

Temporality and Processuality in Narrative Action Research: Working with Collaborative ‘Reflexive Revisits’ in the Analytical Process

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Abstract: This article contributes methodologically to action research in the field of leadership development. It examines how narrative approaches can foster leadership development and how co-researchers may be actively involved in the process of analysis. The study was conducted in a large public institution with ten mid-level managers as co-researchers. The overall purpose of the project was to strengthen the leadership team and develop a relationally oriented leadership style.

The article outlines the theoretical framework, followed by an account of how the term ‘reflexive revisits’ was used in the analytical process. Hereafter is presented an example in which the co-researchers actively participated in the analytical work. The conclusion is that narrative action research with ‘reflexive revisits’ can work as a useful approach to co-create reflexivity, development, and cohesion in a leadership team.

Keywords: action research, narrative studies, leadership development, process theory, organizational learning

Temporalidad y procesualidad en la investigación-acción narrativa: Trabajando con ‘revisitas reflexivas’ colaborativas en el proceso analítico

Resumen: Este artículo contribuye metodológicamente a la investigación-acción en el campo del desarrollo del liderazgo. Examina cómo los enfoques narrativos pueden fomentar el desarrollo del liderazgo y cómo los coinvestigadores pueden participar activamente en el proceso de análisis. El estudio se llevó a cabo en una gran institución pública con diez directivos de nivel medio como coinvestigadores. El objetivo general del proyecto fue fortalecer el equipo de liderazgo y desarrollar un estilo de liderazgo orientado a las relaciones.

El artículo describe el marco teórico, seguido de una descripción del uso del término ‘revisitas reflexivas’ en el proceso analítico. A continuación, se presenta un ejemplo en el que los coinvestigadores participaron activamente en el trabajo analítico. La conclusión es que la investigación-acción narrativa con ‘revisiones reflexivas’ puede ser un enfoque útil para co-crear reflexividad, desarrollo y cohesión en un equipo de liderazgo.

Palabras clave: investigación-acción, estudios narrativos, desarrollo del liderazgo, teoría de procesos, aprendizaje organizacional

1. Introduction

This article explores how insider action research, informed by narrative approaches (Boje, 2008; White, 2007), can support the development of a leadership team. It also examines how co-researchers can be involved in parts of the analytical process through “reflexive revisits” (author’s term).

The action research project took place in a Danish, nationwide, public pedagogic institution (located in one of Denmark’s five regions) with a unionized workforce of 500, most of whom are social care employees. In the institution, there are seventeen units where the residents live and spend their time. Each of these units is led by one of ten mid-level managers who are included in this project as co-researchers. The residents (all adults) are dealing with developmental disabilities and have committed serious crimes. The task of the employees is to support the residents, who are described to be and considered dangerous. The residents have an extensive need for social support around the clock. The chief executive and four sub-managers (each responsible for their own area, finance, administration, social work and treatment) expect the mid-level managers to provide a form of leadership that helps and sustains the employees in this demanding work. Due to national requirements, task performance and size, the organization also has internally employed specialists, such as HR, shift planners, nurses, social workers, psychologists and development consultants to provide professional support—for example to the mid-level managers, other members of the organization and several national operators. My role as action researcher was as an insider in the organization due to my position as an internal development consultant and specialist in the field of process leadership and organizational change.

The project aimed to create organizational movement and change, which was initiated to support a relationally oriented mode of leadership, through continuous dialogical processes (Hernes, 2014a) within a frame of a collaborative approach and “joint action” (Shotter, 2010b). As an internally employed development consultant I had facilitated a similar process before, and the mid-level managers had asked me to take the project lead, which the chief executive has supported. It was my task, among other things, to design the overall process and facilitate dialogical processes that could foster a common reflexive space for leadership development and contribute to organizational learning.

During the startup, co-researchers had made it clear to me that they were participating because of their shared interest in leadership, therefore I did not expect them to spend time engaging in my research interest. I was aware that I had to conduct a balancing act, for example, when I involved them in the analysis work, or presented new theoretical perspectives on what they were struggling with. In this study I show how I created a framework for analysis to actively involve them in analyzing selected transcribed excerpts from the dialogical processes. Drawing on a case from the project, this article explains how the framework, as a “scaffolding” tool (a concept from Wood et al., 1976), was applied as a process-methodological approach, both to strengthen the analysis and to facilitate the process with the team. Through the article’s case-based example, the continuous dialogical movements are studied, highlighting how past and future were brought into the narratives of the present.