

Trying Out Loud

Leadership Development as Experimentalism

Kjærgaard, Annemette; Meier, Frank

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Trying out loud:

Leadership development as experimentalism

Annemette Kjærgaard, Department of Management, Society and Communication, Copenhagen Business School, Denmark (corresponding author)

Email: amk.msc@cbs.dk

Frank Meier, Department of Organization, Copenhagen Business School, Denmark

Email: fm.ioa@cbs.dk

Bios:

Annemette Kjærgaard is a professor with special obligations in management learning and development at Copenhagen Business School, Denmark. She teaches personal leadership development to leaders in the public sector in the post-graduate program. Her research activities address topics such as business education, management learning and leadership development.

Frank Meier is a post doc with Copenhagen Business School with an interest in leadership, leadership development and digital transformation, often from a communicative perspective. Also, Frank is engaged in trying out new formats for practice-based, post-experience education. His research has appeared in *Human Relations* and *Public Governance Research*.

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Introduction

In recent years leadership has largely ceased to be conceptualized as a set of coherent skills (Carroll et al., 2008) and practices, instead increasingly becoming seen as a more muddled set of everyday behaviors that Alvesson and Jonsson (2018) refer to as 'the quagmire'. This quagmire includes a wide variety of situationally determined decisions and actions made in practice that often conflict with the prevailing normativity of leadership theory (Carroll et al., 2008). This insight resonates well with studies demonstrating the persistent romance in leadership theory of an individual, stable, and coherent leadership figure (Clifton and Mueni, 2020; Collinson et al., 2018; Meindl et al., 1985), even if this figure has less to do with everyday practices. Still, in courses on leadership development at business schools, leadership is often taught from the assumption that the forms of leadership are stable, cohesive, and unambiguous and thus correspond to specific categories or ideologies (Alvesson and Jonsson, 2018). However, leadership that entails not only realizing extraordinary organizational change but also making context-specific, small-scale, and mundane adjustments to practice fits less easily into such molds (Alvesson and Svenningsson, 2003). Leadership development therefore needs re-thinking to better support students' learning about leadership work from an everyday practice perspective.

Historically, leadership development programs (LDPs) have focused on providing students with theoretical knowledge and models they can then practically apply to become more effective leaders. However, leadership skills have also been taught with the understanding

that students cannot acquire such skills through theory alone, but must also practice them.

This mindset has often engendered teaching methodologies and learning activities for leadership development that build on the theory of experiential learning, which is also relevant for leadership development in a practice perspective.

Stemming from the works of William James, John Dewey, and others, the idea of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) provides a distinctive perspective on learning and development (Baker et al., 2005). While the assumption that learning happens through experience clearly supports the leadership-as-practice perspective, experiential learning in business schools is often effectuated through classroom practices like simulations, theater and role plays, creative play and case-based teaching (Zantow et al., 2005; Li et al., 2007; Poisson-de and Turgut, 2012). In other words, experiential learning in the classroom focuses on getting students to practice their leadership skills in a setting decoupled from their everyday leadership actions—a development process that requires students to translate their classroom learning into everyday practice.

In this article, we revisit Dewey's concept of experimentalism with the aim of extending experiential learning to include the use of experiments done outside the classroom in students' everyday practice. Dewey preferred experimentalism over pragmatism to 'capture his notion of ideas as playful instruments for experimental action' (Elkjaer and Simpson, 2011: 58). We explore this use of experiments in an LDP where students are tasked with defining, designing, carrying out, and reflecting on experiments conducted in their own organizations. As such, we seek to show how experiments performed during practice can become an important leadership development activity providing immediately relevant learning that does not have to be translated into leadership practice, as is often the case with such learning in the classroom. We pursue the following research question: In what

ways can experimentalism—that is, the carrying out of planned experiments in the participant’s organizational practice—contribute to leadership development?

We start by locating our study in the discussion of leadership as practice, as well as provide an overview of the relevant leadership development literature and introduce Dewey’s concept of experimentalism. We then present the research setting and methodology for our study and illustrate our data through four cases of students’ experimentation processes. Next, we analyze our findings to discuss the results and their practical implications for leadership development. We conclude the article by addressing the limitations of our study and offering suggestions for future research.

A call for everyday leadership development

Although themes and ideas vary according to research interests, leadership courses often build on the assumptions of charismatic visionaries, whose abilities and skills allegedly enable them to influence followers, even if such visionaries’ impact on organizational performance is only claimed (Clifton and Mueni, 2020; Collinson et al., 2018; Collinson and Tourish, 2015; Crevani et al., 2007; Meindl et al., 1985; Schweiger et al., 2020). Other streams of research show how practice increasingly appears as a resource for less presumptuous accounts of leadership (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a; Heifetz et al., 2009; Hill et al., 2010). Studies suggest that leadership in practice is much more ambiguous and inconsistent and, indeed, far from the grandiose understandings presented in textbooks on leadership (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2016; Carroll et al., 2008; Harding, 2005; Schweiger et al., 2020) and by leaders themselves (Fairhurst, 2009; Kelly, 2008)

For instance, a study on rethinking leadership in knowledge-intensive companies (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a) suggests that actual leadership practices are often fairly mundane,

consisting of 'listening, informal talk and being cheerful' (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a: 1454) and thus disparate from more popular notions of 'active, powerful, visionary, and transformative leadership' (2003a). The authors conclude that the leadership literature rarely pays attention to everyday, mundane activities, opting instead to focus on more sweeping issues. For this reason, they argue that such a focus may overlook dimensions that, although vital to leadership, are thus less relevant to leadership practice.

These more situationally sensitive approaches call for similarly sensitive leadership development practices that engage with everyday, mundane activities rather than teaching 'general management practice' (Korpiaho, Päiviö, and Räsänen, 2007). In the past, business schools were criticized for their narrow, vocational focus, but as research expanded, business communities began to complain 'about lack of relevance for and interest in real-life organizational and management problems' (Berggren and Soderlund, 2011: 379). Scholars in this camp go on to assert that management education must strive to help realize the lessons students learn in relevant settings and situations. This concern for relevance becomes actualized when students, removed from their work experience, are immersed in educational systems that privilege abstract, discipline-based knowledge 'while replicating the relentless pace, task focus, and reflective deprivation of work environments' (Petriglieri et al., 2011: 433, see also Gosling and Mintzberg, 2006). The current MBA model, for example, has been criticized for promising to promote general management skills, thereby suggesting that they are generic and de-contextual (Bissett and Saunders, 2015; Fairhurst, 2009; Korpiaho et al., 2007). Similarly, Berggren and Söderlund (2011) mention that management education comes under persistent fire for being largely remote from practice and implementation. As these scholars note, to realize a program's potential and relevance in terms of personal and organizational learning, participants must translate the knowledge

gained from program experiments into action. Acknowledging this challenge, Ramsey (2011) suggests that LDPs ease the translation process by making use of 'provocative theory', which can shift attention from the substance of theories, concepts, and research findings to 'how management-learners appropriate ideas from within such management thinking to their day-to-day managerial practice' (Ramsey, 2011: 470).

Even in instances of programs based on students' developing leadership conundrums for self-directed learning (Eriksen, 2007), these remain within the confines of the executive classroom when it comes to deliberation, reflection, and future action. Kempster and Stewart (2010) note that the primary source of development is on-the-job experience as well as interaction with key people in the workplace—an observation that parallels this study's findings. They demonstrate how leadership development is based on a knowledge of practice, itself drawn from situated activities, thus calling for innovative approaches to this 'situated curriculum' (Gherardi et al., 1998) to be further explored. Finally, Bissett and Saunders (2015) claim that the prescriptive, instrumental character of programs offered by Western business schools should be replaced with more troublesome—that is, critical knowledge, relational understandings, and reflexivity.

Certainly, reforming the content of the management class curriculum in response to the critique of its romantic leanings has had good effects. However, we maintain that this curriculum is inherently limited with regard to its practical relevance for everyday leadership practices. As such, we turn to traditions whose point of departure lies in the learner's practical experience: experiential learning theory.

Experiential learning

In the field of experiential learning relevance centers on an understanding of learning as a process in which the learner draws on lived experiences to create structured knowledge (Kayes, 2002; Kolb and Kolb, 2015; Kolb, 1984). While scholars have proposed many variations of experiential learning, Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory (ELT) continues to be among the most influential theories of management learning (Kayes, 2002). Called experiential because it draws from the experiential works of Piaget, Dewey, Lewin, Freire and James, the theory creates a distinctive perspective on learning and development (Baker et al., 2005: 412). The ELT model encompasses a continuous process whereby learning occurs in the two dialectically related modes of concrete experience and abstract conceptualization as well as the two dialectically related modes of reflective observation and active experimentation. In these modes the learner constructs new concrete, lived experiences, and the cycle of learning starts anew (Eriksen, 2012).

In the business and management education field several studies on leadership development in the classroom have addressed how classroom practices generate experience. Such practices include leadership practice simulations (Li et al., 2007; Poisson-de and Turgut, 2012; Zantow et al., 2005) and case-based teaching where students are presented with real-life problems to solve and reflect on or are asked to design case materials with the aim of achieving a deeper understanding (Druckman and Ebner, 2018). Other more creativity-based classroom practices include choral conducting masterclasses (Sutherland, 2013) and theater and role plays (Berggren and Söderlund, 2011) where students dramatize and diffuse knowledge or engage in creative play like that described by Wade and Piccinini (2020), who had students use LEGO bricks in the classroom to construct different scenarios

for meeting sustainability challenges (see also Kark, 2011). Such classroom practices are often combined into a semester or yearlong leadership development process, as in the case of Petriglieri et al. (2011) or of Eriksen's (2007) Personal Leadership Conundrum, where students are provided with a self-directed learning opportunity that involves a process of formulation, inquiry, problem-solving, and evaluation (Eriksen, 2007). In all of these studies learning takes place in the classroom or a similar setting separate from the actual leadership practice and is assumed to be transferable to that practice. However, some issues regarding the transfer of knowledge from the classroom to practice have been raised, beginning with a concern that learning gets lost in the process. For example, MacGregor and Semler (2012) argue in favor of integrating action learning into in-program or post-program projects to encourage students to immediately apply their learning to real-life challenges. Action, these scholars claim, manifestly prevents the learning from evaporating in the days and weeks following the executive training program, keeping it somewhat fresh in the minds of participants as they actively work on projects drawing on the concepts covered in the program (MacGregor and Semler, 2012).

While experiential learning has proved an efficient means of instigating and harvesting in-classroom experiences for subsequent reflection and learning, translating these experiences into (later) leadership practice has proved problematic. To address this issue, we draw on a specific dimension of pragmatic learning theory that situates learning not in the classroom but in the midst of the learners' practice: Dewey's experimentalism.

Experimentalism

This specific component of Dewey's sophisticated framework of learning combines theories and practices (Elkjaer, 2004; Schön, 1992; Thomassen and Jørgensen, 2020) into what he at

times termed instrumentalism, at others experimentalism (Brandi and Elkjaer, 2016; Dewey, 1938). The former underlines the way Dewey posits theory and concepts as tools and instruments for understanding and manipulating the world, and the latter stresses a 'playfulness between ideas and action' (Brandi and Elkjaer, 2016: 194). Although drawing inspiration from the natural sciences, Dewey was not envisioning specialized laboratory techniques when he referred to 'experimentalism', but rather seeking to reclaim the spirit of experimenting from the constraints of those disciplines and instead apply it to inquiry into human experiences (Rosiek, 2018). Dewey's central concept is rooted in the indeterminate situation characterized by 'dis-equilibrium, instability, imbalance, disintegration, disturbance, dysfunction' (Burke, 1994, in Evans, 2000: 314). The experience of such a situation, so rife with confusion and doubt (Thomassen and Jørgensen, 2020), instils a desire to restore balance in those involved, as these participants are never only at the mercy of the situation, but are rather 'agents ... trying experiments ... concerned with undergoing in a way which may influence what is still to happen' (Dewey, 1917, in Evans, 2000: 315). Through a series of iterative inquiries, the manager engaged in developing learns how to handle real-life problems and challenges (Thomassen and Jørgensen, 2020). Inquiry, then, occurs when a person seeks in a controlled manner to transform the indeterminate situation into a sufficiently determinate one (Brandi and Elkjaer, 2016). Inquiry carries a dynamic dimension in which the problematic situation is understood through its transformation to a 'unified whole', or is at least sufficiently rebalanced to 'let us get on with the task at hand' (Evans, 2000: 314), meaning that tentative next steps are possible and the way for more intelligent future action has been paved (Brandi and Elkjaer, 2016; Thomassen and Jørgensen, 2020). Although neither being a truth-finding endeavor nor generating universal answers, inquiry is 'specific to a particular situation ... a continuing

process ... never completely settled' (Hickman, 1990, in Evans, 2000: 317). Furthermore, the knowing that arises from inquiry cannot be separated from each particular situation and the practices giving rise to it (Evans, 2000). To learn from experience, then, we connect what we do to its consequences, meaning that 'doing becomes a trying; an experiment with the world to find out what it is like' (Dewey, 1916, in Brandi and Elkjaer, 2016: 200). In other words, we learn from our experience in ways that seek to avoid our repeating mistakes and that also inform our future decisions (Hlebowitsh, 2006). Experimentalism is therefore an active engagement with practice; we try out solutions to an indeterminate situation, developing provisional facts and testing hypotheses as we go. Doubt, as well as its resolution, is a property of the open-ended relationship between the inquirer and the situation (Schön, 1992). 'There is no such thing', Dewey maintains, 'as a final settlement' (Dewey, 1938, in Schön, 1992).

Dewey's epistemology of active knowing overturns the classical philosophical hierarchy that placed a premium on theory and contemplation. For Dewey, theory becomes just another form of practice, but one that opens up new aims or possibilities as problematic situations are encountered (Evans, 2000). Against this backdrop, theory and practice are not distinct domains but rather different phases—one concerned with thinking and planning, the other with doing (Evans, 2000). Like Dewey, practicing public managers may readily emphasize that 'in a complicated and perverse world, action which is not informed with vision, imagination and reflection, is more likely to increase confusion and conflict than to straighten things out' (Dewey, 1917, in Evans, 2000: 317). Philosophy should stop occupying itself with eternal questions of truth or logic and leave its ivory towers to participate in the generation of methods and visions that aid in 'dealing with the problems of men [sic!]' (Dewey, 1917, in Evans, 2000: 317, expression added). We assert that this firm grounding in

the problematic situation and the inquiry into it makes Dewey's experimentalism relevant for training and developing public managers' leadership skills (Shields, 1998; Thomassen and Jørgensen, 2020).

This grounding also enables us to articulate the question explored in the current study: How can experimentalism contribute to leadership development?

Research setting and methodology

Our research question calls for a close-up study of active leaders in experimental programs. We thus present data from a unique leadership module at a flexible Master of Public Governance program conducted by a Danish university consortium. The program strives 'to qualify and develop the public manager's ability to conduct professional management in a politically directed public-sector context, with the aim of strengthening the public manager's competency through reflection on and the further development of his or her own management practice' ([Contributing institutions], 2013). The experimental element of the LDP has the implicit learning objective of familiarizing students with experimentation as a continued leadership practice.

The six-month leadership development course, which both authors teach, comprises six full workshop days and is designed as a student-directed and problem-based leadership development project divided into three phases: *focusing*, *experimenting*, and *reflecting*.

Prior to the course, students participate in a one-on-one coaching session with an instructor, perform peer-to-peer ethnography in a fellow student's practice and—notably here—perform various experiments in their own leadership practice. The students design these experiments following extensive deliberations in their peer workgroups, where they process their leadership challenges and come up with relevant experiments. They

subsequently conduct and document the experiments at their respective home organizations, at times observed by the peer ethnographer. Following the experiments, students are held accountable for their learning in two ways. First, they must meet with their colleagues in the student work group sessions to reflect on their experiments and subsequently complete an assignment reporting on these reflections. Second, students must take an oral exam based on a 15-page term paper in which they report on and analyze their leadership development project. All students in the given workgroup attend the exam together, although the assessment is individual. Course instructors are primarily tasked with providing theoretical resources for the experiments and reflections, thereby covering themes like personal growth, communication, power, change management, and ethics. They are also responsible for process facilitation. All students, on the other hand, are responsible for providing feedback on practical execution and reflecting on fellow students' experiments and thus supporting learning.

Trained in both experiential learning and process facilitation, the faculty selected to teach this course are capable of handling such a format, which entails managing classes and students operating in an unfamiliar realm of experience. The faculty also meet regularly to exchange their experiences with running the program and to consider curriculum revisions, including the relevance and fit of experiments. An external examiner ensures that faculty and students are held professionally accountable for the program outcome at the final exam. Under instructor supervision, the aforementioned peer workgroups also meet regularly to discuss and reflect on the course activities, of which the experiments are an important part (cf. Wright et al., 2019).

For data collection purposes, we conducted a focused ethnography (Knoblauch, 2005), guided by our interest in how students, instructors, and pedagogical interventions interact,

also beyond the present article's research question. The university's ethics committee granted us approval to include student assignments for research purposes. For this study, we compiled the full corpus of student assignments (n=19) as our primary data source. As we were unable to observe students' leadership practice in the field, this method helped us understand the experimentation process in practice, as well as gave us insight into students' own written reflections on these. By basing our analysis on the papers submitted for these assignments, we gained access to a rich set of data on students' experiments. A careful reading of the student papers enabled us to see why each experiment was chosen, the arguments for its design, what happened in the process and the student's reflections on that process. To illuminate the salient dimensions of the experiment component of the program, we present four cases showing how experiments unfolded in students' practices.

Case studies

We chose the cases presented here because they convey how broad and complex doing leadership experiments is for practicing managers. Obviously, these cases do not represent everything going on in the data or indeed in the program, but they cover a variety of important dimensions like the theoretical input to the experiments, the obstacles encountered when they are carried out, their perceived success, and the depths of the subsequent reflections. The cases are further examined in the following analysis.

Amber stepping up to confrontation

The first case is about the leadership of Amber, who heads the secretariat in the administrative body of a large, urban municipality. Top management has tasked Amber with reducing the case processing time for complex, social cases. She describes her leadership challenge as her difficult relation with a senior, highly paid employee, Dan, whom she

describes as ‘autonomous’—independent from colleagues and top management—and overly devoted to processing cases right down to the ‘technical subtleties’ at a speed that Dan himself calls the ‘pace possible’. Amber doubts, however, that Dan is actually putting all the required hours into his job, and she further expects him to realize efficiency gains. She feels that her ‘usual strategies’ for leading employees do not suffice in this instance, and the sense of powerlessness frustrates her. Taking suggestions from colleagues, she decides to experiment with confronting problems more directly, and follows the peer ethnographer’s suggestion to try dealing with Dan in a more structured manner.

In a first experiment, Amber invites Dan to a meeting, where she deliberately applauds the results he has achieved so far, her intention being to ‘nurse’ Dan’s professional pride and win him over. Dan seems somewhat uneasy with such praise and continues to reject any further interference with his work. Amber subsequently cuts the meeting short. During her second experiment at a later meeting, Amber intentionally and persistently suggests that a younger colleague be brought in to work with Dan. Again, Dan reacts very negatively, refusing to accept the new colleague. Amber closes the meeting by informing Dan that she will nonetheless go forward with her idea.

Rachel carving out a space for herself

Rachel has just become a senior nurse at a large public hospital when she joins the leadership development program. She did not previously have employees reporting to her, and has ‘close to no’ explicit expertise regarding the ward’s particular branch of medicine. Rachel struggles to find her place in the management team, her being caught in a ‘power struggle’ between the other two leadership team members—the chief physician and the senior radiologist, who reports directly to her. She finds her colleagues preoccupied with their own interests, and feels a need to create her own power base that can keep her from

getting stuck 'in-between and having to make unpopular decisions that the other two may renounce when confronted by employees'. She defines her experiments as rising to the occasion and carving out a space for herself in the leadership team.

Rachel's first experiment addresses her relationship with the chief physician, whose 'expert power' makes him seem dominating to her. She theorizes this as an instance of 'power as legitimization' and reports that he positions her as responsible for the 'soft' or 'feminine' dimensions of management like 'creating a nice atmosphere' while he takes care of the 'hard' issues. Seeking to change this gender-determined positioning so she can be an equal partner, her first experiment involves her moving office to co-locate with the chief physician. As a result, he starts to share his email correspondence and his thoughts on leadership matters with her, including insights on the conflict with the radiologist. The objective of Rachel's second experiment is to gain the confidence of the radiologist, who is skeptical about Rachel in light of her lacking specialized expertise. Drawing on a coaching leadership style, Rachel invites the radiologist into a relationship of mutual support and professional challenge. She openly addresses her lack of specialized expertise as a challenge she needs the radiologist's help to solve. The radiologist is 'overly positive', articulating her own difficulties with reporting to Rachel 'who does not know anything yet' and her insecurity about how much she can 'allow herself to teach Rachel without degrading her'.

Mathis managing conflicts

Our third case example concerns Mathis, a recently appointed manager of an alcohol rehabilitation center, who makes use of physical exercise, among other things, to treat clients' alcohol abuse. He describes a leadership challenge reported by employees in the organization's self-governing teams. They feel they lack a clear sense of direction and that conflicts surrounding accusations of 'taking too many liberties at work' are increasing.

Mathis decides to experiment with becoming more adept at conflict resolution by exerting two styles of leadership in which he recently scored poorly on a test: authoritative and visionary. To test out this new approach, he decides to set up a meeting between two employees clashing in their collaboration, hoping to resolve the actual conflict.

In his first experiment, Mathis invites the two employees, Liza and Eric, to a meeting at his office, explaining how he will first talk to Liza while Eric listens and vice versa, and stressing the importance of dedicated listening. Mathis starts by asking Liza to articulate why she finds working with Eric difficult. She responds that she does not appreciate people being rude to her. Mathis then asks Liza when she has experienced this with Eric. She relates a particular situation where Eric told her off, but states that 'this was just the last straw'.

Mathis finally asks Liza what she thinks it will take to improve their collaboration, to which she replies that they should speak properly to one another. Mathis then turns to Eric, asking him to express what he thinks is difficult about their collaboration. He responds that Liza often just does what suits her, for example, showing up late for work and sometimes using the facilities privately during working hours. He comments that he had reached the end of his rope when he got angry in the episode concerned, but that he is completely aware that his behavior was inappropriate. He goes on to tell Liza that he will speak to her properly in the future, which Liza accepts.

Ellen forging alliances

Ellen works at the National Health Service, overseeing patient complaints. She has no employees directly reporting to her but is responsible for quality assurance, specifically regarding case processing. Ellen wishes the agency to work 'smarter, not harder' in particular when it comes to case processing, and for herself to be more assertive in her communication. Her experiment addresses the first of these objectives, and concerns how

cases are processed, including instructions, templates and—in this instance—case file covers. A conflict flared up in the committee on redesigning these covers, with one member resisting a proposal to give the cover a new field specifying the maximum number of days an investigation should take. Ellen’s coaching leadership style was ineffective when it came to the resisting member, so she decided to experiment with forging alliances with other committee members outside the meeting arena and thus deprive the critical committee member of influence. Although Ellen felt the alliance strategy challenged her values of democratic deliberation, these efforts at accomplishing influence proved effective because she mobilized her followership, which in turn allowed greater accountability in the case processing. Ellen made analytical sense of this leadership experience using conflict and communication theory. From this brief introduction to four exemplary cases, we now proceed into an analysis of the data corpus as a whole.

Analysis

The analysis is sectioned into three core attributes of the experimentation process: situational, practice-driven and responsive, followed by a section on students’ reflections regarding their learning through experimentation.

Situational embeddedness

The first attribute of experimentation as a leadership development process that we point to is the situated nature of the problems addressed in the experiments. Indeed, Amber, Rachel, Mathis, and Ellen, like most students in the data corpus, tended to conceive of and situate the experiments in ongoing, everyday situations where their leadership practices were challenged or under pressure. Amber explained that, in her eyes, to enable leadership work in the actual situation that faced her as she struggled to manage Dan, she had to go

beyond her 'usual strategies'. Ellen, too, felt her leadership style was insufficient. Moreover, the students tended to focus their experiments on situational issues involving relations concerning authority (Amber), trust (Rachel), or collaboration (Mathis and Ellen). This tendency could mean that problems—whatever their origin—present themselves as relational, or perhaps that solutions to such problems tend to come in relational form. As such, conversations were usually the students' arena of choice for carrying out their experiments, even if some important conversations, like Ellen's, took place outside the official meeting arena.

The process of defining the experiments was highly situated, and students used the available cues from their leadership work to generate numerous ideas, but how they boiled this multiplicity down to the one or two ideas eventually employed was less obvious.

However, an element of opportunism was readily observable in the cases. For instance, Rachel's ability to relocate her desk next to her co-leader's was contingent on both the availability of space in his office and the need to make space for more employees elsewhere in the building.

Students typically carried out their experiments on specific occasions, such as meetings, workshops, or planned conversations, as when Amber met Dan about streamlining case handling and Mathis sought to resolve a heated conflict. However, many experiments were also carried out in recurring everyday situations or at informal meetings, including daily morning rituals involving meeting and greeting employees, mealtimes in the lunchroom, or encounters entailing conflict, criticism, or questions from employees or more senior leaders. Finally, some experiments were constructions of actions, such as when Rachel physically moved her desk into her co-leader's office to change his positioning of her.

Practice-driven focus

The second and related attribute of experimentation as a leadership development process is that practice rather than theory drives what constitutes an experiment. As illustrated in the above cases, the predominant problems or situations arose when students felt stuck or experienced an especially thorny situation as opposed to when they dealt with issues aimed at providing new insights into students' practices. Mathis faced a tough situation, which drove his choice of experiments and which he addressed by means of a theory about leadership styles. In Amber's case, her frustration about her considerable yet fruitless previous efforts to manage an employee occasioned her choice. For Rachel, her new co-leader locked her into what she defined as a gender stereotype while her direct supervisor was skeptical about her specialized expertise, which in turn exposed her to her employees' potential frustration. Finally, Ellen chose to make alliances, a decision prompted by her realization that her coaching leadership style had its limits.

Whereas the challenge of being stuck emanated more or less directly from students' everyday practices, the problem diagnoses and remedies seemed to be compiled from a variety of other sources. For instance, Amber consulted her direct supervisor, who advised her to address problems head on, and her peer ethnographer suggested that she behave in a more structured way. Rachel implicitly reached her diagnosis through the difference she experienced between her previous and current positions. In general, the students harvested ideas for experiments from any source conceivable, including leaders in the organization, previous employment, current employees, test results, leadership, and communication theories. Another prevalent insight across the corpus was articulated by Stephano, a student who initially imagined his intervention as 'grand and profound, so it would revolutionize my personal leadership', but who went on to say, 'I no longer think like that.'

The real projects for me are all those small, everyday situations in which I, through my leadership, contribute to small changes.'

Although not relying greatly on theory to design and complete experiments, students used theory to make sense of them. We saw this in Rachel's account of how her experiments paid off, in which she noted her relief that exercising her positional power by seeking to build trust, create harmony, and engage in dialogue enabled her to reposition herself as an equal partner in the leadership team. This gave her the strength to carry on, and in her reflections on the experiment, she reported being hopeful about the leadership team's future collaboration. We interpret this as the experiment's giving her a sense of agency that freed her from being locked in a gender stereotype regarding feminine management and being perceived as the ignorant colleague. Ellen used conflict and communication theory to make sense of her somewhat unsettling experience with depriving the critical committee member of influence. Unlike the other case experiments, Amber's were unsuccessful, and she suspended them because of turbulence in the organization. Nevertheless, she used motivation theory to make sense of what happened and reflected on possibilities for future experiments.

Responsiveness

The ability to make continuous changes during the experimentation process constitutes the third attribute of experimentation as a leadership development process. The students made in-process changes because the experiments involved other people who acted in and responded to the experiments, thus becoming active co-constructors. This necessitated en-route changes to the experiment, such as when Amber cut the meeting with Dan short because he refused to participate in the carefully staged dialogue. Other students reported feeling relieved that their responsive actions during a particular experiment resolved a

difficult situation. For instance, another student, Heather headed a project that had stalled because of some dissenting project members. To jumpstart the project, she decided to go directly to the members' superiors, her aim being to construct a consensual alliance before a decision meeting. Still, she worried: 'Personally, I had a somewhat guilty conscience about partly suspending the "overall democratic process" by creating an alliance where all disagreements were settled before the meeting. It actually felt like excluding someone from "the game."' However, in the moment this decision significantly helped the case to progress. Rachel also spotted an opportunity when some office space needed to be freed up during her experiment. Seizing the chance, she decided to move into the chief physician's office—an excellent move as he subsequently treated her as his equal, involving her in relevant considerations about leadership challenges.

Moreover, the students rarely articulated the scope of their experiments—for example, the extent to which business-as-usual was to change—even in cases where the experiment might amplify tensions in a perhaps already tense situation, as occurred with Mathis' conflict mediation. Indeed, students only engaged in a more assertive leadership style in experiments dealing with direct supervision (such as in Amber's and Mathis' cases), treating experiments addressing relations to superiors or peers less confrontationally and with more subtle means (as in Rachel's case). This indicates that experimentalism carries an inherent bias towards reproducing organizational hierarchy.

Students' reflections on the impact of experimentation

Students' reflections on their learning by experimentation make the impact of its practice-driven, situated, and responsive nature clear. Both Amber and Rachel explicitly projected a future that includes experimentation, as did other students in the program, who—in addition to gaining new knowledge and insight from the actual experiment—reported

having gained a future leadership skill of experimenting. They reported greater trust in their ability to experiment and learn, particularly in ambiguous situations holding no obvious solution to a given challenge or problem. By experimenting, they could carry on renewing their understanding of and ability to address leadership challenges going forward. Mathis reflects that he has become better at framing situations and acting assertively since conducting his experiment, which he further believes will significantly benefit the organizational turnaround planned. Before the experiment, he was concerned that the employees involved would perceive him as a top-down leader and thus question his integrity. He reflects, however, that his style of leadership has become very clear since the experiment. He considers himself to have shown a strong connection between his acts and his values, for which reason the employees can more clearly perceive his values as those of a human being and as a leader. Similarly, Amber, in reflecting on her experiments, makes sense of her and Dan's emotional responses in terms of psychodynamic defense mechanisms, and she ponders how she might practice containing and discussing difficult feelings in comparable, future situations. She considers whether motivational theory might offer a more constructive interpretation of the unproductive outcome, one that sees Dan as motivated by a higher, professional calling. Such an interpretation, she muses, might help her in future 'possible experiments'. Rachel for her part reflects that she now understands the need to accept that getting to know people and their histories takes time and that she must acknowledge the multiple paradoxes that exist in organizations. Finally, Ellen reflects on how forging alliances may put pressure on democratic ideals.

Discussion

We set out to understand how designing, performing and reflecting on experiments in participants' practices can advance leadership development in the light of experiential and experimental learning. We offer a number of salient points emerging from the analysis concerning experimentation as a situated, practice-driven, and responsive process, thereby revealing the act of experimenting as a leadership capability on its own. We also reflect on ethics in relation to experimentation as a leadership development intervention.

The relevance of many leadership development programs has been widely questioned (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003b; e.g. Berggren and Söderlund, 2011; Korpiaho et al., 2007; Petriglieri et al., 2011). Our study demonstrates that integrating practice experiments increases the relevance of experiential learning in three ways. First, the learning process can be situated directly in an 'indeterminate situation' (Dewey, 1938, in Brandi and Elkjaer, 2016) in the student's leadership practice. In this scenario, knowledge does not have to be translated from one setting to another (Berggren and Söderlund, 2011), which thus reduces the concern that knowledge will evaporate during translation (MacGregor and Semler, 2012). The learning activity never really leaves the 'flow of "real" work experience—the raw material of meaningful learning' (Petriglieri et al., 2011: 433) characterized by a 'bewildering and contradictory array of expectations' (Carroll et al., 2008: 364). As such, experimentation all but eliminates the distance from the classroom to the 'real-life organizational and management problems' (Berggren and Soderlund, 2011: 379). Amber's 'problematic' situation, to use Dewey's term, with Dan is what hinders her from 'getting on with the task at hand' (Evans, 2000: 314, see also Carroll et al, 2008). In such situations, Dewey maintains, one is left to try, that is, to 'experiment with the world to find out what it is like'

(Dewey, 1916, in Brandi and Elkjaer, 2016: 200). In other words, experimentalism—trying out and doing experiments—is not an inventive pedagogy. From a Dewey perspective, it is more akin to a ‘naturalistic’ pedagogy, as it merely emulates and augments what humans are already doing through their practical engagement with the problematic situations they encounter—all amidst confusion and doubt and the ensuing desire to restore balance (Evans, 2000).

Second, experiments are driven by practice rather than theory. As such, our analysis aligns with the observation by Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003a) that leadership in actuality consists of ‘everyday activities such as listening and talking informally [that] become special when exercised by a manager—“leader” but remain every day and trivial when performed by someone else’ (2003a: 1452). Our leadership development study shows how practitioners, by engaging in these mundane actions, become aware of how such actions have effects that indeed constitute leadership (or not). When Rachel moved office, her co-leader appears to have read this seemingly innocuous action as an invitation to intensify collaboration. Moving office is not in itself an extraordinary act—its being a common workplace event—but when done by Rachel, it constitutes an act of leadership or, more precisely, a potential act of leadership, contingent on the organizational responses. Our data shows that problem diagnoses, ideas for experiments, and potential actions are compiled from a variety of sources beyond theory. This finding resonates with experiential learning theory, where the learner draws on lived experiences to create structured knowledge (Kolb, 1984) and not the other way around. Theory is used to make sense of experiments and generate future perspectives for action. This goes back to the first point of this discussion: the participant constructs the situation as something, in Dewey’s words, sufficiently determinate to allow

the participant to continue her leadership practice—not as a final settlement, which is never available, but as sufficient for envisioning future practical action.

Third, our study demonstrates that doing experiments in participants' practice contributes to current thinking about designing and carrying out relevant LDP activities. Erikson's (2007) Personal Leadership Conundrum covers the first four of Dewey's five steps of inquiry, and we seek to extend this conundrum by adding the fifth step to the LDP design, namely 'further observation and experiment leading to its acceptance or rejection' (Dewey, 1910: 72). By incorporating leaders' everyday practice into leadership learning, we firmly situate students' leadership development conundrum in a particular situation not divorced from the practice giving rise to the situation in the first place (Hickman, 1990, in Evans, 2000: 317). This situatedness enables a back-and-forth process between actions and their consequences without the need to translate and thereby risk a loss of relevance. In this understanding, an experiment is intended to encourage the individual to do by trying out as she goes about her everyday practice. For instance, in Amber's conversation with Dan she tries out different tactics for mobilizing his understanding that production needs to speed up. Her responsiveness in the situation enables this effort. She thus tries out various tactics, 'rejecting' her first approach and instead 'trying out', in Eriksen's words, 'the complexity, flux, and contingency of the actual act of leading' (Eriksen, 2007: 275). We argue that this final step of the leadership development conundrum completes and extends Eriksen's work to create an executive leadership development intervention thoroughly situated in Deweyan experimentalism.

The process of experimentation constitutes a leadership capability that goes beyond the specific experiment conducted as part of a leadership development program. It also hones students' ability to observe their own practices as well as those of others, thereby building a

foundation for a broader analytical perspective. In this instance, the experimentation seeks to reclaim the spirit of experimenting from the natural sciences and apply it to inquiry into human experiences, thus realizing Dewey's own idea (Rosiek, 2018). Moreover, by trying out different acts of what they consider to be leadership, students reflect on what constitutes relevant leadership practices and build competencies in response to those reflections and then act accordingly. Finally, when students continuously reflect on their practical experience gained through experimentation by meeting with their reflection team and remaining in close contact with faculty, they are constantly challenged in a safe environment while also learning to become explicit about their underlying assumptions and receive feedback. Yet, however safe the environment, experimentation can carry some risks when experiments are done in an actual organizational practice and not a simulated one, such as solving cases in class. As all leaders are responsible for their employees, when they decide to experiment, they must be aware of the risks to which they expose their employees and colleagues and thus identify an adequate level of challenge. Importantly, the experiment must always be done within the sphere of the participant's organizational authority and remain subject to policies, codes of conduct and employee rights that regulate the organization. The LDP faculty is responsible for the ethical consideration of asking leaders to experiment in practice and for facilitating and supervising the appropriate processing of these experiences (Knudsen and Adriansen, 2017; Wright et al., 2019). Although many participants have found experimentation valuable in developing their leadership, we would like to note a few limitations of our study and point to areas for further development and future research. First, we see a tendency among some of our students to avoid some of the more challenging experimentation or experimentation that could cause tension within the organization. In such cases, they direct the experimentation

at their employees which is less challenging than directing it at their leaders or leader-colleagues. This may result in a student's reporting on a pseudo-experiment or a 'paper tiger'. From a learning perspective, such students can be seen as remaining in their comfort zone. For instance, some students retrospectively report that the regular and unproblematic tasks they performed were experiments. From the instructor's point of view, however, these students have failed to constitute a problematic situation characterized by 'dis-equilibrium, instability, imbalance, disintegration, disturbance' (Burke, 1994, in Evans, 2000: 314), as such tasks do not provide a sufficient learning opportunity. As instructors, we are torn between the urge to challenge such student choices and the wish to respect students as experts in their own practice, not to mention a desire to remain mindful of the high demands and risks most students face when practicing leadership.

In a related observation we have made, some students do not experiment in the Deweyan sense of trying out and reflecting but rather design actions that are mere extensions of what they already do. In seeing students as the experts of their own practice, we as instructors can only encourage students to reflect on and discuss with their group what makes a suitable and relevant experiment. In the current setting, instructors deliberately refrain from pushing students to engage in experiments they are not prepared to do because their workload is too large or their unwillingness to 'rock the boat' in a difficult situation too great. However, this also faces the instructor with a dilemma, for she is an expert guide meant to facilitate the learning process but who explicitly resists being the expert on the content of the experiment. This dilemma is related to the discussion about ethical conduct in experiential learning, and future research is needed to explore how instructors strike the delicate balance between respecting students' preferences and knowledge about their practice and promoting learning challenges.

Conclusion

Our study shows that experimentalism in leadership development programs strengthens students' experiential learning by enhancing relevance in three ways: first, by situating learning directly in the student's practice; second, by aligning with the everyday mundanity of leadership practice rather than with the widespread idea that leadership is an extraordinary phenomenon; and, third, by extending the Personal Leadership Conundrum with Dewey's fifth step of 'observation and experiment[ing]' (Dewey, 1910). Integrating experimentation in LDPs is not done for the sake of the educational program, but rather to develop experimentation as a practical leadership capability, or, as Dewey says, a 'deliberately conducted practice' (Dewey, 1916, in Brandi and Elkjaer, 2016: 193). Experimentalism, we envision, can inject a measure of audacity into leadership development as well as leadership practice itself, thus enriching the space of action in a way that, in Dewey's words, may influence what is still to happen.

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