Practice-Based Evidence and Action Research

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Abstract


Indledningsvis vil vi perspektivere praksis baseret evidens ved at sammenligne det med evidens baseret praksis og argumentere for, at evidens baseret praksis hensigtsmæssigt kan videreudvikles med praksis baseret evidens. Herefter beskriver vi de begreber og metoder vi finder specielt anvendelige til at facilitere lederes evne til at udvikle et forskningsbaseret udviklingsfokus. Til sidst vil vi opstille nogle af de nøglespørgsmål praksis baseret evidens stiller til forskere indenfor ledelse og organisationsudvikling.
Introduction

Our curiosity centers on the way that managers can develop a research position within their working lives in order to develop their professional practice and sense of competence. This interest has been stimulated by our ongoing involvement with a European MSc program in Systemic Leadership offered by MacMann Berg, a Danish consultancy company, in collaboration with the Kensington Consultation Centre Foundation (London) and the University of Bedfordshire (UK). The MSc program is aimed at practicing managers and consultants working within for-profit, non-profit, social service, educational, and governmental sectors and its curriculum is grounded in a systemic constructionist approach to management which focuses on the ways that communication, discourse, and language construct identities and relationships within human systems. It spotlights the ways that language, meaning making, and context intertwine to create different forms of organizing and patterns of social arrangements and directs our attention to the consequentiality of these forms and patterns. The program emphasizes developing practical tools that managers may use to manage the linguistic landscape they co-create with others—tools of sense making, reflection, and action (see Barge, 2004a, 2004b, 2007; Barge & Fairhurst, 2008; Hornstrup 2005, for a more in depth discussion of the ideas and practices that constitutes a systemic constructionist approach).

This fascination arises in part from our participation in the third-year of the program where participants write a 15,000 word dissertation that is a self-reflexive inquiry into their own practice using systemic constructionist concepts as well as ideas from qualitative and action research. Kevin’s primary position has been as a tutor for the third-year students while Carsten and Jan both completed the MSc dissertation under his supervision. Carsten has gone on to become a tutor on the third-year while Jan continues his work as a school Headmaster. Even though we have engaged the MSc from different positions, we have been struck by a common thread that weaves itself through our own experiences and the comments we hear from other students who complete the MSc. When asked what difference doing the MSc research has had on their practice, it is common for students to respond that taking a research position has enabled them to more closely examine the detail of their linguistic practice—the way that utterances, vocabularies, language, metaphors, stories, framing, and conversational architectures co-create different forms of organizing and patterns of living together within organizations. This detailed and systematic reflection also generates new insights on the consequences of their language use leading to new developments in their own professional practice regarding the ways that systemic ideas and concepts can be lived out in the future within their working lives.

In this essay, we articulate our evolving practice for working with managers to develop their ability to create a research position within and on their professional practice, an approach we and others have called practice-based evidence. Incorporating ideas associated with self-study or 1st-person action research (McNiff & Whitehead, 2003, 2006; Whitehead & McNiff, 2006), we are interested in exploring the ways that managers can systematically research their practice and generate usable knowledge to elaborate and develop their competence. Our task is to develop a model of practice-based evidence that allows for the systematic generation of local knowledge that individuals and human systems may use to develop their practice while simultaneously allowing for the generalizability of local knowledge to other settings by engaging in a mode of theorizing called practical theory (Barge & Craig, 2009). We begin by comparing a perspective
on practice-based evidence with evidence-based practice approaches suggesting that evidence-based practice approaches can profitably be placed within a practice-based evidence approach. We then explore the kinds of concepts and tools that we have found particularly useful to facilitate managers developing a research position. We conclude with a discussion of what kinds of key questions a practice-based evidence approach prompts for organizational and management scholars.

**Working From a Practice-Based Evidence Approach**

Practice-based evidence represents one approach for working with managers to develop a research position toward their practice and to inquire into their lived experience. Similar to evidence-based practice, it is concerned with issues of validation—how do managers make claims about their practice and learning—its quality and its evolution. A systemic constructionist perspective toward practice-based evidence, however, differs from evidence-based practice as the starting point for inquiry is the situated linguistic experience of individuals as opposed to formulating and testing hypotheses about cause-effect links using individual, process, and structural variables. Similar to other action research approaches (i.e., Whitehead & McNiff, 2006), we focus on what transpires within a situation; but we focus quite closely on the words persons use in their speaking, the linguistic utterances that they make and what it creates. The tools and practices we have used and developed to teach qualitative and action research methods with managers enrolled in the MSc in Systemic Leadership focuses on investigating the linguistic dimension of experience. Three important ideas have influenced our approach: (1) co-creation, (2) reflexivity, and (3) coherence. For each idea, we highlight: (a) some important tools that we and practicing managers have found useful for developing a research position toward practice, and (b) connect these tools to the ways that evidence may be constructed from practice.

**Co-Creation**

Co-creation is a word that is used commonly within the MSc program which reflects a belief that our social worlds are jointly constructed through the dance of utterances that transpire among members of human systems such as teams and organizations. Co-creation takes on a particular meaning in the context of research as it tends to be associated with collaborative forms of inquiry. We have found it useful to talk about the ways co-creation unfolds over time through inquiry and have worked to develop tools that help managers co-create a focus for the inquiry, use interviews to co-create the empirical material for analysis, and employ reflecting tools to disturb, deepen, and enrich their interpretations.

**Research and the co-creation of a focus for inquiry.**

A key idea in collaborative forms of inquiry is that the participants or co-researchers should have a voice in determining the direction and focus of the research (Heron & Reason, 2008). This idea was present in a relatively nascent form within many of the early MSc dissertations where there was a concern with the way that the invitation to participate in the research was constructed. Typically, managers conceptualized the research project and then invited other organizational members to work within the frame that they established. The early dissertations tended to equate co-creation with the structure of the research design versus
the focus for inquiry. For example, in her dissertation exploring the way evaluation processes could be articulated and conducted using systemic ideas and practices, Poulsen (2006) treated co-creation in the early part of setting up the research as coordinating working schedules:

I decided to talk to the managers individually to co-create ideas for how to go on, because there was lack of possibilities for holding common meeting. Already planned common meetings were cancelled because of a lot of snow in Denmark and the distances between the managers working places. (p. 12)

Co-creation in many of the initial dissertations tended to be focused on constructing a set of agreements regarding who would be talked to, when, where, and about what in the context of the researcher’s primary interests. The practice of (p)research has emerged recently as an important concept for students as they collaboratively develop their research focus in consultation with the participants. Coined by Henriksen (2009) in his dissertation, *Leading Through Language: The Creation of Reflexive Relationships*, (p)research is a way of coordinating the multiple stakes and purposes among participants:

From the very beginning I was inspired by the idea of co-creating the process with the participants. This inspiration arose from the fact, that I wanted not only to investigate the notion of how to go on, but also to investigate what kind of co-creating methods could be used to facilitate strategic choices in the future. . . Presearch in this context is an invitation to co-create the research with your co-researchers. In my context, I used the presearch for two things. First of all I used the presearch to co-create the very focus on the project, and second I used the presearch to deal with some of the considerations needed regarding the ethics prior and during to the project. (p. 14)

Henricksen took portions of the ethics form required for conducting the research and invited the participants to complete it. The participant’s responded favorably to the collaborative flavor of presearch:

By having this conversation about the project and having an invitation to put my finger on my key considerations, it makes me feel ownership of not only the research project, but also the very project about how to go on. It makes me feel important and gives me a sense of being a real person in terms of strategic considerations in our school. I really hope this could create a new way of dealing with important issues in the future…the process makes everyone human and gives sense to what is about to happen. (p. 16).

The idea of (p)research is growing as managers participating on the course find it important to co-mission their research project so it has mutual benefit among the various participants.

(P)research is connected with the notion of “pro-flection.” Johannsen (2008) articulated this term in his dissertation and observed that reflexivity and reflecting processes occupy a very important position within the systemic constructionist and action research literature. However, they tend to focus on the past and the present and either minimize or ignore the power of the future to shape action in the present. As he puts it,

Linguistically, re-flexivity is oriented to the past and present. The challenge is to move
our managerial and strategic focus to the emerging future, to concentrate our awareness on the organisational context and management of tomorrow. In that light, the new term ‘proflexivity’ emerged as a forwarded reflexivity. …Inspired by Harré and his positioning theory, I would like to twist it further and add the new term ‘proflexivity’…as a dynamic and discursive practice. (p. 44)

Pro-flection or pro-flexivity becomes a way for creating reflections and meta-reflections regarding the possible futures, hopes, and dreams that may inform the trajectory of the research project. Similar to Appreciative Inquiry’s (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000) emphasis on future talk, talking about the future and what people wish to create provides a generative orientation. Pro-flection is often associated with the practice of backcasting (Hornstrup, 2005) where people articulate the future and then begin to work through the steps they took to accomplish it as if they had already done it. The combination of proflection and backcasting provide managers powerful tools for creating collective images that inspire the inquiry plus generating a concrete sense of how the inquiry needs to be jointly structured in order to move toward this desirable image.

Systemic questioning and the co-creation of interviews.

A common metaphor that is evoked in the MSc program draws on Kvale’s (Kvale & Brinkman, 2008) distinction between interviewers as miners versus travelers. Miners view knowledge as being “out there” and view questions and the interviewing process as tools that uncover the veins and nuggets of truth in peoples’ experiences, leading to an accurate picture of what objectively exists. Travelers, on the other hand, view questions and interviewing as a journey, and depending upon the choices they make, they will take different journeys and produce alternative understandings of the phenomenon. Questions have constitutive power as they introduce particular distinctions and (dis)connections within persons’ systems of language, meaning, and action. The traveling metaphor highlights that the journey is a co-created affair; it depends on the skills of the traveler to negotiate an unfolding linguistic landscape as well as the way the evolving landscape positions the traveler to make certain choices but not others.

A good portion of the MSc course devotes time to teaching systemic or circular interviewing skills. Systemic or circular interviewing is a kind of Socratic questioning technique where questions introduce certain kinds of distinctions and shape the direction of the interview (Boscolo et al., 1985, Tomm 1988, Hornstrup, Tomm & Johansen 2009).

Circular questioning is particularly useful in generating feedback. In asking circular questions, one reintroduces previously elicited information—feedback—back into the system as information about the output. Circular questions tend to trigger sets of mutually interactive feedback loops that recursively create additional loops that, in turn, widen and sharpen one’s perspectives. Another characteristic of circular questions is their tendency to elicit responses from others in nonchronological and nonlinear sequences. The information elicited via these questions often provides fresh and clear pictures of the existing dynamics within a system. (Kikoski & Kikoski, 2004, p. 135)

Circular questioning emphasizes the co-creative process of conversational inquiry as it implicates a circular feedback process where questions generate feedback in the form of responses, and the responses then become the focus for further inquiry. Situated knowledge is generated within the flow of conversation through the joint action of the interlocutors. An
extensive literature regarding the variety of systemic questions and interview styles that are covered in the program can be found elsewhere (Hornstrup, 2005; Tomm 1988).

One of the key areas emphasized in our teaching interviewing as a co-creative process is the importance of following and valuing the responses that others give to one’s questions. Interview protocols and guides are not viewed as fixed scripts that must be strictly followed; rather, they are tools for inquiry, and like other tools, may be used in ways other than way they were intended or dropped if they lack utility. Madsen (2006) in her research regarding the use of resource-based dialogues within mergers discusses how interview guides may frustrate one’s ability to be in the moment as they inquire:

Beforehand I had done a lot of thinking about interviewing, interview guides and the connection between interview guide and analysis tool. I had ended up realising that this did not fit with my way of doing research as an everyday activity. So I decided to join into the dialogues as I normally do in my managerial practice by clarifying the intention of talking together as a context for the dialogue, having no particular questions ready to ask, and using the research question as my guide. I was not speaking in order to be heard but in order to let the employees be heard – creating internal and external dialogues. During the flow of the conversation I let my curiosity follow their responses and commentaries seeing myself as a participant amongst participants in the conversation about a theme that was meaningful to all participants. Possibly all the thinking and reading I had done about interviewing and analysing beforehand served me to find my way during the conversations. (p. 39)

The point is that questions and interview guides need to be treated as flexible tools versus structured methods and held lightly in order to be adapted to the emerging situation and foster co-creation (Lowe, 2002).

**Reflecting processes and the co-creation of disturbance.**

Consistent with action research, practice-based evidence also emphasizes the importance of reflection. However, reflecting processes do more than simply shift one’s own thinking and interpretation from a preconscious to conscious level. Reflecting processes are deliberately structured to introduce different takes or perspectives toward experience and to challenge one’s own meaning making process. Building on Maturana’s (Maturana & Varela, 1987) notion of autopoeisis, individuals may be viewed as having their own autopoietic system of meaning and action and that this system must be appropriately disturbed if it is to change and develop. New information can be introduced into the system that challenges or provides the existing system which can subsequently alter existing patterns of meaning making and action. Managers deliberately invite varied reflections during the inquiry process in order to disturb their thinking and enable new possibilities for meaning making and action.

There are a number of ways that managers can create reflecting processes to disturb their thinking. For example, Henrickson (2009) had his staff interview him about the research as well as conduct a group interview on the way the research process worked as a way of creating different reflecting positions to challenge his thinking. As managers analyze the empirical material they have co-created with others, they often use theories as a resource for structuring reflections. For example, domains theory suggests that practice can be viewed in terms of
production, explanation, and aesthetics and managers in the MSc have often used these ideas to analyze the way that linguistic material facilitates task accomplishment, constructs various interpretations of the way situation may be made sense of, and influences what is beautiful, elegant, and moral about the material (Lang, Little, & Cronen, 1990). Most recently, managers have employed multiple co-researchers to offer reflections during the inquiry. For example, Falkensfeth (2009) used a number of co-researchers as she inquired into the way knowledge may be shared to improve service delivery within a hospital hotel. Internal co-researchers not only included the participants themselves, but also another manager from a different department in the organization as well as a doctor, who operated from a medical paradigm. External co-researchers included her fellow students on the MSc course as well as tutors on the program. Each of these different co-researchers was able to offer a different reflection on the inquiry and how to make sense of it.

One reason for working with multiple co-researchers is that it keeps multiple Discourses alive during inquiry that can be drawn on and combined in different ways to make sense of the material. For example, one way to view Falkensfeth’s (2009) sampling of co-researchers is that they represent and reflect different Discourses which she needs to give attention to during her inquiry including hospital (participants), organizational (other manager), bio-medical (medical doctor), and systemic Discourses (MSc students and tutors). Employing multiple co-researcher positions is one way we have found useful for keeping numerous Discourses and interpretations alive to stimulate further reflection. As Skov (2009) observed in her dissertation:

As the co-researcher made the presentations of the flipcharts, I noticed, that different prospective perspectives emerged as the participants said: “I understand the issue differently” or “I think I can add one more dimension”. I also noticed when the co-researchers were in doubt about the themes and headlines. It affected that they began to investigate this. They asked: “What does this mean?” (pp. 26-27).

Reflecting processes using varied co-researchers facilitate different Discourses intermingling and challenging one another which can deepen and enrich one’s analyses.

**Co-creation and practice-based evidence.**

Co-creation begins to set the standards for evaluating practice. As Whitehead and McNiff (2006) observe, values become an important standard for evaluating one’s own practice and determining what kind of evidence will demonstrate that one’s practice is developing. (P)research begins to develop an understanding for managers as to what kinds of evidence would count for the manager and the participants regarding whether their practice has changed in a useful way. (P)research can generate a collective account by managers and co-researchers as to what will count as good practice. Systemic questioning helps sort out people’s ongoing connection to the emerging body of evidence and through the questioning and interview process continues implicitly or explicitly to construct living standards for assessing the quality of evidence. Reflecting processes from multiple positions begin to sensitize the manager to different expectations for what counts as evidence due to varied Discourses and points to similar or competing expectations among them.

**Reflexivity**
Reflexivity has typically been conceptualized in terms of self-reflexivity, the awareness of how one’s assumptions influences the generation of knowledge. When we view reflexivity through a communication lens, however, self-reflexivity is only one form of reflexive activity that can inform managerial practice (Barge, 2004a). Reflexivity may be conceptualized in terms of reflexive descriptions—the use of systemic accounts such as stories that connect people, context, communication, meaning, and action into an integrated whole—or what can be called descriptive reflexivity. Reflexivity can also be characterized in terms of relational reflexivity which refers to the way utterances and conversational moves connect and play off each other and are patterned. Within the MSc program, these different types of reflexivity are used to help create research positions through the use of action-reflection cycles, the I-you-we-search model, and writing as a reflexive practice.

**Action-reflection cycles.**

Practice-based evidence is grounded in action research which emphasizes a cyclical pattern of action and reflection. Action-reflection cycles involve taking an experimental attitude where researchers formulate expectations for what they think will or should happen, try something out, assess whether the action has generated the desired expectation, and then adjust the next action that is taken. In short, the practice generates evidence as to whether it has facilitated the ends-in-view that were desired by the researcher and/or the co-researchers.

When we teach action-research principles, we talk about the various kinds of actions that may be taken (interviews, introduction of protocols, consultations, facilitations etc.) as well as considerations regarding how to structure the reflections. Those considerations include:

- **Participation.** Who participates in the reflection? Are the reflections conducted in individual or group settings?
- **Time.** When do the reflections occur? Before, after, or during a particular action or sequence of actions?
- **Focus.** What is the topical focus of the reflection? Is the reflection about the past, present, or future?
- **Positions.** What different reflecting positions need to be incorporated into the design? How are the different reflecting positions integrated? Should they be sequentially layered (one individual or group reflect from two or more positions sequentially)? Should they be concurrent (multiple individuals or groups reflecting from a single position at the same time)?
- **Purpose.** Are the reflections intended to make choices about how to structure the ensuing activity? Facilitate sense making and analysis?

As managers work through their dissertation, they need to make choices about how they want to structure the reflections. For example, Breddam (2008) was interested in developing the competence of her leading team to work with systemic ideas and practices. She designed a research project that consisted of four sessions where she would introduce particular systemic practices and try them out during the session. Her managers would return to their respective
departments with a homework assignment to experiment with the practice. She called this a double action research learning cycle.

I term it a double learning cycle because we initially tried out the methods in the leader group and then each leader tried the method in their own offices in the form that they found most useful in their office. As we were experiencing a method, we were at the same time practicing a method. The group process was a learning process. In the same way there was a double reflection. After each practice in the leader group, we reflected on the method, usability, ideas of how to work with it in own organisation and new ideas that could be added to the method. At the next meeting we would start with sharing stories on how the method was used in own office, reflecting on usability and inspiring each other to new uses. I chose this method both as a way of sharing practices but also through my understanding that usability of practices is situated and emergent. In trying out the practice in their own offices the participants also in a very practical sense became co-researchers. Our process in that sense took the form of plan – act - reflect – modify – act – reflect. (p. 33)

The vocabulary of action and reflection fit very well with the practices that managers engage in their everyday working lives which connects relatively easily to issues associated with research design.

**I-you-we-search.**

One of the challenges we faced when working with practice-based evidence is explaining to managers in a simple yet rich way how to manage the tension between being inwardly focused during inquiry (self reflexivity) as well as focusing on the social constructions of others (descriptive reflexivity) and how the interplay of communication influences the construction of self and other during the research (relational reflexivity). As we began working with this challenge a very simple model emerged that played off the notion of research as a “re-search,” a searching through the material multiple times. The model articulates three different research positions managers make take up during inquiry:

1. **I-search:** A focus on the internal conversation of the manager’s research position. A first-person perspective focusing on the choices the researcher makes throughout the inquiry and what kinds of effects they created.

2. **You-search:** A focus on the way that other co-researchers or participants have constructed the experience and its consequences. A third-person perspective describing the grammars, rules, moral orders, stories, and metaphors that construct the forms of living by others.

3. **We-search:** A focus on the way that collaborative conversation influences the construction of self and other. The living pattern of utterances—the way they affirm, supplement, and challenge each other over time—and the consequences of the pattern are given attention.
These relatively simple distinctions have provided a powerful vocabulary for moving managers to think about the research process in a more systemic fashion. When presenting these three ideas, we typically present them using some kind of visual diagram that highlights their interrelationships. Take for example, the following diagram:

This diagram portrays the three research positions as contingent on each—I-search occurs within the context of you- and we-search, you-search is contingent on I-and we-search, and so on. The diagram allows us to explain the integrated complexity of the three positions, one cannot be considered without the other, while at the same time gives us the possibility of foregrounding one at particular moment in time.

The I-You-We-search model is particularly helpful for helping managers locate the resources and reflecting processes that help develop their inquiry. The following figure from Johansen’s (2008, p. 30) dissertation illustrates how he used the notion of I-You-We-search to structure his inquiry into the kinds of practices that leaders who work systemically feel they may need to develop in order to effective in the future. In his dissertation, he interviewed four leaders who had been systemically trained and reflected on the kinds of practices they felt would be important in the future for leading organizations. The numbers (1, 2, 3 etc.) reflect the order that the process design unfolded. Johansen’s (2008) model provides one example of how tools for co-creation and reflexivity may be combined to inform the inquiry.
**Writing as a reflexive practice.** One of the most powerful tools that we have found for moving managers into the research position is writing. Similar to most recommendations for conducting qualitative research (e.g., Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), we encourage managers to keep a research journal or diary. As they go through the research project, they are encouraged to write down within 48 hours of any activity the moments in the process that struck them as important and meaningful, turning points in the process where they experienced some kind of change, or
choices points where they felt an important decision had been made. These various moments that arrested their attention are supplemented with reflections on the process, their learning at that particular moment, questions that they feel they need to contemplate, and their thoughts on what has transpired so far. The act of writing moves the managers to a more reflexive position as they must provide a temporary punctuation of what the process means to them at a particular moment.

A second form of writing that has proved to be quite important for managers to develop reflexivity is transcribing their interviews and interaction with the research participants. It is rare that managers take the time to reflect on the moment-by-moment utterances they make and reflect on what they invite and create. Family therapists often watch tapes of their practice repeatedly and develop awareness to the details of the way they manage the therapeutic conversation. There is not an equivalent experience that we are aware of in most management training programs. By taking a research position toward their practice, the act of transcription becomes an important practice that generates insight into their linguistic experience. Consider the experience of two MSc students:

> Being very thorough and going into details in the conversation has been a large help on the way. Many times I thought I had a “conclusion” going from a meeting and then later realised my conclusion was just the last highlights. After listening to the tapes the nuances came forward. I reflected with the group in each session, I reflected in transcribing, reading etc. I have done it this way to integrate the transcribing into the process, instead of seeing it as hard work I tried to also see it as a medium helping and supporting my reflections. Transcribing became more a helper rather than an enemy and transcribing the tapes myself made me notice something I might have overlooked or not paid any attention to. My tone of voice is different depending on how it connected to the subject of the session and the emotional atmosphere. (Christensen, 2008, p. 28)

> Doing transcription also made me aware of the huge difference in spoken language and written language. Transcribing is a way of transforming an interview into a written language; it is a way of freezing a moment, a story into a media where new ideas, development and changes can arise (Kvale 1994, p 167). It has its limitations but combined with proper tools of analysis can it be a valuable process. (Lorentzen, 2006, p. 42)

Both quotations highlight the importance of creating additional reflections on the material which attend to issues of nuance and depth. The process of transcribing the material is less about getting the record right or accurate, it is much more about becoming reflexive about the way that communication is used by self and other and how it enables coordination.

**Reflexivity and practice-based evidence.**

Reflexive practice facilitates confidence that the claims generated through one’s inquiry and analysis are warranted. Drawing on the American pragmatist John Dewey (1938), the issue centers on warranted assertability, what are the conditions that allow people to make a meaningful claims regarding knowledge. Our argument is that reflexive practice provides a means for warranting the assertability of one’s claims. First, action-reflection cycles permit on ongoing cycle of experimentation where “hypotheses” can be formulated, tested out, and revised. The experimental attitude characterizing action-reflection cycles provides an opportunity to
reflect on and revise one’s interpretations, analyses, and actions. Second, the I-you-we-search model focuses attention on the way that individuals make choices during the process of inquiry and how this might affect the articulation of knowledge claims. Third, writing as reflexive practice moves managers to pay attention to the conversational detail—key moments, important sequences, and linguistic patterns—within the process and provides an important tool for identifying bits of textual evidence from the practice itself that can be used to make claims. Reflexivity allows managers to develop a sensitivity to the conversational and narrative detail that unfolds during inquiry and to elaborate their ability to spot striking moments that can be used to generate knowledge claims.

**Coherence**

A key idea in systemic constructionist practice is coherence. Coherence refers to the way that different elements within a system hang together and connect. In the context of creating a research position toward one’s practice, we have emphasized the importance of keeping a coherence between the grammar of managerial practice and the grammar of research. Rather than treat the grammar of management as distinct from the grammar of research, we believe that it is important to develop tools and models that closely resonate with the ways that managers conduct inquiry into their everyday life. As systemic models of change suggest, it is more likely to create change when working within one’s existing grammar than challenging it, trying to replace it with a competing one (Barge, 2004; Lang & McAdam, 1995). In the MSc program, we try to connect explicitly connect the grammars of research and managerial practice in at least three ways.

First, we frame the activity of research as something that individuals typically do in their everyday lives. We frame research as something that managers and consultants already do as they are inquirers into their local circumstances and use questions and reflections to generate ideas about what to do in their practice. Similar to the psychologist George Kelly’s notion that ordinary people are scientists—they use theory to make sense of their world, they have hypotheses about how things work or could work, and they test out these hypotheses or expectations—we begin many of workshops with the observation that research is what managers and consultants currently do in their everyday working lives. We then explore the grammars of research by posting up two key terms—scientific research and social constructionism—and map out the key ideas and practices that inform each. We then introduce the term social constructionist research and articulate the grammar that might inform that construction. We then connect the key words “systemic” and “action research” to “social constructionist research.” As we conduct this exercise, it becomes clear to the MSc participants, that the notion of research parallels many of the activities that comprise their everyday managerial practice.

Second, we develop tools that pick up on the grammar of systemic ideas and practices. By the time that students have made the decision to participate in the third year, they have developed a perspective toward practice that is grounded in systemic constructionist ideas and practices. Therefore, one way to encourage managers to engage with a research position is to create tools that resonate with this working philosophy toward practice.

One example of this is how we teach grounded methods and thematic analysis. Most approaches to grounded methods focus on the way themes emerge from the data using concepts such as open coding, axial coding etc. One model that we have developed for teaching coding is based on the notions of social constructionism, systems, and narrative, all concepts and ideas that the MSc students are quite well versed in by the time they undertake the third year. Regardless of
whether one takes a more traditional thematic analysis, discourse analysis, or narrative analysis, any analysis usually involves four key processes:

**Naming**—Sometimes called coding and labeling, naming involves taking different sections of the interview (i.e., words, sentences, speaking turns etc.) and categorizing them in some way and giving them a name.

**Connecting**—Creating a pattern for the relationships among the names you have created for describing sections of the interview.

**Comparing**—You are constantly comparing the “raw” data from the interviews with the names you have created to see if the names make sense. Such comparison allows you to elaborate your names and explore the subtleties of the properties associated with naming data in particular ways. You are also constantly comparing the various names you have created to illuminate both the uniqueness of the name as well as its connection to other names. Finally, you are constantly comparing the names you have developed with the pattern of connections you have generated to see how each elaborates the other.

**Storying**—Developing a coherent narrative about the data for others to read. (Barge, 2009)

We have found that labeling these processes with terms that the MSc students are already familiar with makes it easier for them to pick up and use research grammars—such as discourse and narrative analysis, that they are unfamiliar.

Third, key ideas and practices that they learn in their education for developing their practices are used as resources for developing analyzing tools for their research. During the MSc, they learn about a number of theories and models regarding communication including Shotter’s (2005, 1006) social poetic model, Coordinated Management of Meaning theory (Pearce, 2007), the LUUTT model (Pearce & Pearce, 1998), the domains model (Lang, Little, & Cronen, 1990), and moral orders and grammars (Wittgenstein, 1953) to name a few. Rather than treat these as solely inspiration for managerial practice, we encourage managers to think of these as possible analyzing tools for inquiring into one’s own practice and developing different kinds of reflections.

**Coherence and evidence-based practice.**

The focus on coherence moves us to think about the multiple Discourses and conversations that constitute the local situations of managers and how they situate knowledge claims. Reflexivity draws our attention to the way inquiry processes unfold over time and how the adjustments we make often serve as evidence for the way a practice works (or doesn’t) as well as the assumptions we use for formulating our knowledge claims. Coherence on the other hand, addresses the multiplicity of Discourses that comprise a situation and focuses on how their interconnection sets a discursive context for articulating one’s knowledge claims. The notion of coherence suggest that managers need to find ways to situate the knowledge claims generated by research in light of the connections—strong and weak, present and absence, direct and indirect—among various Discourses and conversations. When the knowledge claims connect with the
ongoing Discourses and conversations constituting a situation, it is more likely that they will be viewed as legitimate and valid by others.

Discussion

I feel that my tools have been good for my doing and my doing has been good for my tools. I have reflected much more and more detailed than I do in my daily work life. It has been an eye opener and I will try to reflect more and be irreverent to my own quick decisions in future. (Poulsen, 2006, p. 77)

Adopting a research position moves managers to become more reflective about their practice by focusing greater attention on the details of their lived experience within their everyday working lives. This essay articulates a practice-based evidence approach toward management that is grounded in a systemic construction perspective toward communication. From this perspective, elaborations of individual and collective practice emerge from a sustained inquiry into the linguistic experience of managers and other organizational members. This inquiry process involves managers developing tools for sense making, acting, and reflecting that embody co-creation, reflection, and coherence. Evidence of how managers elaborate their practice is generated from within the flow of inquiry and reflects an assessment of how changes in practice generate shifts in patterns of meaning making and action. A practice-based approach suggests at least three areas for future research for management scholars and educators.

First, we need to pay closer attention to the rhetorical construction of evidence. Communication has a rhetorical dimension to it that gives awareness to the way language influences others through tools such as argumentation as well as the way particular modes of thinking, being, and feeling are legitimated (Holman, 2000; Shotter, 1993). This is consistent with evidence-based practice approaches that recognize the importance of how managers make the case for new practices. For example, Rousseau and McCarthy (2007) suggest management education needs to pay close attention to the rhetorical and persuasive power of communication:

A powerful exercise is the task of making a persuasive case to superiors for adopting a new management practice, the effectiveness of which the evidence supports. Practitioners need to learn how to use evidence in circumstances requiring negotiation and compromise. (p. 97)

Through co-creative and reflexive practices, managers typically create a set of living standards for what counts as evidence of good practice and for evaluating their practice in relation to themselves and their research participants. However, managers within the MSc program have paid relatively little attention to the kinds of rhetorical processes and evidence that would be required to make the case for individuals not associated with the initial research to take up and use the learning generated by the research project. Future research needs to look at the way evidence is rhetorically constructed and how reasoning, argumentation, and framing are used to legitimize the knowledge claims generated by the research as useful to persons who participated in the research as well as people who have little or no connection to the original research.

Second, management scholars and educators need to rethink the theory-practice relationship. Evidence-based practice approaches emphasize the importance of doing science to build theory and, when the evidence is sufficiently strong, to derive practice from it. This
constructs practice as being secondary to theory. We would reverse this relationship suggesting that practice manages the complexity of life that theory cannot. Practice is always ahead of theory and research as managers must develop ways of working that allow them to address the situation at hand. Even if the science is strong and the normative prescriptions generated by theory clear, the learning from population-based science must be adapted to the individual case and this requires practical versus scientific reasoning (Staller, 2006).

We would suggest that the theory-practice relationship may be more profitably conceptualized from the perspective of practical theory (Shotter, 1993). Practical theory operates on the metaphor of a toolbox, whereby a theory’s propositions, models, concepts, and ideas become tools for conducting inquiry into lived experience (Cronen, 2001). This position does not undermine the view that theory can be conceptualized as a set of interrelated concepts that generate explanations and predictions regarding social phenomena. However, it shifts the view that theoretical concepts and models provide a picture of reality to the view that theoretical concepts and models provide tools that may inspire the practices we use to inquire into lived experience. For example, an antenarrative approach to management emphasizes the fragmented, nonlinear experience of organizational life and how stories migrate and travel through organizational life (Boje, 2001; 2008). It makes an important theoretical distinction between story—where multiple meanings can exist for the connections among plot, characters, setting, and action—and narrative where the meaning is fixed and singular. From our perspective, these theoretical concepts are useful not because of their definitional power, but because of their implications for practice. Antenarrative inspires a number of practices or tools that managers may pick up and use to explore and work with the fragmented linguistic aspects of human life. Our point is that management education needs to shift from the notion of applying theories wholesale to organizational phenomenon, to teaching managers how to use theory as a resource and to work with managers to develop their wisdom of how to draw on particular theoretical resources within the moment to further inquiry.

Third, the moral-aesthetic domain of practice needs to become more closely tied to the generation and use of evidence. Evidence does not stand on its own two legs; it used by people in conversation to further particular aims and purposes and it can be used in elegant, graceful, and inspiring ways. It is interesting that the words “values,” “moral,” or “ethics” do not appear in the index of the seminal book on evidence-based management, Pfeffer and Sutton’s (2006), *Hard Facts, Dangerous Truths, & Total Nonsense*, but “performance,” “motivation,” and “incentives” do. The tendency within evidence-based practice is to conflate ethical and moral considerations with technical ones. If we start with the premise that management is a design problem (Kelly et al., 2006, Kelly, 2008), whereby managers design their communicative activity to manage emergent problems, then it is important to recognize that practical-moral problems occupy a central place in our everyday lived experience. We are influenced by Whitehead and McNiff’s (2006) claim that values serve as living standards for evaluating one’s practice and believe that future work needs to explore the connections among practice, evidence, and values.
Notes

1 To be sure, recent approaches to evidence-based practice have attempted to incorporate the contextual and experiential knowledge that practitioners bring to bear in their working lives (Briner, Denyer, & Rousseau, 2009). However, prior experience, intuition, and situational knowledge take a secondary supplemental position to scientifically generated and validated knowledge, “Rather than blindly applying rules, experts condition their judgments upon facts and context supplementing their scientific knowledge with local experience, priorities, and needs” (Rousseau & McCarthy, 2007, p. 88).

2 The term practice-based evidence has been used previously in the literature (Fox, 2003; Dupree, White, Olsen, & LaFleur, 2007; McDonald & Viebach, 2007; Nicholson, Hinden, Beibel, Henry, & Katz-Leavy, 2007; Barkham, Mellor-Clark, Connell, & Cahill, 2006; Simons, Kushner, Jones, & James, 2003; Staller, 2006; Peile, 2004), however, it has typically been used to describe more inductive research that is a precursor to deductive and quantitative hypothesis testing.
References


### Table 1

**Discursive Comparison of Evidence-Based Practice and Practice-Based Evidence**

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<tr>
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<th>Evidence-Based Practice</th>
<th>Practice-Based Evidence</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Criteria for evaluating knowledge</strong></td>
<td>Knowledge is treated as a set of stable objective facts and fixed relationships among variables and concepts. Knowledge involves “knowing about” particular phenomena and should be objective, valid, and reliable.</td>
<td>Knowledge is local and emergent generated by the communicative interaction of individuals. The development of knowledge involves “knowing how” to move forward within human systems. Knowledge is assessed by its utility—is it useful in generating practice that enables individuals, teams, and organizations to work with the opportunities and constraints within local contexts?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Role of evidence</strong></td>
<td>Evidence is generated from the results of scientific studies to substantiate theoretical claims. The accumulation of evidence demonstrates the truthfulness of the claim.</td>
<td>Evidence refers to examples drawn from practice to generate claims and stories about learning and development. What counts as evidence for learning and development depends on the audience.</td>
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<td>Position of the practitioner</td>
<td>The accumulation of evidence creates a convergence regarding the practices that should be associated with a particular activity. Practitioners should follow closely these objective or normative principles generated by research. Practice becomes a scripted rule-governed activity. Practitioners are responsive to the unique characteristics of emerging situations. Practitioners need to make situated judgments about situations and what to do next. Research and practice become phronetic activities where individuals work to create coherence among the values that inform their practice, the repertoire of skills and abilities they bring to a situation, and the unique particulars of a situation.</td>
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<td>Role of theory</td>
<td>To create either objective or normative principles regarding social practices. Post-positivist and normative conceptions of theory are typically employed. To create a toolbox of sensitizing concepts that enable practitioners to develop a sense of orientation within conversational landscapes.</td>
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<td>Migration of practices</td>
<td>The practices generated by research should be generalizable across contexts, or specify the contextual variables that affect the performance and efficacy of the practice. Instructive interaction by experts facilitates the spread of practices to new contexts. Practices are transferable across contexts; they are disembedded from one context, adapted to a new context, and reembedded. The spread of practices is a rhetorical one, where individuals become inspired through the stories of people’s practice and believe that it fits with their local context.</td>
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