

SUSTAINING MANAGERIAL DEVELOPMENT: THE “RESEARCHING PRACTITIONER” IN ACTION LEARNING SETTINGS

Gorli Mara¹, Ripamonti Silvio, Galuppo Laura, Scaratti Giuseppe

mara.gorli@unicatt.it; silvio.ripamonti@unicatt.it; laura.galuppo@unicatt.it;
giuseppe.scaratti@unicatt.it

Università Cattolica di Milano, Milan, Italy

Abstract:

The paper discusses the challenge to sustain managerial development by moving from the hypothesis that this should involve opportunities, for managers, to experience reflexive processes and the creation of “communities of researching practitioners”.

An Action Learning process is presented, with a specific methodological choice. The paper analyzes the proposal of research, narrative and ethnographic methods to sustain managers to the incoming organizational challenges. It does so through an organizational case, entering the details of the phases and the use of tools proposed. More specifically, the use of an ethno-narrative tool is discussed, as well as its effectiveness for managerial development.

Key words:

action learning; ethnonarrative; writing

INTRODUCTION

In the organizational contexts, the turning point is nowadays represented by the challenge to develop professional identity as linked to innovation and change. The key-level that is mostly challenged is the managerial one. Managers in effect are more than ever pulled by the new organization requirements (speed, knowledge, innovation, cost reduction, high reliability) and they are requested to invest on a challenged professionalism (sustainability of their role and responsibilities, expectation, learning, growth, career...). According to a “learning perspective” on management (Easterby Smith, Thorpe and Jackson, 2008), managers are more and more asked to create learning organizations (Senge, 1990; Easterby Smith, 1997), facilitate knowledge creation (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). Increasingly this perspective seems to be combined with other views, such as the focus on change leading to dynamic capabilities (Winter, 2003).

Organizations nowadays require managers to take positions in an often chaotic flow of events and actions. Managers are requested to identify and construct their problems (problem setting) through an accurate analysis of complex organizational processes and practices. They are also challenged to act urgently and to influence (not only to lead)

¹ Mara Gorli, mara.gorli@unicatt.it; Largo Gemelli 1, 20123 Milan, Italy. Phone: +39 02 72343974

those processes and practices, by handling and mediating among different and sometimes conflicting cultures and interests.

Moreover, organizations less than before require people to develop individual courses of action. The new challenge is instead to act collectively, to create networks where every stakeholder may have a role and an appreciation.

These aspects require not only the exercise of reflexive competences, but also competences in developing authorship and networking that are more than ever crucial.

Moving from these premises, our hypothesis is that sustaining managerial development means creating opportunities where managers can be involved in reflexive processes and can also build and experience “communities practitioners”. These communities, constituted by colleagues, would help them search around the working practices and their cultural foundations, and permit an exchange of events’ interpretations and practical solutions (problem setting and problem solving). We can therefore call them “communities of researching practitioners”.

This is the idea that guided the authors of this paper, who are going to present a theoretical and also practical reflection stemming from a specific organizational intervention in which they have been involved as researcher-consultants².

The paper discusses the challenge to sustain managerial development through specific methodological attentions. Within the framework of an Action Learning process, traditionally centered on reflection and change, the paper reports and analyzes the proposal of research setting and tools, coming from narrative and ethnographic traditions, to sustain managers to the incoming organizational challenges.

NEW NEEDS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR MANAGING COMPLEX ORGANIZATIONS

Organizational complexity and the changing market, constantly challenge managers because of their responsibility in mediating between the macro and micro levels of the organization, between the outside and the inside, and between the strategic issues and the everyday practices. Therefore, managers are nowadays more and more required to face such a complexity through a process of continuous professional development, that challenges their daily practices as well as the organizational cultures.

We recognize that working practices, just like the organizational processes, are symbolic and cultural results of continuous social exchanges and interactions that take place in work settings, and that are in turn strongly influenced by local cultures. Organizations, in this perspective, are seen as processes of continuous building and re-building of cultures through narrative and discursive practices (Clifford-Marcus, 1986; Schein, 1993). It is now recognized that cultures are situated, locally built, multiple and contradictory and that they are not whole, coherent systems (Martin, 1992; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992).

Professional development, working practices and culture are thus strongly interconnected concepts. Professional development is not to be intended as a process which involves single individuals as separate “entities” from their organizational context, nor do we think that organizational learning is a global process superimposed

² We do not intend entering the debate about the differences between being “academic researchers” or being “academic consultants”. Although we are aware that there is a strong debate in literature, for the purposes of this paper we will here refer to our role in the organizational case by using the short term “consultants”.

on people's everyday experience. Rather, professional development has to do with the relationship between the subject and his or her organizational context. Such a relationship is chiefly of a symbolic and cultural kind and it is displayed through people daily working practices.

People orient their professional practices in communication with the local (and often fragmented) cultural systems, which they contribute to create and re-create over the time.

As organizations are relatively unstable and organizational boundaries appear indefinite and porous, the seek to define managers professional practices has acquired heightened significance and complexity. The frequent organizational restructurings, that can occur in many forms, produce different organizational discourses and competing stories that sometimes fail to sustain coherent repertoires of practices and effective actions (Down and Reveley, 2009).

According to these premises, we reckon that sustaining managers' professional development means exploring and intervening on these complex discursive processes of constructing and reconstructing cultural and symbolic systems that orient and shape, as "theories-in-use" (Schön, 1983), their professional practices within the organizational contexts. In other words, promoting managers' professional development in our perspective means helping them better understand and try to modify their relationship with the organizational context, particularly through working on the symbolic and cultural domains that shape their working practices.

These premises induce to think that the process of managers' professional development may be chiefly a *reflexive process*. The concept of reflexivity refers mostly to the post-modernist perspective (Cunliffe, Easterby-Smith, 2004), and it indicates that knowledge is built inter-subjectively and discursively and in such a way that subject and object contribute to define one another. *Reflexivity* can be therefore defined as a "socially, situated, political, collective process" of being aware of the self-in-action (Reynolds and Vince, 2004, p. 6). Other authors (Bolan and Chamberlain, 2003) point out that reflexivity "involves *recognizing* the situatedness of knowledge and practice" (p. 216). Within the organizational and professional field, reflexivity thus becomes a way of co-researching on the cultural assumptions underlying one's other professional actions and experiences.

We recognize the relevance of the recent literature contributions on reflexivity in organizations. Through the reflexive capacity people may involve, understand, give meaning to what happen in their workplaces, and they can reflect on their strategies and embedded knowledge in the work daily practices. Nevertheless, if the reflexive capacity cannot be an optional feature anymore, because it assumes the value of a minimum requirement for the majority of the strategic organizational positions (necessary for being manager today), it is not alone sufficient to sustain the managerial level for the incoming problems and organizational complexities. Nowadays organizations have to cope with global economical interests, waves of crisis and recession, political decision often not clear but always pushed by pressing needs "to do something" or "to go in any direction" even if not agreed. In this scenario, the challenge is not only to understand, to share and to become aware of our context and of its intrinsic logic: the challenge is to agree on strategies and to proactively and cooperatively influence the organizational processes..

Recent publications present the required skills for sustaining organizations in the future. Weick and Sutcliffe, for instance, suggests the concepts of "mindfulness" and "resilience" (Weick and Sutcliffe 2007). We believe that the key-levers for the "tomorrow manager" are necessarily a reflexive capacity, but also the competence to build and to sustain networks (communities of practitioners) and the possibility to act

and influence collectively on problems. Specifically, we think that sustaining managerial development should nowadays regard the possibility to:

- help them identify and define their criticalities and problems
- help them research on their contexts (knowledge development) and on their local in-use cultures (the implicit premises that individually but also culturally determine the managerial practices)
- help them develop hypothesis on how to cope with problems and how to deal with criticalities of the organizational life
- help them influence their contexts (by modifying their practices and the diffuse cultures around them).

We assume that these aspects should not be conceived as individual expression of competences or managerial practices. Rather, they are processes that can be put in action only within collective contexts that permit an exchange and agreement on interpretations, knowledge, strategies and hypothesis about change and new actions. Organizations are socially built, and only socially can they be dynamically de-construct and re-construct according to the perceived needs. The community is a precious place where to find sustainment for the incoming challenges and for their interpretation and understanding. For this reason, a competitive pillar for organization is the construction and the maintenance of informal and situated networks for practitioners.

ACTION LEARNING AND BEYOND: THE ETHNO-NARRATIVE PROPOSAL

Traditionally, in order to sustain managerial development, many intervention strategies and settings have been tested and discussed. Action Learning represents in our view a particularly fruitful and useful tradition (Pedler, 1997). It in fact represents one of the most well-known and common used form of managerial development interventions. Aims of this approach is to sustain managerial development through a group process whereby participants develop reflection on their professional conducts and experiences in order to improve their effectiveness (Revans, 1983). Action Learning uses the small group setting both to enable each person to review the professional situations they have experienced, and to develop group reflexivity and learning.

Action Learning stems from the idea of “learning from what we do by reflecting on it and talking about it”, and develops a way for sustaining managerial learning (Revans, 1983).

A crucial ingredient of Action Learning is the “set”: the group of people engaged in learning from their actions. A fundamental assumption underlying Action Learning is that people are most likely to experience significant learning when working on issues of real evidence to their life: the reflexive community creates learning by sharing materials around events and problems that require actions on which it is necessary to take a position.

This is why common tools for working within an Action Learning perspectives are usually individual-centered and linked to the applicability in work situations that have been previously understood through the support of a group (the Action Learning set). Tools like case-study, business games, action plans, supervision groups, shadowing, facilitation sessions, plenary conferences (Boshyk, 2002; Nicolini et al. 2004), are frequently used for triggering action and learning, the two key terms of the approach.

Nevertheless, we observe that in the actual organizations it is rarely possible to define just “one problem” and to assume its challenges in a clear and neat manner. Most of the time people have different representations around problems, and problems are interconnected in a complex hank. Local culture also influences the perception of what

is the problem and for whom it is. Finally, managers need not only to give meaning to the problems they encounter, but also to imagine and test new work practices for actively influencing their realities.

This is why we claim that the traditional tools that we mentioned in Action Learning are not always enough. We reckon that there is more than ever the need to provide methods that may help managers analyze their professional practices by detecting their cultural and inter-subjective dimensions at play. It can be useful to experience working methods that sustain cycles of action, reflection and new interpretations by inviting participants to mutual research and experimentation on the field.

We feel promising tools, used in addition to the traditional ones, may complement Action Learning processes. In particular, in this paper we consider the use of narrative and ethnographical research methods. Although they seem not well explored in Action Learning tradition, we think that both the ethnographical and the narrative research methods, for their focus on the cultural and symbolic dimensions of the organizational processes and of people working practices, could provide promising lens to look at -and tools to promote- Action Learning paths towards professional and managerial development. If the ethnographic approach in effect traditionally focuses on the exploration of the cultural dimension, the narrative approach is centered on the texts, that are (inter)subjective and discursive productions, which shape the local cultures where they are in turn embedded and re-generated.

Our hypothesis is therefore that the combination of these two aspects, used within an Action Learning process, would be particularly powerful to sustain managers in being researching practitioners (learners) and authors (people able to influence) in their organizations.

Ethno-narratives writing in Action Learning settings

Hansen, in 2006, defined the “*Ethnonarrative approach*” as a combination of ethnographic methods in narrative research, with the aim to catch the sensemaking processes -built and made visible in people’s narrations about their working contexts- and the tacit knowledge not immediately visible because captured only through ethnographic observation.

Let’s firstly explore the meaning of the two components of the term *ethno-narrative*.

Bruner (1990) argues that creating stories is a human and natural response for making sense and comprehending the events in our lives. If the *narrative* creates meaning, constructing narratives is then a primary means of organizing. We agree with Hansen when he writes: “we make sense of our lives by creating narratives that explain our experiences. In doing so, we are constructing subjective realities about what happened, what is, and what will be. Narratives provide meaning by describing and creating the relationship between ideas which we act on. A narrative plot connects a series of actions and provides the rationale and expectations regarding those actions. Narrative theory stresses the role language plays in these processes, focusing on how people use discourse to build understandings and representations, make sense of their work lives, and to organize, interpret and influence each others’ actions.” (Hansen p. 1049-50)

What narrative research cannot easily reveal, i.e. the cultural and tacit knowledges, can be obtained through other methods, which traditionally went into the ethnographic tradition. “Context is material too, and the non-discursive makes meaning. Words are only half the story.” (Hansen 2006, p. 1072)

The need to combine the narrative tradition with the ethnographic one derives by the fact that meaning making must be embedded in a context (historical, social) for being understood. Ethnonarrative relies on ethnographic methods to get at phenomena that is outside of the organizational discourse, but is material (in both senses of the word) in

meaning making. (Hansen p. 1055). With this approach, it is possible to gain an appreciation of how context is used as material that goes into meaning making, but also show empirically how texts get their various meanings from the contexts in which they operate.

The heuristic power of this approach is therefore evident, as its potentiality in allowing richer understanding to organizational life.

We assume the challenge to adopt an ethnonarrative approach in an Action Learning setting because we believe it can be potentially fruitful for exploring and working on the cultural processes that produce and reproduce people professional practices.. Nevertheless, we suggest a different way to promote the synergy between the “narrative” and the “ethno” dimension. In particular, we propose and discuss the use of a tool that combines the two attentions: we name it the *ethno-narrative writing*. This tool represents for us the possibility to help practitioners explore and reflect on the culturally-made relationship between their practices and their context. We furthermore believe that the focus on people working practices can facilitate the passage from exploration and new understanding, to action. Before we present in details the specific case where our proposal was tested, it is important to mention the relevance of the *writing* exercise. One of the most important tools in accompanying people into an inquiry process, among other ways to create knowledge and data, is writing. “Writing is, and becomes, a form of knowing and discovery, a method of (auto) ethnographic inquiry – of personal–cultural–writing – that enables the inquirer to learn more about the ‘self’ and more about the research topic. In this way, “writing is thinking, writing is analysis, [and] writing is indeed a seductive and tangled method of discovery” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 967). We use writing to dismantle our conceptual frameworks and to build new knowledge from what we find. The most relevant function that *writing* permits is the possibility to produce and to communicate data on which people can return for analysis, discussion, interpretation. In this meaning we use writing to research, to share and to learn individually and collectively.

In the next part of the paper a case study is presented for the purpose to show the potential of Action Learning combined with the ethno-narrative approach in managerial development.

SUSTAINING MANAGERIAL DEVELOPMENT: THE CONTEXT OF THE INTERVENTION

The Action Learning intervention we present took place in a large organization in Northern Italy that manages networks of services and centers for child education in nursery schools, providing training, consultancy, support and innovation strategies.

The organization is a Federation that counts 160 schools distributed in different regional areas and managed by the central service. At the beginning of the intervention, each territorial area was coordinated by one pedagogical manager and one administrative manager. These two functions represented two cultural anchors: the pedagogical one, for which managing meant planning and supporting the educational activities, and the administrative one, in which managing meant providing financial and administrative consultancy and assistance in running the service.

Despite this structure had functioned for many years effectively, when the Federation became more complex and large, several limitations were recognized: a fragmented or chaotic communication between the administrative and pedagogical areas, too much bureaucratic relationships and lack of flexibility in setting and solving the critical situations.

The aim of the requested intervention was therefore to promote cultural change towards more integrated and shared management practices. It was decided to develop and support a new function: an unique manager as substitute of the two that were typical of the “old” organization. Such a new unique manager was called “Unique Coordinator” (UC).

At an organizational level, the mandate was to shift from a professional and organizational culture made of divisional logic and procedures towards a greater integration of work oriented towards a new professional approach and new ways of organizing. The aim was to transform the organizational culture progressively from bureaucratic stances to more responsible ones, from standardized duties to differentiated tasks and goals according to the specific local contexts (schools, social environment and organizational networks) and from individualistic work to integrated and shared processes. The change, therefore, would touch on the management of delicate balances, power dynamics, internal conflicts caused by the ignorance of the point of view of one side of the managerial function or another.

The intervention was aimed at testing the new managerial function by sustaining a pilot group of managers (7 managers selected out of 30) in restructuring and integrating their knowledge and practices according to the new organizational mandate. The idea was that, as new “unique coordinators”, they would have the two pedagogical and administrative perspectives in mind, with less overlap and better proximity to the stakeholders and direct clients of the service. This was to be a new profession with consequences in terms of not only new actions and practices to be implemented but also new responsibilities at a structural and organizational level.. The intervention went into the direction of helping the managers construct a more integrated cultural frame suitable for orienting their action within the changing organization. The Action Learning process was set up to provide the pilot group with the possibility to recognize the value and the richness of the practices they were experimenting within the new mandate, and share the knowledge and the know-how arising from their experience (Gherardi, 2006; Gherardi, 2008; Zucchermaglio, Alby, 2006). If the general vision was clear to the board of the organization, the final shape of the new role was still indefinite. Moreover, it must be considered that every UC had its own specific territory to manage (a territory made up of at least 5-10 schools to coordinate, different context requirements, a population of different families with diverse needs, and historical relationship with the local services), with its specific and local cultures and practical repertoires. Both practitioners and the board thus had to deal with a high level of uncertainty. Exploring, researching and discovering the new directions seemed the most fruitful attitudes to assume.

The paper now shows how the new professional challenge was faced by the managers involved, and specifically how the introduction of the ethno-narrative writing in Action Learning contributed to speed up the learning directed to the acquisition of new practices and competences, as networking and building communities of practitioners, and to the possibility to actively play for the benefit of those communities and the rest of the organization (becoming organizational authors).

THE ACTION LEARNING PATH

We are now going to present the different phases that constituted our process proposal, exploring in detail the methodological choices and their impact on the learning process. For each of the three main phases, the paper reports on:

Which hypothesis and aims have guided the consultants along the process?
What setting has been proposed?

What kind of methods and specific tools have been introduced?
What have been the participants' reactions?
What have been the obtained results?
What can the consultants comment on that specific work phase?

1) Initial phase (the first three meetings): “*The fatigue of reflexively re-discovering our managerial mandate*”

The hypothesis and aims that guided the consultants

The hypothesis that guided the Action Learning proposal came after an agreement with the Federation's board. The conviction was that it was necessary to activate a reflexive pathway for the pilot group of 7 managers, the new Unique Coordinators (UC). For the process to begin, an initial request for the managers was to recall some situations and critical incidents happened in real work life that they could share with colleagues.

The proposed setting

Ten monthly meetings were organized and articulated in different work sessions, each of it would collect stories and episodes for activating practitioners' sharing and mutual understanding, before passing on to actions (change). Following one of the principle of Action Learning, reflection would provoke ideas for changing, and every participants would be invited to put in action the agreed direction of change inspired by the group. Role of the external consultants, in this process, was to facilitate the critical reflection among people and to nurture feedback and suggestions on the situations/incidents reported. In this way, the inquiry process activated by participants would favor the on-the-field exploration of critical knots of the new UC function and the emersion of new actions and new management practices.

The methods and specific tools introduced

In this fifth phase, round table free discussion among participants and the deepening of everybody's specific work situation was the method used.

The participants' reactions

Although the possibility to share problems was perceived important by the managers, the first meetings were difficult because UCs found them hard to use. It was not clear to them what kind of material was more proper for such meetings, and how to elaborate on it effectively. The UCs had a constant flow of experience to report in that educational development initiative, and they did not know how to depict it or make it accessible to others. On-the-field experiences were reported in a confuse manner: it was not possible to stop the thinking on some of the most relevant junctions. Discussing problems seemed a too delicate process for jeopardizing it with confusion of tongues and references. Managers were irritated by this added fatigue.

“I cannot see how we can work together. Each of us has its own specific context to work in. We do not share much of it: we have specific daily problems related to the local cultures in which we have traditionally operated. Everyone has to survive in his context, with his

referring partners, with his routines. Are we sure that sharing our problems would be of any help?"

The obtained results

The themes raised in the three meetings concerned representations on the managerial mandate, tasks perceived as strategic in the new role, role change and its impact on schools and local partnership. These topics regard people's involvement and representation of the mandate, the influence of one's own history and cultural background, the networks activated along the professional life, personal needs and values in place.

The outcomes of the first three meetings therefore consisted in the "opening of the boiling pot": lots of confused situations emerged, where the former and the new functions fought in absence of any recipe or top down direction. Participants profited by sharing experiences but were not able to offer or receive applicable feedback to/from colleagues, because of the complexities of the situations brought.

The consultants comments on this specific work phase

From the beginning, the consultants understood that they had underestimated the different contexts and cultural aspects raised by the events reported. In the Federation there were territorial distances and cultural specificities that made the local educative services very different. Traditions, routines, local practices modify the way the local communities interpret the service and its management. UCs were challenged to be sensitive knower of the context and of the different relations instituted among the Federation and its schools.

UCs can in fact be consider local knowledge managers. Necessarily, the ways to interpret their mandate are different, reflecting the territorial differences in place. If this is a positive trait for a complex organization, it also requires to balance potential conflicting or not coherent interpretations. The challenge in such a context was to value the local practices as well as to allow not too fragmented positions and responses.

2) The intermediate phase (from the fourth to the seventh meeting): *The "research" turn. Searching practices through ethno-narrative writings.*

The hypothesis and aims that guided the consultants

The first proposal created a too highly de-structured and free setting. Because the new mandate strongly challenged the UCs and caused intense emotional responses, setting where everyone was free to bring any thoughts and fears might not be functional for mediating between thinking and action.

Consultants decided to change method: the complexity should have been put inside a frame for focusing attention and producing data analyzable by managers in their multifold aspects.

The proposed setting. The methods and specific tools introduced

The setting remained similar to the first three meetings and aligned to the Action Learning principles, i.e. the 7 managers of the pilot group met once a month in Action Learning set and, when alone at their workplace in the time from one meeting to the

following, they tried to put in action what they gained thanks to the colleagues' contributions. What did change were the tools to support their reflection and inquiry attitude around the role's challenges.

Two new tools were introduced, named the *ethno-narrative writing* and the *heuristic map*.

The ethno-narrative writing was aimed to orient the practitioners attention towards the daily work practices. As said before in the paper, the ethnographic method allows to detect data that have been observed, traced, sustained by researcher's documents and notes. Writing is instead a method for capturing personal data on which it is possible to orient reflexive thinking.

The turning point in the process was represented by the introduction of these two qualities combined. In table 1. the tool is described in its part.

Table 1. The Ethno-narrative writing

Table 1 - *The ethno- narrative writing*

For exercising on ethno- narrative writing, we created a frame composed by four columns that requested different attentions by the managers.

In the first column, the “*Critical events column*” the participants are invited to describe in details a situation or an event (related to the new role) that requested all their energies and thinking.

Writing the first column should consider “fresh events”, recently happened and narrated as freely as possible without any brain mediation. Participants should write down the details of what happened and the specific aspects or condition of the context. It is important that the event is also described in terms of the place where it happened, the actors involved, the organizational feature at that time and the contextual characteristics that will be later useful to explain what happened and why.

The second column is the “*On the spot column*”/ “*Immediate column*”. In this column participants can express their emotional state influenced by the situation. What were the feelings activated by the event? What was the personal reaction upon the critical event?

The third column, on the contrary, asks participants to express a sort of cold-press. The “*Cold-press column*” / “*Ex post column*” is the place where participants may report their interpretation and thoughts after a certain time from the event. This exercise aims to develop reflexive thinking based on the knowledge possessed and revised as related to the event.

The fourth column is the “*Group comments column*”, a specific space where participants registered comments, feedback, interpretation and considerations emerged from the Action Learning group meetings. The fourth column has been compiled only after the discussion of the critical event with colleagues.

Here is an example of the ethno-narrative writing exercise proposed to the UCs:

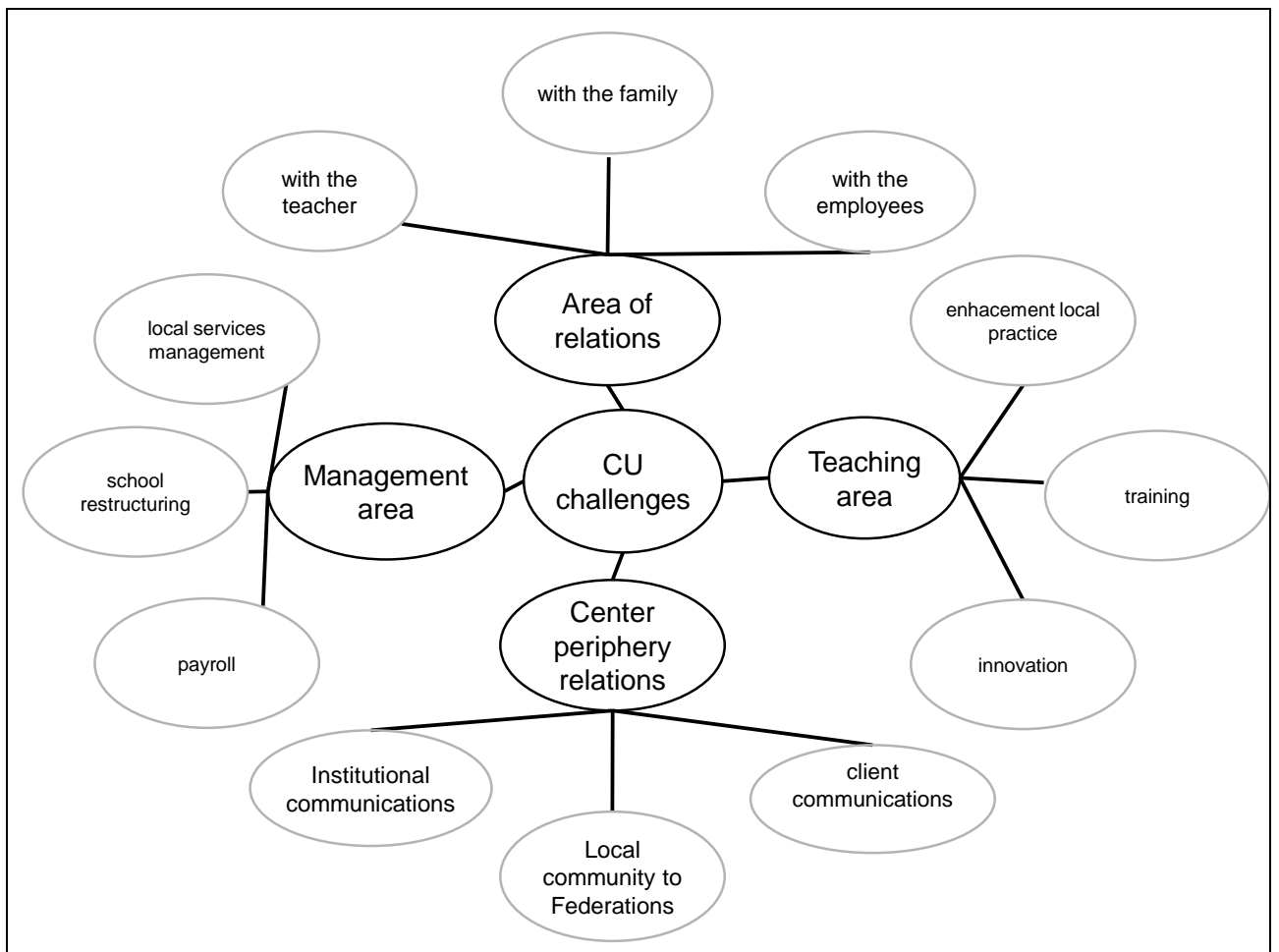
Critical events	<i>On the spot/ Immediate</i>	<i>Cold-press/ Ex post</i>	<i>Group comments</i>

During the third meeting, consultants invited participants to consider the above ethno-narrative writing proposal, and suggested to compile one writing every week per one month. From the third to the fourth meeting the seven UCs produced four ethno-narrative writings per person. Before the following (fourth) meeting they were asked to select the most significant writing out of four, to send it to the other colleagues and consultant and to present its content during the Action Learning meeting. Reading the others’ writings permitted to open an individual space of reflection before joining the group. Presenting and discussing the contents in front of the colleagues, instead, permitted to open up a group space for reflection.

The heuristic map is an artifact that consultants proposed at the fourth and following Action Learning meetings. Due to the managers’ confusion in the first phase of the process, the idea was to orient the reading of the rich and complex incoming data. Referred situations and critical events, keywords utilized, questions and crucial themes

reported by participants were positioned on a map which was named heuristic for its potential in developing new connections and interpretations. (see table 2)

Table 2 Example of the Heuristic Map



This represented a new work phase that accompanied the rest of the process (from the fourth meeting to the seventh). From a methodological point of view, every group meeting focused on 4 ethno-narrative writings and permitted their analysis. The new phase entailed a more active role of consultants in feeding back the collected data and the calling of participants’ engagement towards those data for further analysis.

The participants’ reactions

The map had a relevant function in the process. It put in words recurrent problems and issues that characterized the work practices. It made visible that the complexity and apparent diversity of those problems were actually experienced in the same way by other colleagues –although with a few different contextual elements. It made also visible, on the contrary, that similar situations were managed differently by colleagues, thus suggesting new coping strategies.

Map caused intense emotional responses by the managers, because it was seen as a synthesis of the challenges they have had to cope with.

“The possibility to work on ethno-narrative writings helped us better know our work. Ex post comments are opportunities to take a distance

from the emotional reactions experienced and help in the analysis. And the Map...it simply says to me that there is somebody who recognizes the mess I am experiencing!"

"Since we have been concentrating on writings, our group is improving its capacity to get in depth to the situations described. We have a great lot of data, and we ca play with analysis and reading"

The obtained results

Reading the ethno-narrative writings, discussing the heuristic maps, building new social discourses derived by sharing the findings, caused a major implication and clearness of topics. The author of the writing could thus receive feedback from colleagues in the group and from consultants. At the same time every author pulled colleagues to implication on his/her own context characteristics and specific problems.

Round table discussion favored the exchange among participants in terms of similarities, subjectivities and cultural differences in role representation and in the perceived challenges, strategies to cope with local critical events. It was a way to make local knowledges emerge, and to canalize them into a new feeling of being a community in research within the same organizational work-frame and vision.

For better representing the general obtained results for this phase of the process, we attach an ethno-narrative writing filled in by participants after individual reading and group discussion.

Critical events	<i>On the spot/ Immediate</i>	<i>Cold-press/ Ex post</i>	<i>Group comments</i>
<p>Monday morning. I go to the school as every Monday. There is one thing that I am still preoccupied of, form last week.</p> <p>This year one class risks to not be activated because there is insufficient number of pupils. The secretary is waiting for reactions. The President...well, it is better I don't even mention how disappointed he was.</p> <p>The secretary tells me that 149 pupils enrolled. 7 are still missing, and they will make a difference in terms of personnel employed and class start up.</p> <p>I analyze with her the list of children names that so far have not presented their enrollment form.</p> <p>We stop looking at that</p>	<p>I am too frustrated by the fact that every time there is something which is not under my control and I have to be responsible of the consequences in front of other people.</p> <p>Pupils enrollment is not my duty! Why do I have to pay the consequences?!</p>	<p>What could I have done differently? I know there are some information that do not circulate very well. Maybe it is a matter of making possible the communication channel...Those families, that did not enroll their children, did they have the right information about time, requirements, alternatives?</p> <p>If I was a family of those, I would complain about the scarce level of circulating documents... Well, but the secretary should have done something. Or myself?</p> <p>Does this new UC role mean that we have to be more proactive? What does it mean in this specific situation?</p>	<p>It may be necessary that we think of our role as the one of an entrepreneur.</p> <p>Entrepreneur cannot wait for clients to come, he/she has to go to them and attract them all.</p> <p>It is his/her responsibility. Nobody should be blame apart from him/her.</p> <p>The image of the school is what we should be concerned about mostly. This will attract families, that are the direct clients of our service.</p> <p>In group the discussion suggests some alternatives of action: And if it was you to go to the families, knocking at their door and providing information about the</p>

<p>list when we see there is nothing we can do. I call the President (with anger!).</p>			<p>enrollment of their pupils? A door to door function, for example.... And if it was you to post up some other necessary information at the school door? Or in the local newspaper? Phoning the families! That could also be an alternative.</p>
---	--	--	---

In this example it is quite evident that the first column is radically different from the positions emerged in the fourth. A progressive level of action is conceived thanks to the exchange with colleagues. Being able to invent alternative ways in being manager does not happen naturally or spontaneously by reflecting on problems. Making these alternatives “good practices” to be implemented, and pushing them into the Federation’s code of action or philosophy, is a precious process that can emerge only when individuals have a community of reference behind them as support and as steering committee for the most fundamental things to sponsor.

The consultants comments on this specific work phase

Given the overall good appreciation of the use of ethno-narrative writings, the consultants decided to propose their utilization for the entire central phase of the process. Starting with the fifth meeting, every month the UCs were asked to compile one writing for continue discussing. The emerging issues served to define the cultural anchorage of the Federation, and to include them into progressive definition of the new repertoire of managerial practices.

3) The third and final phase: *Recognizing and managing critical challenges. New practices for new managers.*

The hypothesis and aims that guided the consultants

Consultants staff recognized that UCs were ready to a step forward in their elaboration. Once they became strong enough to cope with their new practices and challenges, thanks to the support of colleagues in Action Learning, they were ready to define the centrality of the new mandate for the Federation’s purposes and reorganization. The organizational challenge was to use the support to the pilot group of first 7 new UCs, for a cascading effect to the rest of the coordinators. For obtaining this, the seven managers had to explicit in which direction their practices were in line with the Federation’s service philosophy and values, and what were their efficiency and effectiveness. If in the first and second phase the aim was to provide support to individuals’ situations or perceived problems, in the third one the process should have aimed to the overall managerial functions needed by the organization.

The proposed setting

The former setting was maintained, but the effort was to lead managers to new considerations in terms of authors and organizers of the Federation’s future. Discussion raised with the help of the research tools, was canalized in a new map that was progressively built and confirmed in the last two meetings.

The methods and specific tools introduced

The new map was named “Mandate dimensions Map”. Aim of it was to highlight the critical areas of the service that the Federation had to provide, and the characteristics of the former coordinator mandate compared to the new ones.

Table 2 - Mandate dimensions Map		
Critical area	Characteristic of the former mandate	Characteristic of the new mandate
<i>Mandate interpretation</i>	Fulfilment and obedience to the Federation’s command	Interpretation Proactive behaviour
<i>Management functions</i>	Top-down transmission of the Federation’s orders to territorial schools Logic of control and technical supervision for the schools (coordinator seen as content expert)	Management of exchange processes between the Federation and the schools. Best practices must circulate for becoming everybody’s property. Logic of information, circulation and support for learning and for process consultancy.
<i>Sources of authority</i>	Formal legitimation by the Federation	Negotiated and shared legitimation, constructed with local stakeholders and colleagues.

The participants’ reactions

Participants reacted to the new group functioning and to the new product (the Mandate dimensions Map) with enthusiasm. The Action Learning group became the collective subject able to evaluate, integrate or change the managerial practices highlighted in the writings.

Organizational change was interpreted as well as managerial change.

The obtained results

Group was used not only for sharing ideas and solutions, but also for validating and proposing new repertoires of practices to be implemented in the new managerial function. Main first result was the possibility to act as authors of the new mandate. Second result was that this was possible only because a network of colleagues (a community in research) had been activated and trusted.

The consultants comments on this specific work phase

The third phase ended up with an evaluation of the overall process, and with new ideas to be exported in the Federation. The seven UCs had the duty to inform the organization and the rest of their colleagues about the managerial development investment and its effects. Cascading effect had to be built in the future, with the support of the Federation. The group also suggested a few ways to continue their learning in the distance and along the time. These are the challenges that the Federation is still investing on nowadays.

In Table 3 we summarize the key-elements and phases of the process as it happened.

	Introduction of the ethno-narrative writing							New maps for new managerial mandate		
	Initial phase <i>The fatigue of reflexively re-discovering our managerial mandate</i>			The intermediate phase <i>The research turn. Searching practices through ethno-narrative writings.</i>				The final phase <i>Recognizing and managing critical challenges. New practices for new managers</i>		
	1° meeting	2° meeting	3° meeting	4° meeting	5° meeting	6° meeting	7° meeting	8° meeting	9° meeting	10° meeting
Hypotheses and aims	Activating a reflexive pathways allows the group to investigate how each manager is facing the new mandate and building new managerial practices			Because the new role strongly challenged the UCs and caused intense emotional responses, a non-structured setting may not be functional. A change of method is required				Introducing change in managerial practices, according to the new mandata		
Setting	Action learning			Introduction of both group and individual spaces for analysing the managerial practices through more structured research tools				New leadership functions		
Methods and tools	Analysis of managerial practices through a free discussion			Ethno-narrative writings Heuristic map				"Role dimensions map"		
Participants' reactions	Low commitment			More commitment in exploring each other's writings				Enthusiasm in trying to modify the managerial practices		
Results	"Opening of the boiling pot"			Deep exchange of experiences and interpretations				Validating and implementing new repertoires		
Comments	The emerging etherogeneity requires to balance conflicting interpretations, in order to identify a common repertoire of practices			For the vauable results obtained, the use of the ethno-narrative writing is maintained along the whole Action Learning process				Planning "cascading" pathways		

Table 3. The process, its key-elements and phases

DISCUSSION

The Action Learning was set up to help managers face the challenges of a new mandate, that required to integrate pedagogical and administrative functions within their organization. The analysis presented above has highlighted, from the beginning to the end of the process, the setting and multiple tools that were proposed to sustain the managerial development toward such a direction.

Main outcomes were:

- the possibility, for the managers involved, to better focus and set the common problems and the critical issues related to the new mandate
- the foundation of a community of managers able to co-research around their problems and their practices reflexively, by sharing not only interpretations and suggestions but also a renewed repertoire of knowledge and professional practices that they could have in common.

- the concrete put in action of such a new and shared repertoire of managerial knowledge and practices.

We reckon that the proposal of a research setting and research methods and tools -more specifically, the ethno-narrative writings- within the Action Learning path, has played a meaningful role in achieving these outcomes. The use of ethno-narrative method, in effect, seemed to increase and better sustain the effectiveness of the Action Learning process in three ways:

1. In helping managers better explore and focus on their problems
2. In facilitating the foundation of a community of researching practitioners
3. In orienting and sustaining managers' actions

In the following paragraphs we describe each of these.

1. Helping managers better explore and focus their problems

The ethno-narrative writings let the managers research around their practices from a new and valuable standpoint. As a matter of fact, it gave them the possibility to better focus the critical aspects of their new mandate, by helping them highlight both the cultural and the psycho-social dimensions of their daily practices.

More specifically, the writings allowed to collect and to display a repertoire of critical incidents related to the managers' interpretation of their new mandate. They also allowed to order such criticalities and to start up a process of systematic and progressive construction of a map of the most important and critical practices related to their mandate.

The joint production and analysis of the writings, together with the consultants' presentation of a report summarizing the most significant and common themes, provided managers with data and interpretations suitable for seeing more clearly the "theories in use" embedded in their practices. It also offered them the opportunity to deal with and to discuss their differences, as well as to re-structure interpretations and new orientations to action. Such an effort had a great impact, for it allowed to explicitly prioritize both the challenges and the new requirements provided by the reorganization. Furthermore, the ethno-narrative writings, in integrating the ethno and the narrative aspects, allowed managers to research both on the cultural and on the psycho-social side of the "theories" embedded in their professional practices. Such a tool therefore sustained the emergence of important information around the cultural and local contexts where managers operated, as well as around their personal interpretation of the managerial mandate. This allowed the group not to lose neither the cultural nor the subjective nature of the problems and practices described by each manager. It finally helped them produce more complex and articulated pictures of their situation. Moving from it, managers developed a deeper awareness and clearer stance of the organizational requirements.

2. Facilitating the foundation of a community of researching practitioners

The ethno-narrative writings facilitated managers' team working, and helped them build a community of practitioners, active and committed in co-researching around their practices and in elaborating more shared and renewed repertoires.

More specifically, the proposal of writing not only the critical episodes (first column), but also the emotional reactions as well as the individual and group interpretations of the incidents (second-third and fourth column), allowed the generation of comments and reflections which were visible, shareable and dialectically usable by the group.

Given the heterogeneity and the richness of managers' professional stories, as well as of the local sub-cultures and contexts within the Federation, the ethno-narrative tool allowed to disclose such a variety and make it visible to the managers' eyes and to the rest of the organization's, thus generating a deeper understanding of the different values and representations. This was an important milestone that originated a higher confrontation around the managerial practices, within a climate of progressive reciprocal legitimation.

From such a work, therefore, managers could trace, systematize and validate their interpretations about the critical incidents, as well as their new agreements towards a more shared set of beliefs, values, practices. Each of them could trace and benefit from the group's suggestions and comments, in order to re-orient their practice within their specific context. They also traced the agreements related to the foundation of a new and more integrated system of languages, knowledge and practices shared by the emerging community.

The dialogical and recursive use of the writings, the joint analyses and the presentation of summaries, reports and maps, helped managers, as co-researchers, commit themselves in a cooperative process where they recognized each others as sources of knowledge and support. In this sense the writings sustained the reflexive process, based on a joint analysis of the common problems and on the generation of new shared understandings and possibilities of actions.

3. Orienting and sustaining managers' actions

Finally, the ethno-narrative writings, within the Action Learning setting, facilitated a process where managers built new agreements and could re-position themselves with regard to their mandate and their professional practices. They found opportunities to support each other towards the implementation of such agreements and new stances.

The fourth column, written after the group discussion of the writings, was in particular recognized as the most valuable leverage which facilitated the possibility to put in action the knowledge and the indication generated. As a matter of fact, the written artefact traced reflections and orientations arising from the group and gave more emphasis and validity to the new managers' positions towards their mandate.

Furthermore, the ethno-narrative writing revealed itself not only as a tool for collecting data and interpretations related to the "there and then" of the organizational and managerial field. It was also used as a tool for generating data around the "here and now" of the discussions and the agreements within the Action Learning process. It therefore allowed to collect and integrate information around the managers' daily practices "within their contexts", as well as information around the managers' research practices within the Action Learning context. It finally provided non-ambiguous orientations, and was recognized as an useful set of evidences from which the process of researching and reflecting together as a community of practitioners could start and was sustained, even after the end of the intervention.

Within a long-term perspective, the writings could be also used as evidence that periodically reminded managers' need of confrontation and legitimated the maintenance of settings where they could re-discuss and offer reciprocal support around the shared repertoire of practices. They finally provided a basis for further dissemination of such a repertoire within the organization, in order to promote awareness and involvement among the other managers towards their new mandate.

While the proposal of ethno-narrative tools provided the Action Learning process with the advantages and opportunities described above, we are well aware of some limitations and criticalities concerning its application.

The first criticality is related to the time and the efforts required for sustaining the research work. Editing an ethno-narrative writing takes at least one hour, and a great commitment in breaking up the work-flow, in reflecting around meaningful episodes, in focusing and writing down descriptions, reactions and reflections.

We reckon that in our case such an effort was made possible thanks to several conditions: the Action Learning was set up in an educational organization, whose managers were familiar with constant “training on the job” approach; they trusted the consultants that had been introduced to the Federation long time before the intervention; and had, for their professional humanistic culture, a good attitude and passion for writing. In other contexts and with other participants these facilitating conditions should not be taken for granted; nevertheless they can be considered and carefully evaluated.

Furthermore, from an organizational and logistic perspective, the proposal of an Action Learning setting focused on ethno-narrative writings and, more generally, on a cooperative research process, requires time (a great number of days and hours, even for the back office work of reading all the participants’ writings products) and resources (economic, technological, etc). This availability must be negotiated in every single situation.

Finally, working with the ethno-narrative tools requires participants to trust each others, the organization and the consultants. A minimum trust is necessary, in effect, to avoid the risk that managers commit themselves only superficially in writing and dealing with their real problems, as in the case of suspicion or worry in being evaluated or in losing competitiveness. In competitive organizations, or where the organizational change is perceived as too threatening for managers’ survival, it seems necessary to build a higher degree of trust and psychological security before proposing the described setting and tools. Consultants are therefore required to evaluate and to eventually discuss with their clients and their participants such conditions, in order to stipulate a psychological agreement and to safeguard the consultancy process from mystifications and perverse dynamics.

Conclusion

The paper discussed the challenge to sustain managerial development by moving from the hypothesis that this should involve opportunities, for managers, to experience reflexive processes and the creation of “communities of researching practitioners”.

An Action Learning process is presented, described in line with its traditional principles but with a new methodological attention. The paper explored and analyzed specifically the proposal of research, narrative and ethnographic methods to sustain managers to the incoming organizational challenges. It did so through an organizational case, entering the details of the phases and the use of tools proposed. More specifically, the use of an ethno-narrative tool is discussed, as well as its effectiveness in sustaining managerial development. We can here briefly summarize some aspects:

1. The ethno-narrative writing *oriented the group work*. It allowed an ordered emersion of local knowledge arranged for discussion.
2. The process therefore provided *a new individual and group reflexive space*, necessary for long-life learning. Thinking activity became oriented and everyone could profit, lightening the burden of everyday managerial difficulties.
3. The ethno-narrative writing constituted a precious research tool and methodology for a new managerial feature: *the role of co-researcher* of the managers, accompanied by

colleagues and consultants. Managers became protagonist of their own inquiry. They not any more waited for somebody to propose a solution, by engage themselves in its search.

The new process was that participants focused together on specific issues, and became a work team in defining their new role and the partners they could consider for their tasks.

4. The “researching managers” became *authors of their own work practices*: they gained responsibility and appreciation about the innovative responses that they could find to recurrent or unexpected problems. They also learnt to build new partnership and network activities for not responding only individually to their challenges.

The paper ends up with the analysis of the advantages and limitations of these uses and the conditions for making the best out of this method.

References

- Bolan, B., Chamberlain, K. (2003), Professionalization and reflexivity in critical health psychology practice, *Journal of Health Psychology*, 8, 215-218
- Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Harward: Harward College.
- Clifford, J. – Marcus, G. E. (Eds.) (1986): *Writing culture: the poetics and politics of ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cunliffe, A.L., Easterby-Smith, M. (2004), “From reflection to practical reflexivity: Experiential learning as lived experience”. In REYNOLDS, M., VINCE, R. (a cura di), *Organizing Reflection*. Ashgate, Aldershot.
- Czarniawska-Joerges, B. (1992): *Exploring Complex Organizations. A Cultural Perspective*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.
- Down, S., Reveley, J. (2009), Between narration and interaction: Situating first-line supervisor identity work. *Human Relations*, 62 (3), 379-401
- Easterby Smith, M. (1997). Disciplines of organizational learning. *Human Relations*. 50 (1), 1085-1113.
- Easterby Smith, M., Thorpe, R. and Jackson, P. (2008). *Management research*. London: SAGE
- Gherardi, S. (2008). Situated Knowledge and Situated Action. In D. Barry & H. Hansen, :*The SAGE Handbook of New Approaches in Management and Organization* (pp. 516-525). London: Sage Publications.
- Gherardi, S. (2008). Situated Knowledge and Situated Action. In D. Barry & H. Hansen, :*The SAGE Handbook of New Approaches in Management and Organization* (pp. 516-525). London: Sage Publications.
- Hansen, H. (2006). The ethnonarrative approach. *Human Relations*, 59 (8), 1049-1075.
- Martin, J. (1992) *Cultures in Organizations. Three Perspectives*. Oxford University Press, New York.

- Nicolini, D.; Sher, M.; Childerstone, S. & Gorli, M. (2004) 'In search of the "structure that reflects"'. Promoting organisational reflection practices in a UK Health Authority', In R. Vince and M. Reynolds (eds.), *Organizing Reflection*. Ashgate, UK (pp. 81-104)
- Nonaka I., Takeuchi, H. (1995). *The knowledge-creating company*. Oxford: University Press
- Pedler, M. (1997) *Action Learning in Practice. 3rd Edition*, Aldershot, Gower.
- Revens (1983) *The ABC of Action Learning*. Republished 1998. London: Lemos & Crane
- Reynolds, M., & Vince R. 2004. Organizing reflection: An introduction. In Reynolds, M., & Vince, R. (Eds.) *Organizing reflection*. London: Ashgate.
- Richardson, L. & St. Pierre, E.A. (2005). Writing: a method of inquiry. In N. Denzin and I. Lincoln (eds) *Handbook of qualitative research*. London: SAGE
- Schein, E.H. (1993) On dialogue, culture and organizational learning. *Organizational Dynamics*, 22, pp. 40-51.
- Schön, D. (1983), *The Reflective Practitioner*, Basic Books, New York, NY.
- Senge, P.M. (1990). *The fifth discipline*. New York, NY: Doubleday
- Weick, K. E. and Sutcliffe, K.M. (2007). Managing the unexpected. Jossey-Bass
- Winter, S. (2003). Understanding dynamic capabilities. *Strategic Management Journal*, 24(10), 991-995.
- Zucchermaglio, C., & Alby, F. (2006). *Psicologia culturale delle organizzazioni*. Roma: Carocci