Peer-to-peer ethnographies
in an executive master leadership development course

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Introduction
The interest of this paper is to explore how and to which extent non-supervised peer to peer ethnographic exercise stimulate leadership development in the context of a Master of Public Governance. Thus, the case study reports the utilities and effects of an element within a personal leadership development course (Personligt Udviklingsforløb, PUF) within a mid-career Master of Public Governance programme at Copenhagen Business School. The course is one of only two mandatory courses in the programme, extends two semesters and covers 6 ETCS. The MPG programme was launched in 2009, as a part of a larger Quality Reform by the Danish government

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The programme aims “to qualify and develop the public manager’s capability to conduct professional management in a political directed public sector context with the aim of strengthening the public manager’s competence in reflecting and further developing his or her own management practice” (Copenhagen Business School and University of Copenhagen, 2013). The aim of the course in question is to expand the student’s personal leadership capacity and range of opportunities of action to meet current or future business needs and is described in further detail in the appendix.

The pedagogics employed – as it will transpire from the description in the appendix A – are action-learning (Anderson, 2004; Cho & Egan, 2010; Revans, 1982), with important elements of reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2005), collaborative inquiry, problem-based learning and learning groups (Berggren & Soderlund, 2011). Realin proposes four common principles of action learning that encapsulates the pedagogic of this course quite succinctly:

- Learning be acquired in the midst of action and dedicated to the task at hand
- That participants work on problems aimed at organizational as well as personal development and the intersection between them.
- That learners work in peer learning teams to support and challenge each other
- That its users demonstrate a learning-to-learn aptitude entailing a search for fresh questions over expert knowledge

(Contentwise, the syllabus has – apart from mainstream textbooks like Yukl (2010) – strong components of critical works on e.g. rationality in organisations, the fashion of self-development and the power dynamics at work in coaching in the workplace.

This is then the context for the mini ethnography. According to the Ethnography Guide, the role of the ethnographer is ‘to watch all these activities and subsequently to assess when exactly leadership is being practised and what characterises this leadership’. The Guide further unfolds this:

The objective for the student who is the focus of the ethnographic study ("the focal person") is to be observed "in action", i.e. in situations in
which he/she exercises leadership, and for these observations to be analysed. The co-student (ethnographer) acts as observer. The ethnographer observes the focal person in a leadership role over a defined period of time.

The objective for the ethnographers is to train their ability to observe another person's leadership context and practice and to hone their analytical skills in relation to leadership. Analysing someone else's leadership practice can be a useful tool for reflecting on your own leadership practice.

The Ethnography Guide, CBS, 2014

The instruction is highly detailed (See Appendix B) and covers A) briefing, B) fieldwork and C) analysis. The briefing takes place some days prior to the fieldwork, and is a formal meeting in which the two or more students (from same learning group) whom visit each other as ethnographers respectively hosts agree the terms of the exercise (time, place, confidentiality, safety, dress code etc.), but in particular how the ethnography may be staged to produce rich data regarding the leadership practice of the host, specifically with an eye on the developmental intentions implied in the project of the host. Further, the ethnographer also learns what theories inform the project of the host. As a specific point of the briefing, the ethnographer inquires, how her visit will be communicated to the organisation and if the host has any expectation regarding the attitude and behaviour of the ethnographer.

The fieldwork may then cover the event of actual experiments, but more frequently the ethnographies are carried out on other occasions than those of the experiments. The fieldwork itself last typically one full day with some variations. The ethnographer is equipped with pen and paper, follow the host (cf. shadowing, (Czarniawska-Joerges, 2007) and records episodes: Meeting, phonecalls, email communication, movements etc^2.

^2 The present guide does not emphasise context (artefacts, technology, architecture etc.), and this is indeed a weakness from a theoretical point of view (Hansen, 2006). On the other hand the social and thematic complexity of the exercise is already very high for the students involved. One may also ad, that while context observations are not actively requested in the guide, the whole exercise is performed in the context, and informs the impressions at the phenomenological level.
Following the actual shadowing, there is a concluding reflection between ethnographer and host, exchanging views on the events that did – and did not – go down. Finally, the ethnographer completes her notes of the day, while events are still in recent memory.

The third phase – the analysis – is that of the actual ethnography (the ‘written life’) of the field visit. The ethnographer selects two or three situations from the visit, meeting most of the criteria stated in the Guide i.e. the situations:

1. Are relevant for the leadership development project.
2. Are possibly characteristic of a number of observations made during the visit.
3. Can hopefully be put into perspective by the theory which the focal person has chosen.
4. Can acknowledge and inspire the leadership of the focal person.
   The Ethnography Guide, p. 3

These episodes (‘Situations’) are now described through two lenses: The first is the situation ‘as it happened’, captured as loyal as possible by the ethnographer. The second is a ‘theoretical reflection’, were the situation above is retold, now through the vocabulary of the theory/theories that the host works with in his project. This is done for all two to three situations.

This last text – the ethnography – is then handed over to the host, whom includes it as a mandatory appendix to his assignment to be used as one source of data in the analysis of the whole project, and as a possible reference during examination.
Two-by-two framework

Our entry into this case is informed by two lines of thought. The first being the one following the Aristotelian distinction between the three intellectual virtues: episteme, techne and phronesis (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Phronesis is a “true state, reasoned, and capable of action with regard to things that are good and bad for man” (Aristotle in ibid., p. 2) and thus differs from episteme, denoting the analytical and scientific knowledge, more or less equivalent to modernist conception of natural as well as social sciences, following Enlightenment aspirations. Likewise, it differs from techne, the technical knowledge and know-how.

For the purpose of this paper, episteme denotes the dominant virtue endemic to the scholastic institutions - in casu academia - and phronesis then points to the virtues dominating the practical field of management. In the words of Chia, we have identified an ‘epistemological rupture between knowledge and knowing [that] results from the translation of practitioner experiences into the logic, vocabulary and interpretive frameworks of academia in order to meet the demands of rigour and scholarship in management research’ and, we may add, management education (Chia, 2009). Thus, this rupture divides the two fields – academia on the one hand, and management practice on the other – that our student ethnographer travels. Thus, the first dimension in our framework is that of episteme versus phronesis.

The second line of thought is that of power, or more specifically, that of the formal asymmetry of scholastic teaching – performed by a teacher or other experts - that is as endemic to academia as the virtues of episteme and techne. The opposite end of this dimension is symmetrical learning or in the language of andragogy: peer learning. Generally, the ‘peer’ in peer learning ‘are other people in a similar situation to each other who do not have a role in that situation as teacher or expert practitioner […] Most importantly, they do not have power over each other by virtue of their position
or responsibilities.’ (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 2014). Thus, the second dimension in our framework is that of asymmetry versus symmetry.

In total, a matrix is established in which the trajectory of the student ethnographer is depicted (See figure p. Fejl! Bogmærke er ikke defineret.)

![Figure 1 The Student Manager Ethnographer Trajectory](image)

**Discussion**

The discussion is still to be developed, but a number of themes offer themselves for further inquiry. The overall theme is how come the student feedback on the efficacy of the ethnography is so univocally positive given the somewhat mundane appearance of the whole exercise at the point of instruction? This is the central point of curiosity for this author, as the magnitude of this effect was underestimated on beforehand.
• How can we theoretically conceptualise this? Does it make sense to conceive the multiple sites in the trajectory of a student-manager as dominated by different virtues, each calling forth different logics of legitimisation? And if so, can we as educators become more astute in designing learning events aware of and possibly utilising rather than being stifled by the epistemological conflicts facing the students moving back and forth across the ‘rupture’, Chia is talking about above? One element may be a much more transparent appreciation of the different – and conflicting – logics at play, rather than insisting on mechanical ‘transfer’ from left to right in Figure 1. In fact, if anything, the transfer goes from left to right, through the power of the ethnography itself. Another element – along the vertical dimension - may be to construct episodes of active neutralisation of the Teacher/Student asymmetry as prescribed in the peer learning developed by Boud et al. (2014). There is little doubt that one of the strength of the design employed here is, that the students are prone to listen to one another in a different way than they listen to the teacher.

• What is the particular ‘learning’ or ‘leadership development effects’ of the activity?

• Does this format suggest itself to other programmes and learning objectives? This seems definitely to be the case, even if relevant changes would be needed. Further, as Boud et al. also touch upon; the question of resources - in times of decreasing funding also for universities – partly drives the interest for new learning formats as well. The mini ethnography should - in terms of ‘learning output to teaching input’ – yield an attractive ratio, even if this never was part of the intention in designing the element.

• Yet another theme is that of the relational effects of the ethnographies. It was evident, particularly at the project coaching at session 4 and at the examination, that quite a few of the ‘ethnographic partners’ had developed very strong ties, and considerably mutual knowledge of each other’s leadership practices. How come – and how is this effect utilized in leadership development?
• What is the interplay between narrative and theory in the production of the ethnographies?

• Critique from the organisational ethnographers, ‘jet plane ethnography’ and similar criticisms are certainly relevant. The question maybe points to the broader question on how to integrate ‘research formats’ into ‘learning formats’.
Appendix A: The Course Content

The aim of the courses is to strengthen students’ self-insight and leadership competence, taking into account their personal qualities and the institutional parameters in the specific political and moral context typical of management roles in the public sector.

PUF Syllabus, CBS 2014

The course spans two semesters and six full-day sessions, two of which are residential. It is structured in three phases: Focusing, Experimenting and Reflecting, and driven by the students own developmental project. In the first phase - ‘Focusing’ – the student completes a personality test (Neo P-IR, shortened version) and a condensation of her contemporary leadership practice, including background information like education, current vision for her organisation, vision for her personal leadership, strengths and weaknesses and developmental concerns. This is followed by an individual ‘developmental dialogue’ of 1,5 hrs with the teacher, in which the test result is fed back and informs a broader dialogue, exploring which present or future business needs are not adequately met by the current leadership capacity. The idea of this phase is to transform a relevant part of this conflict into the students ‘Personal Leadership Development Project’. Finally, the student is introduced to the portfolio, a document following the whole course and the project, in which relevant exercises, actions, data and reflections are recorded. The first two sessions of the course covers ‘You as a leadership tool’ and ‘Leadership as Dialogue and Communication’. In the former, the students are placed in learning groups that follow the whole course, and in the latter, the students are introduced to the mini-ethnography. Concurrently, the student decides finally on her project, and design adequate experiments in her leadership practice, that will throw light on possibilities for expanding the leadership capacity against the business needs. This completes the Focusing phase.

In the Experimentation phase the student executes one or more experiments the results of which are recorded in the portfolio, and the phase carries over into the next semester. Through this phase, three
more sessions cover ‘Power, Conflict and Emotions in Organisations’, ‘Change Leadership’ and ‘Motivation and Communication’. The mini-ethnography is to be carried out in this phase – and there is a personal project coaching by the teacher with each student, with active participation of the learning group. Finally, the Reflection phase consists of the last session on ‘Personal Resilience’, the writing up of the assignment and an assessment seminar, in which the students is examined in the active presence of her learning group.

The learning objectives of the course demand of the student to describe the organisational context of and the personal change needed for the Leadership Development Project, justify on theoretical and practical terms the design of one or more relevant experiments and account for the execution and documentation of these. The entire project must be analysed using relevant theory and a theoretical and practical reflection of the future potential of the entailed change for the student’s leadership and organisation must be performed.

Examples of project questions include from (Meier & Tangkjaer, 2013):

- During implementation of the new IT governance model, how do I foster the experience of sense among my employees?
- My section is being integrated into a new organisational design – which leadership approaches would support this change?
- Two districts are merging – how do I as a leader support the development of a common culture?
- A top management policy paper on leadership defines a certain perspective of change as preferable. What does this mean for my local group of directors, and how do I contribute to the group through this?
- My organisation is implementing user driven innovation. How do my leadership support this?
Appendix B: The Ethnography Guide

Period: The ethnographic study is performed between the last day (Day 3) of course A (PUF A) and the first day (Day 4) of course B (PUF B) the next semester.

Objective: The objective for the student who is the focus of the ethnographic study ("the focal person") is to be observed "in action", i.e. in situations in which he/she exercises leadership, and for these observations to be analysed. The co-student (ethnographer) acts as observer. The ethnographer observes the focal person in a leadership role over a defined period of time.

The objective for the ethnographers is to train their ability to observe another person's leadership context and practice and to hone their analytical skills in relation to leadership. Analysing someone else's leadership practice can be a useful tool for reflecting on your own leadership practice.

The ethnographer must observe the focal person during an entire working day. In other words, the focal person has a co-student "looking over his/her shoulder" for a whole day. During the day, there will be times when the focal person is not directly exercising leadership – for example when writing e-mails, skimming through papers or informing staff. The role of the ethnographer is to watch all these activities and subsequently to assess when exactly leadership is being practised and what characterises this leadership.

The students in the development group form pairs (or possibly groups of three if one student has a third person acting as ethnographer) and are responsible for seeing to the practical arrangements. Note that, as with the other group, confidentiality must be observed.

Structure: The exercise consists of three components, each with its own accompanying template: A) briefing, B) field work and C) analysis, which involve both factual descriptions of several different leadership situations as well as a number of theoretical interpretations of these situations.

A. First of all there is a briefing at which the ethnographer interviews the focal person. The purpose of this is for the ethnographer to tune into the focal person's leadership tasks and challenges at work. The notes from the briefing can be written into template A.
B. Next, the visit itself is planned and the focal person takes the ethnographer back to his/her organisation. It is important during the visit for the ethnographer to have pen and paper at hand to note down every relevant activity carried out by the focal person. It may well be strange, unfamiliar or even a nuisance having an observer on your heels all day, but you should try and give it a positive twist. Inform staff and other managerial colleagues that the ethnographer will be present, that this is part of your MPG programme and that you are experimenting, trying to find out what leadership is in practice. That way you can create transparency about the fact that you are actively working to improve/analyse your own leadership.

The field notes from the day can be written into template B or recorded in a similar structure.

A. BRIEFING
The briefing takes place, for example via Skype or similar, a few days before the visit.

| How would you describe your leadership development project? |
| What particular skills do you wish to train in your project? |
| What experiments will you carry out/have you carried out to further your personal development? When? |
| What activities relevant to the leadership development project do you expect during my visit? |
| What inspiration in terms of theories or issues do you have for your leadership development project – and what makes this theory/these theories particularly important? (For example, increasing dialogue-based leadership – where the theory might be Madsen, B, (2004).) |
| Given your intention with the project and your theoretical inspiration, what would you like me to be especially aware of during the visit? |
| Is there anything in particular I need to take into consideration? (For example, an especially vulnerable member of staff, confidentiality etc.) |
| How will my visit be communicated and what you like my behaviour or attitude to be like during the visit? |
| Is there anything else I should be aware of or that we should clarify with one another? |
B. FIELD NOTES

Enter here from template A what the focal person wishes you to be particularly aware of:

Place and date:

Expected activities and events:

Log:
How the log is organised obviously depends on the leadership development project. One of the many episodes during the period of observation might be a "managerial meeting". During this managerial meeting, the focal person's intention with "dialogue-based management" may come into play (see example above). So, in view of Benedikte Madsen, the observation could concern analogue versus digital communication.

It is important to focus on both the leadership development project and on the many other situations during the day in which leadership is exercised, such as:

- Greeting the staff in the morning
- Telephone conversations
- Informal chats
- Lunch
- Other meetings
- Handling a sudden problem
- Handling unpleasant mail
- Etc.

You may take notes – and possibly supplement them with relevant pictures.

Concluding reflections with the focal person: Here, the ethnographer and focal person can reflect on the visit – did the expected activity actually happen?

Ethnographer records the day's occurrences: The notes taken during the day might be sloppy, incomplete or inadequate, so set aside one hour or so just after the observation period to enter them in the log. Ensure that all notes are clear and fill in the gaps in the descriptions while the day's memories are still fresh in your mind. You may want to structure your notes in the log so that they conclude with a list of different situations in which the focal person exercised leadership.

C. Finally the ethnographer picks two or three situations from his/her observations and analyses these on the basis of course theory. The analysis should be based on solid observations from the visit, i.e. episodes that:
   i. Are relevant for the leadership development project.
   ii. Are possibly characteristic of a number of observations made during the visit.
   iii. Can hopefully be put into perspective by the theory which the focal person has chosen.
   iv. Can acknowledge and inspire the leadership of the focal person.
It is important that each situation is analysed (or interpreted/reflected on) from a theoretical angle so that the observed situations are not solely "everyday actions", but become examples or illustrations of more general leadership issues that can be discussed.

The factual descriptions of the situations and accompanying theoretical reflections – i.e. the contents of template C – will be included in the focal person’s exam assignment and will thus provide inspiration for further reflection and learning.

**C. Factual description of the situation and reflections (remove inserted example).**

**The contents of this template will be enclosed with the examination assignment.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation 1:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It’s Monday morning and everyone has sat down to the staff meeting. The mood in the room, into which eight people are squeezed, is jovial and informal. Anders stands up, smiles broadly, and says, &quot;Welcome to the meeting! It's good to see you all, particularly to see Susanne, <em>on time!</em>&quot; There's a slight shift in mood and Susanne smiles stiffly.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theoretical reflection 1:**

Our communication is both *digital* and *analogue* (Madsen, 2004), in other words both "verbal" and "physical" (body language, inflection, tone of voice etc.). The situation above describes a meeting where Anders communicates through both channels but the two messages do not harmonise (Madsen, 2004). On the one hand, Anders’ digital message is that he is pleased to see everyone, particularly Susanne. At the same time, through the technically correct addition of the phrase "on time", Anders’ analogue message (through tone of voice) communicates that he is tired of Susanne always turning up late. Nonetheless, we see Anders smiling, which is yet another analogue message about acknowledgement and acceptance. However a smile – like Anders’ – can also be "broad", and thus signal irony, i.e. that the message should not be taken at face value. Susanne’s strained smile can be interpreted as meaning that she receives both the digital message (here, about the meeting) as well as the analogue (about the relationship between herself and Anders).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation 2:</th>
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**Theoretical reflection 2:**

<table>
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<th>Situation 3:</th>
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**Theoretical reflection 3:**
References


Chia, R. (2009). The nature of knowledge and knowing in the context of management learning, education and development. The SAGE handbook of management learning, education and development (pp. 25-41) SAGE.


