of original model presented at the first seminar)

Charles and Cynthia return to the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary leadership several times during the seminar and later on the first day, Charles returns to what Cullinan leading revolves around: 'We can't always have the answers, but [if we] live the questions then the answers will come ... [we have to] Be bold and follow the discomfort, be honest to one self and the others, bring in curiosity, bring oneself and each other out of the comfort zone; what is learned here is not a

toolkit, it's a journey' and link back to concepts and characteristics presented in figure 1. Cynthia follows up on this and says: 'It revolves around working with post-conventional leadership. Conventional leaders believe that there is one truth and one story and post-conventional leaders believe that there are many stories and many truths ... this programme is about recognising the different stories and the different solutions and working with them'.

It was quite interesting to observe how Cullinany was introduced by Cynthia and Charles as a way of leading with predefined and desirable characteristics and practices that the leaders could take over if they put an effort into it during the program. In that way Cullinany is presented as a metaphor in an epistemological way, because the leaders do not have to co-construct it in meaningful ways to them. The consultants have already made the concept meaningful. Based on our observations and looking at the notes we took during the first seminar, the leaders did not use the concept Cullinany in any way to refer to their own practice. None of their spontaneous or taken-for-granted embodied ways of leading was presented as ways to connect their leading with Cullinany. The leaders mentioned Cullinany a few times, but when they used it they referred to it with a certain distance and admiration. One leader expressed how he found the concept inspiring, but it did not have anything to do with his leadership approach. Another leader mentioned how he felt that the extra-ordinary way of leading that Charles and Cynthia had introduced was really interesting and that he would really like to incorporate elements of it into his own leadership approach.

As Cynthia and Charles presented the leaders with models, research results and theories, and the leaders listened and took part in communication, they jointly and gradually co-constructed Cullinany in the here-and-now as an abstract, desirable and extraordinary metaphor for leading. As Charles and Cynthia communicated with each other in front of the leaders, they incrementally co-constructed an invitation to the leaders to take part in generating a meaningful perception of Cullinany as something extraordinary, desirable and within reach for everyone in the room if they put effort into it over the course of the two-day seminar. The leaders accepted Cynthia and Charles' invitation to engage in imaginative and poetic talk as they explored the Cullinany metaphor and jointly constructed Cullinany in a meaningful way, a way in which they jointly and incrementally made it meaningful to distinguish between their own practice and Cullinany.

Following this, the leaders did not take over the characteristics and practices Cynthia and Charles presented as being Cullinany. Instead, they engaged in a here-and-now relational construction of meaning where the leaders' existing knowledge, taken-for-granted assumptions and meaning structures about leading were challenged as Cynthia and Charles invited them to construct leading in different meaningful ways. In these processes, the leaders embodied existing knowledge, meaning structures and previous conversations, meshing them together in the concrete here-and-now, where they jointly attempt to make sense of the unique and unknown in the situation. This led to a chronotypical and meaningful construction of Cullinany as something abstract yet desirable.

As we observed the communication during this seminar, we felt that we were observing a group of kids in a toy store admiring a big blue shining ball on the top shelf, standing on the floor seven shelves down, looking at it from beneath with reverence. They could all agree that it was a ball that definitely would be fun to play with: it shined, and they all had an urge to try it out, try to dribble with it, feel how it bounced and maybe also bring it home. But no one climbed up the ladder and lifted the ball down to the floor.

Excerpt 2: The great disappearing act of Cullinany

Five months into the programme, the leaders met to have their first unfacilitated learning group meeting. The leaders had had two facilitated learning group meetings prior to this meeting, led by Margaret, and the leaders had taken the initiative in this meeting to enable the exploration of their present organisational challenges more freely without following the specific enquiry method that Margaret used during two prior learning group meetings. The short excerpt presented here offers a glimpse into how the leaders communicated during the unfacilitated meetings. Here they discuss how political their day-to-day practice is:

Thomas: How much does politics influence your everyday practice?

Christian: Very little, we are a cooperative society, and the board is very politically oriented ... and part of my job is to make sure this [politics] doesn't influence daily operations ... but once in a while we take on projects that aren't of strategic but political importance ... but it doesn't influence much...

Jenny: How much does politics influence your work? [directed at Thomas and Paul]

Paul: Quite a bit, we are leading small hospitals.

Thomas: It influences my work very much ... the political games and tactics suddenly fall down in your lap and become a part of your everyday practice.

Paul: Yes, and how is it that you get drawn into politics?

Jenny: I have to take care that I don't turn into a politician. I'm very close to the region councillors and I want to be loyal and support the decisions [region councillors] even though I don't always agree.

Laura: It's just politics, you know how it is ... it's a political decision that everyone [in Greenland] should receive the same treatment and that's just not possible...

Christian: Don't you have some degree of freedom?

Laura: No one dares to touch it...

Christian: What about discussions in your governance structure?

Thomas: We discuss it in an employee-representative-board structure and we try to make sense of the things that don't function accordingly.

Christian: How do you then anchor your ideas and decisions?

Thomas: That's a good question, I don't know ... I guess the clinic surgeons handle that....

At this unfacilitated meeting, the researcher who observed the meeting did not hear the concepts related to Cullinany, post-conventional leading or any of the other concepts Cynthia and Charles had used during the six hours the meeting lasted. What instead was heard and documented was a lot

of different spontaneous talk and taken-for-granted assumptions about everyday challenges each leader was facing, and how they invited each other into co-constructing other understandings about these challenges and what meaningful actions they could initiate here-and-now to deal with them. They engaged in imaginative and poetic talk as they invited each other into the arresting moments that struck each of them, and explored their organisational challenges together.

In this local inter-act it was the leaders' existing embodied meaning structures, what they took for granted, their norms and practices that were co-constructed in earlier interactions, and these were presented as taken-for-granted ways of acting and making sense as they say things like: 'It's just politics, you know how it is...' At the same time, they were challenged as they said, for example, 'Don't you have any freedom?' and this was replied with sentences like, 'That's a good question, I don't know....' As the leaders communicated, asked questions and replied, they jointly underwent a process by which the different ways their challenges could be understood meshed together and were used as starting points to engage in explorative and imaginative dialogues with each other about how they could move on and deal with their challenges in meaningful ways.

Even though what they each took-for-granted differed the leaders were very attentive to each other and curious about their surroundings; they did not at any point try to reach a shared sense of agreement or consensus or invited each other to take over an already constructed meaning or practice, like they were invited to in the first excerpt. The leaders' different perceptions and ways to construct meaning were allowed to co-exist despite the different ways to move forward that they each co-constructed. Language was used ontologically and not epistemologically to jointly figure out how it would be meaningful to go on here-and-now.

As these interactions and talks were observed, it felt as if we were suddenly back in the toy store where the curious kids had turned their attention towards something other than the shiny blue ball. They had instead opened a large package of LEGO® blocks and had commenced on a shared exploration of the multiple ways in which they could combine the blocks. At the same time, they expressed curiosity about the limitless ways they could together come up with different ways of building objects and constructing small worlds.

Excerpt 3: The embodiment of Cullinany

It was not until the programme's third seminar, half a year later that Cullinany reappeared in the leaders' communication. Charles and Cynthia initiated the seminar titled 'Creating tomorrow's outcomes' by presenting concepts like post-conventional leadership and being true, enquiring and present. Charles said: 'Can you be your best post-conventional leader if you're in the midst of arriving? How long can you be arriving in meetings, jumping in and out and still be true?' Not long after this, Charles continued: 'Leaders are good at navigating, having the answers and trying to get others to get the picture. But should we enquire more? What would you do if you ruled the world?'

This was followed by a longer introduction in which he, Cynthia and some of the guest faculty used words like: being brave, possessing local wisdom, embodying backbone and heart, being honest,

looking into oneself, feeling naked, stepping aside, experimenting in uncharted territory and enabling the organisation to make the necessary changes. Cullinany was not used as a term on the first day, but during the morning talk on the second day Charles reintroduced the concept: I want to start with your question; why are we here?... We're all here for various reasons.

Laura: We're here on a journey, it starts with me and how I move forward...

Charles: For me the honest Cullinan answer is we do not know. If we had the answer we would not have needed to come. We are here to explore and change management. If someone could teach a course, we would not need to be here. We are here learning to look and listen; we are here learning the balance between me interfering in the process and me stepping out to make room for change...

Thomas: I'm a leader because I actually think I have something to give to management.

Charles: Beautifully put!

Later on in the day, the leaders gathered in their learning group, and as the leaders reflected on the seminar, Thomas shared how he felt closer to being a Cullinan leader now. During the seminar's concluding open space talk, Thomas shared his experience with the whole group.

Thomas: I feel closer to being a Cullinan leader now

Several of the other leaders: Yes!!...

Charles: The group has moved a long way. You've done work to connect the models, a lot of things have come together for you this time. The majority of you have matured....

Laura: The Cullinan experience is beginning to come to me. It's been knocking during seminars one and two ... we are helping ourselves to be more enquiring.

During this third seminar the leaders and the consultants communicated differently and invited each other to co-construct Cullinany in a different but equally meaningful way. The leaders described physical experiences and linked these to Cullinany and shared with each other how they felt the concept coming to them. They began to express how they saw themselves embodying Cullinan moments. The leaders were here together in another unique here-and-now, where their embodied experiences, taken-for-granted assumptions, norms and meaning structures were reworked as they communicated to construct chronotypical meaning. In this here-and-now, the leaders and consultants underwent a process where they reworked Cullinany from being a detached aspect of their leading like it was in excerpt 1 to now becoming an integrated part of it. As they communicated, they experimented and improvised with their language and invited each other to incrementally make Cullinany become meaningful as an embodied part of their leading practice. In the excerpt above no one is asked to take over an already given understanding of what Cullinany is about. Instead language was used ontologically to jointly construct Cullinany in here-and-now meaningful ways as they communicated.

We were left with a feeling that the leaders were back in the toy store and suddenly one of them got the idea or found the nerve to climb up the ladder and lift the shiny new blue ball down from the top shelf and bring it within reach in order for all of them to start playing with it. They began to touch it

and feel its surface, tried it out, felt how well it bounced and experimented with whether it could be used to throw and dribble with.

Excerpt 4: The uncertainty about Cullinany

The next time the leaders met was 1½ months after the third seminar. The leaders were working on an assignment for the 4th seminar where they had to share their individual or group-based Cullinan moments as leaders with the rest of the participants. The consultant Margaret facilitated the process:

Margaret: I feel like challenging you on your Cullinan moments. When have they occurred and what character have they had?

No one followed up on this, and they started talking about why they should stay in contact with each other after the last seminar had been held...

Margaret: It is a wish from Cynthia that you as a group have 20 minutes to present your Cullinan moment either as a group or individually ... What kind of journey is it that you have been on?

[Laughter]

Thomas: I am not capable of answering this in a short way.

Margaret: You have time.

Thomas: Many things [have been] bubbling; learning, theories, quite banal but some sort of awakening ... What has moved me most is the journey I have been on with the learning group. I wish it could continue.

Margaret: Can I ask you to connect that to a Cullinan experience? You have taken lots of small steps and a few large; where have you taken the large steps?

Thomas: I have thought about it, I have moved in some way, been more thorough. Someone raised the question where is the Cullinan leader in all of this. I do not know exactly what it means to be a Cullinan leader; being together, having a shared vocabulary, I have gained the most from the learning group meetings when we have explored together...

Christian: The image of a journey is a good illustration of this and also exploration...

Margaret: Can you get closer to the highs and lows with examples? We have to make it revolve around *your* journey so it is not just any trip....

Christian: The Cullinan leader has been a journey of zooming out and seeing the bigger picture.

Laura: And also about zooming in....

Margaret: I recapitalise! We want to catch movements in Cullinan moments...

As we observed this meeting, several things came to mind. The leaders brought in several metaphors like: journey, experience, awakening, seeing the light, zooming in and out, the bigger picture, etc., as they made the year-long programme meaningful and tried to put into words what they felt characterised the process, but what caught our attention was how the leaders constructed another meaningful understanding of Cullinany and linkages with their practice and leadership approach as they communicated.

Margaret tried several times to invite the leaders to back to how they relationally had constructed meaning revolving around their practice as containing Cullinan moments 1½ month earlier.

Cullinany was by Margaret presented epistemological as a concept with a predefined meaning. The leaders, however, did not accept this invitation; instead, Cullinany became meaningful as something difficult to depict and disconnected from their leadership. As the leaders communicated, they underwent a process in which they incrementally improvised and experimented with constructing a chronotypical understanding that made the last year's activities meaningful in the here-and-now. In that process, they expressed how their time together in the learning group, where they had allowed each other to be enquiring and presented each other with challenging questions, had been significant to them. In that process, they experimented with their language, and in that process 'journey' instead of Cullinany became a meaningful way to capture what they had experienced together.

As we observed communication between the leaders and Margaret, our thoughts wandered back to the toy store where the kids, after they have tried playing with the shinning blue ball and felt how it bounced, were not really sure what to do with it. And even though the sales assistant tried to persuade them that the shinning blue ball was what they needed, they did not feel like taking it home. They would rather look around a bit more before deciding whether they should they put it back on the shelf, bring it home or just leave it on the shop floor.

Reflections on what can be learned about leading based on the use of social poetics

As we look back at the communicative processes we have followed for a little more than a year, we want to share a few reflections on what can be learned about management learning from the notion of social poetics. First, using social poetics as a frame for making sense of observations made during The Cullinan Leader programme emphasises the ontological aspects of language. Even though the consultants in various ways and at different times tried to use language epistemologically by attempting to make the participating leaders take over a more or less ready-made metaphorical perception of what Cullinany was about, and what characteristics and practices they should embody to become Cullinan leaders, the ontological aspects of language took over. Like we earlier commented in the paper the shining ambitions of becoming a Cullinan diamond leader promised at the start of the programme lead to differing ways of constructing meaning among the participating leaders.

The relational and chronotypical construction of meaning never settles down. It is continually on the move and in this context was dependent on how the leaders in the concrete and unique here-and-now invited each other to engage in social poetics; by improvising and experimenting with their language they succeeded in making Cullinan meaningful as something abstract yet desirable at one point, something they felt entering them at another time and as something they did not really understand and were not sure how to feel about at a third point in time. It will hardly make headlines anywhere to argue that formal management learning courses with ambitions to use language epistemologically in order to make leaders take over pre-defined idealised characteristics or practices often fall short of these goals. This does, however, raise some interesting questions about how formal management learning programmes like The Cullinan Leader can and should be designed and facilitated to acknowledge and work constructively with the notion of language as

ontology. If leaders learn in-situ and relationally concurrently as they engage in social poetic conversations where they incrementally co-construct their own organisational realities, how can and should we embrace and work constructively with this in relation to formal management learning processes?

Calling for social poetics as a way of engaging in reflexive critique

During the year in which we observed the programme, the leaders often referred to the conversations in the learning groups as the most enriching and beneficial part of the programme. As they spent time together and explored each other's organisational challenges, they were often met with unjustified responses or had to reply with 'I do not know' or 'That is a good question'. After the second unfacilitated learning group meeting Jenny, Paul and Steven talked about their perceptions of the programme while one of the researchers was present.

Paul initiated the conversation by articulating that he was unsure what to make of the seminars; he found it difficult to use the models and ideas Charles and Cynthia presented to them. Jenny agreed with Paul and recounted how she did not get much use of the models and ideas in her daily practice. She did, however, perceive the learning group meetings as a sort of free space that was valuable for her because they were allowed to discuss and explore the everyday practices and challenges with which they were occupied. Steven said that he did not feel that the exercises in the seminars had given him much to work with, but having the time to think things through more had really been beneficial to him. The impact of the learning group conversations was the primary outcome of the programme for them. This was something Thomas also expressed in excerpt 4.

As the leaders were together in their learning group, they met people who embodied different meaning structures and norms and who had other taken-for-granted assumptions and existing knowledge. These were conversations in which the imaginative and improvising aspects of language were set free due to the way the leaders helped each other in being radically present, and explore what they were struck by. They therefore communicated and invited each other to construct shared meaning with languages that encompassed diverse threads of previous conversations.

What they each took for granted was arrested in-situ as they communicated with each other. They invited each other to slow down the immediate and relational construction of meaning, dwell in the absence of meaning and take part in exploring other local perspectives. This kind of social poetics is characterised by engaging in what we perceived as reflexive critique, where no solutions had to be found, which created space for more reflexivity for the leaders and allowed them to experiment in-situ and relationally with giving colour and life to other understandings and practices of leadership based on how they communicated, more so than they were allowed to in the more formally led processes.

These findings are very closely connected with the observations of Cunliffe (2002b), who calls for increased reflexive dialogical practice in management learning programmes. This then raises the question of whether it matters at all what is taught in these management learning programmes. This

is a question we find quite difficult to answer in a clear-cut way. On the one hand, there is no doubt that the leaders in this programme expressed that what they gained most from was the opportunity to engage in a reflexive critique about their own and each other's practice with each other. On the other hand, there is always the question of whether these conversations would have been possible without the grandiose aura, the enticing packaging and competent consultant facilitation that came along with the programme and perhaps influenced the leaders to sign up in the first place.

Instead of answering this question, we would like to conclude this article by drawing attention to Gergen (2014, 2009, 2001), who emphasises that we need to rethink our pedagogical practice regarding management learning by moving even further from monologue towards dialogue. To us, this means assigning primacy to social poetics and ontological perceptions of language as we co-construct management learning practices. It means embracing and acknowledging the multiple and different chronotypical here-and-now social poetic constructions of metaphors and management concepts and making room for people to be radically present with each other and to engage in reflexive critical dialogues and explorations as they undergo formal management learning.

We hope that with the emphasis on language as ontology, the relational here-and-now construction of meaning and social poetics we have presented and discussed here, other relational constructionism scholars and practitioners will want to engage in exploring how management learning processes can be understood, designed and facilitated from a perspective in which the ontological and social poetic aspects of language in management learning are assigned primacy.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Professor Sheila McNamee, Professor Jørgen Gulddahl Rasmussen, the chief-editor of *Management Learning* and the three anonymous reviewers for their supportive and very constructive comments on earlier drafts of this article.

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ⁱ 'The Cullinan Leader' and other uses of the word Cullinany are pseudonyms to uphold agreed confidentiality with the participating leaders and consultants facilitating the programme.

ⁱⁱ The name of the program is based on the metaphor of a diamond (Crookes' Cullinan diamond) created out of the same material as charcoal, i.e. carbon, and is intended to signify the creation of high-level (extra-ordinary) leadership skills out of ordinary leadership skills.