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Two ways to support reflexivity: Teaching managers to fulfil an undefined role : 'A problem cannot be solved at the same level of thinking that created it' —Albert Einstein

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What is This?

Two ways to support reflexivity: Teaching managers to fulfil an undefined role

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—Albert Einstein

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Abstract

A current challenge to public managers is the lack of a well-defined role. How can masters programmes prepare managers to live up to an undefined function? In this paper we argue that the lack of role description enhances the need for reflexivity and we show how it is done at Master in Educational Management (MEM). MEM provides the participating managers with a new language that can give them a critical distance to the overload of expectations they meet at work; and MEM teaches participants to translate this new language into practice. The pedagogy used for this is labelled 'experimental management'. This requires participants to conduct experiments in their own organization, to reflect on and analyse their experiences with concepts from the curriculum. While the new language and the experimental teaching format are difficult, participants learn a reflexive practice that can enable them to live up to an undefined role.

Introduction

Since the 1980s, expectations of the public manager have increased dramatically and the role of the public manager is no longer well defined (Rennison, 2007b). Consequently, a current challenge for MPA programmes is how to teach administrators to live up to an undefined role. Moreover, public managers face increasing levels of uncertainty and

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complexity in problem solving. To paraphrase Einstein, public managers need new levels of thinking in order to come up with new solutions to these complex problems. The question is how do we teach these new levels of thinking? So far, the answer to both these problems has been reflection and especially reflexivity (e.g. Cunliffe and Jun, 2005; Meer and Marks, this issue).

In this paper, we want to dig a bit deeper by discussing what reflection and reflexivity may entail and how they can be taught. We share our experiences gained from teaching a masters programme in educational management (MEM).[1] MEM is a 2-year, part-time degree programme directed at managers involved in educational management from private, municipal and governmental institutions. Some 20–25 students are enrolled every year. The teaching format comprises a combination of lectures, group work and individual supervision of essays. The programme has several similarities with MPA programmes but is focused towards education. However, our way of teaching reflection and reflexivity may differ from many MPA programmes as we do not see this as an extra-curricular activity; rather, certain parts of the curriculum and certain teaching methods are means to support reflection and reflexivity. In the following, we focus on this curriculum and the pedagogy that we find relevant for teaching reflection and reflexivity. Both the curriculum and the pedagogy are demanding and challenging for teachers as well as students; consequently we will address both the benefits and the difficulties these entail.

One way to provide public managers with a new level of thinking is by providing them with a new language. At MEM, this is done during the first term 'current challenges in educational management'. The new language is a new way of understanding how problems are discursively construed through articulation. We teach participants to be critically reflexive by analysing how ideals, routines and expectations condition their work as managers. It is a 'reflexive' curriculum that can be used for making analyses of problems at a different level, but not used directly for providing solutions. Nevertheless, by phrasing problems in new ways, new solutions and/or strategies can be developed, if not in unequivocal ways. The second term offers a more conventional curriculum concerning different theoretical understandings of organizations. After the first two terms, some participants feel slightly paralysed in the sense that they can offer critical analyses of problems in their organizations, but can be afraid of acting as they can see how any solution is also a powerful construction of relations and subject positions, and that any solution they make can be subject to a critical analysis. Therefore, the third term is designed to make participants both act and analyse. The third term is labelled 'experimental management'; during this participants carry out experiments in their organizations with a goal of translating reflexivity in theory into reflexivity in and on practice. Participants spend their fourth term on writing their masters dissertation, drawing on elements from former terms that they find relevant. It is the curriculum of the first term and the experimental teaching format of the third term that we find important in relation to reflection and reflexivity, therefore we will analyse these in detail.

In order to do so, the remainder of the paper is structured as follows: First, we examine the need for the reflexive public manager. Then follows a discussion of the concepts of reflexivity and translation; concepts that are important for understanding the

goals of MEM. The third section describes methods and empirical material. In the fourth section we make our analyses, using curriculum and pedagogy as a means for reflexivity. Finally, there are some concluding remarks.

If reflexivity is the solution, then what is the problem?

Expectations of the public manager, at least in Denmark,[2] have exploded since the 1980s (Rennison, 2007b). One of the current expectations is that the manager not only reflects on the legitimacy of decisions or the efficiency of the chosen solutions, but also reflects on the consequences of the way that he/she reflects. Management has changed from being a predetermined role to a process of self-constitution specific to situations and persons. There is no solid anchoring, and there is never a clear description of roles with solid expectations that can be tied to the exercise of management. Up until the 1980s, the public manager was described as a planner, and as a planner the manager was expected to ask him/herself whether the problem that he/she had been set to solve was solved in a professionally defensible and responsible manner.

From the 1980s onwards, a decoupling took place between management and profession and a replacement of the previously dominant planning ideal. Management was no longer regarded as an external reference but perceived as a constant self-referential process of self-construction. What to do then? The solution lay, as Rennison writes,

> in a semantic trick employed in the discourse: positioning management as a *situation- and person-dependent entity*, whereby managers themselves determine what management is. In an over-crowded semantic field with a surplus of meanings and formations of expectation, the trick is to position the manager as the individual responsible for continuously creating management. (Rennison, 2007b: 22)

The public manager is asked to constantly reflect upon the way he/she creates him/herself as a manager. What earlier could be described as an institution with given goals and liberty of method is today described as an organization in constant change, and the manager is asked to reflect on how he/she creates the organization and its relation to the surroundings, the employees, the users, even the superiors. Reflexivity becomes a central part of the manager's role. The responsible manager does not only solve the problems; the responsible manager asks him/herself whether the problem is formulated in the best way, and what effects are created with this formulation of the problem. Hence, Rennison's analysis shows that reflection is no longer sufficient for a public manager to live up to expectations; reflexivity is needed.

This is a challenge for masters programmes; how to prepare managers to live up to an undefined role? The lack of role description enhances the need for reflection and reflexivity. The ambition of MEM is not only to prepare managers to live up to an undefined role; we also aim at providing them with a language that can give them critical distance from the overload of expectations they meet at work. Through the curriculum we teach reflexivity by asking both 'what are the current conceptualizations?' and 'what are the effects of the current conceptualizations?'

Terminology: Reflexivity and translation

We are inspired by Cunliff and Jun (2005) and their distinction between reflection and reflexivity, as well as their types of reflexivity. In this article, we use reflection to denote the ability to reason without questioning basic assumptions. As Cunliff and Jun write: 'Reflection is traditionally defined as a mirror image – an objectivist ontology based on the idea that there is an original reality we can think about and separate ourselves from' (Cunliff and Jun, 2005: 226). Reflection is relevant for example when you want to solve a problem and reflect on different possible solutions. Reflexivity, in contrast, we use to denote the process in which we reflect on the consequences of our reflections and on how articulations create reality. This can be self-reflexive or critically reflexive. At MEM, we do not work with self-reflexivity per se; we focus on critical reflexivity. However, working with critical reflexivity may lead to self-reflexivity in some instances. In an MEM context, critical reflexivity is inspired by postmodern, systems' theoretical and post-structuralist authors, such as Jacques Derrida, Niklas Luhmann and Michel Foucault, all of whom analyse how the social is constructed through articulation. Hence, critical reflexivity takes the productive force of articulation into account. Reflexivity makes it possible to ask 'what is the problem represented to be?' (Bacchi, 2009).

However, ambition goes beyond this: We do not want the students to sit at a distance and ask 'what is the problem represented to be?'; we also want reflexivity to have an impact in practice. How can we conceptualize this? Some researchers use the concept 'transfer' to denote the transmission of knowledge from the classroom to the workplace, hence from theory to practice. Despite the extensive literature on transfer (e.g. Billing, 2007; Burke and Hutchins, 2007; Leimbach, 2010; Yamnil and McLean, 2001), there are still discussions on the difference between learning and transfer. Some authors see transfer as existing when students have learned something as 'deeply' as possible (e.g. Billing, 2007), hence as a type of learning. We find it useful to distinguish between learning and transfer, because transfer is related to the issue of recognition. The student has to recognize that a problem can be solved with a certain method or that a certain concept could be relevant for analysing a situation, i.e. that the problem is similar to the problems presented in a teaching context – this is something different from learning.

Transfer is about building bridges – bridges between knowledge from teaching/training to the learner's practice (Evans, 1999). Yet our experiences from teaching at MEM show that transfer is not quite as smooth as the transfer research would lead us to believe. We find that the concept transfer does not capture what happens between our teaching and the students' application. The concept 'transfer' implies that what is taught is the same as what is being perceived by the students, that knowledge is transported from teacher to students, and that knowledge is being transferred from the teaching context to the work situation without being altered. We prefer the concept 'translation' instead of 'transfer', to emphasize the creative and constructive work being done by the 'receiver'. As Jacques Derrida states: 'Translation augments and modifies the original, which, insofar as it is living on, never ceases to be transformed and to grow' (Derrida, 1985: 122). Moreover, transfer research concerns the building of bridges between theory and practice, but, especially in adult education, links from practice to theory are equally

important. We find that the concept of translation includes the multitude of ways bridges between practice and theory can be built. Therefore, we employ the concept 'translation' in the rest of the article.

Method and empirical material

There are three types of empirical material used in this paper: eight qualitative interviews with former students, essays written by students at the third term 'experimental management', and participatory observations. We did not employ systematic observations for this paper. We did, however, make written observations of the classes in order to have information for the improvement of future versions of 'experimental management'. The interviews were made with this paper in mind. They consisted of five interviews conducted face to face and three telephone interviews. Each interview lasted about an hour.

By studying the very degree programme we are teaching, we are insiders in relation to our research topic. This raises a number of issues regarding positionality and power, especially in regard to conducting interviews. Being an insider is not unusual within educational research (see e.g. Sikes and Potts, 2008). According to Adriansen and Madsen (2009), there are both advantages and disadvantages when conducting research from the inside. Being an insider in relation to one's interviewees gives the advantage of having a shared history and a close knowledge of the context. The disadvantages concern power relations and presupposed shared understanding. We have tackled the disadvantages by being aware of the insider role from the outset and addressing the questions of positionality and power relations both during interviews and during the analysis. In the interview situation, we were conscious to choose locations and physical set-ups which did not resemble the supervision or exam situation.

Two ways to support reflexivity

Our analysis is divided into three sections. The first concerns the reflexive curriculum which provides the participating managers with a new language that can give them critical distance from the overload of expectations they meet at work. The second concerns the pedagogy labelled 'experimental management', which provides participants with opportunities to translate this new language into practice. In the third section, we contextualize our findings and point to some of the difficulties we have experienced with these two ways of supporting reflexivity.

Using curriculum as a means of reflexivity

The MEM curriculum consists of organizational and management theory and a critical perspective on the Danish educational system. The critical perspective entails analyses and diagnostics of the present with a historical perspective showing that the present is not 'natural' but has changed. The analyses and diagnostics also have a common theoretical approach in post-structuralism and/or systems theory. This means that they are not theories based on overall connections but are analyses that ask how our understandings of overall

connections construct reality. Thus, it is not obvious how the students can use what they learn, because they learn how to analyse social constructions and how to formulate problems in new ways. What they get is not 'how-to-do' knowledge but concepts and a language in which they can describe their challenges and formulate problems. The chosen 'diagnoses of the present' are not constant; some of those from the curriculum of autumn 2012 are:

- Simultaneous logics in governing. Focus is on the relation between institution and administration. A relation characterized by a number of paradoxes, as the administration tries to both supervise and govern, and the institution has both to follow orders and present an independent strategy (Pedersen and Hartley, 2008; Pors, 2011);
- Polyphony. The public manager has multiple bottom lines and thereby multiple considerations when making decisions. The educational manager for example is expected to have more considerations than education only as his/her bottom line. Here focus is on the different considerations that occur when an educational institution changes into an organization that is expected not only to carry out instructions but also to be strategic (Andersen, 2003; Knudsen, 2009; Rennison, 2007a);
- Multiple expectations to the employee. The challenges for the modern employee not only take the form of fulfilling exact terms and expectations, duties or roles, but also and mainly the form of fulfilling expectations of 'self-inclusion' and responsibility taking. This creates, among other things, the risk of stress, because the employee's expectations of him/herself can be huge. Here the focus is on the relation between the employee and the organization (Andersen, 2013).

Other 'diagnoses of the present' are changing understandings of professional identity (Bjerg and Knudsen, 2012; Krejsler, 2011; Sløk, 2012); new architecture and new categories of pupils (Juelskjær, 2010);and simultaneous forms of power (Bjerg and Knudsen, 2008; Knudsen, 2010; Knudsen and Andersen, forthcoming).

Why is this curriculum relevant to educational managers in Denmark today? Our short answer is that it is a reflexive curriculum, whereby students learn critical reflexivity in regard to educational management. Hence, reflexivity is taught through the curriculum and not as a separate activity. Why do we label this a reflexive curriculum? It is because it provides students with a new language whereby they can address problems in a different way. Many students found that the diagnoses and the new language resonated with their knowledge, but that they had not been able to articulate it previously. One of the students formulates it like this: 'I got a vocabulary for my gut feeling'.

Another student uses what he has learned to 'decode documents from the managing director: What communication code is at stake here? It has helped me to formulate in an exact way what they want and to see what we can answer.' The same student has experienced that what he learns at the MEM is a certain language. This is both a strength and a weakness. At one of the seminars, a visitor joined the discussions and it was 'disturbing that he posed questions that did not "buy" the premises but were posed from another starting point'. In the student's experience, the new language is both productive and narrow: 'If someone has read an academic text, with another base [theoretical point of departure], I cannot discuss with them; I am quite narrow and become uncertain

whether their knowledge is more valid than mine.' This is mainly the problem in a discussion on the best solution of current problems. In this connection it is a stronger argument to say that 'new research shows that we should do . . . ' than to say 'new research shows that the problem is represented as . . . '.

We, as educators, do not provide students with concepts and theories that they can use to solve their problems, although this would be convenient. However, when the problems are complex and full of paradoxes, a more reflexive approach is necessary. Many of these problems can be characterized as dilemmas with more than one solution. When managerial problems are not given as natural but depend on the articulation of the problem, the content we teach the public managers should build on theories reflecting this. Concepts and theories that students meet in the programme should be opened up for analysis by asking 'what is the problem represented to be?', instead of stating 'this is the problem, and you can reflect on possible solutions'. These analyses may render the student unable to take action as a leader. As one student says: 'In some ways I may be so critical that I am almost paralysed'. When our teaching succeeds, the student is able *both* to analyse the consequences of the current articulations of managerial problems *and* to change this articulation and thereby change the discourse in which he/she is participating.

When reflexivity renders the students paralysed, it is our responsibility as teachers to help them overcome this. Therefore we have a teaching format that is designed to assist students in translating their new language from the classroom to the workplace. This is a course labelled 'experimental management'.

Using experiments as a means to reflexivity and translation

During the course 'experimental management', the students translate theories and concepts into practice and action by working with an experiment in their own organizations. The curriculum for this course is less extensive and there is more weight on the students' active participation, reflection and reflexivity. The aim is for the students to translate and apply what they have learned by experimenting with a problem from their organizational practice. For instance a student who was the leader of a school for pupils with special needs experienced that many of his employees were almost too passionate about their work and therefor at risk of becoming stressed. It was difficult for the employees to limit their work and they felt they were 'on duty 24/7'. The student decided to experiment by introducing fixed working hours to help the employees limit their work. Other students have experimented with different forms of dialogue either between leader and employee or between leader and team. The idea of the course is that students both act in their organization and draw on concepts from the curriculum to analyse what is put at stake through the experiment. In our experience, the experimental teaching format generates reflection, reflexivity and translation for students. This can be illustrated as follows:

The figure shows the different stages and processes of the teaching format.

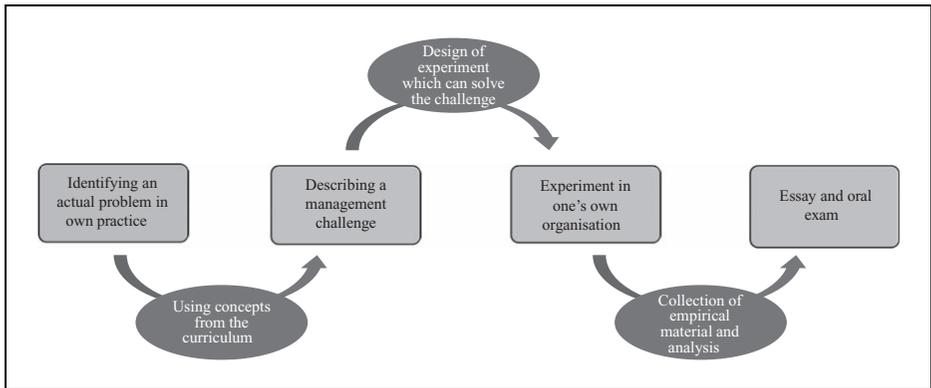A more extended example of how this is done in practice is provided below:

Figure 1. Main elements in third term 'experimental management'.

Sue is an MEM student while working as a member of the management team at a Danish high school. She describes how, lately, the school has admitted an increasing number of pupils. Together with this increase, the school has experienced a change in pupil composition, with an increasing number of pupils with social and personal problems. This in turn has affected the teachers and their work commitment. A recent survey shows a decline in the number of passionate teachers. Following this, Sue has phrased her management challenge as follows: 'How do I (as part of the management team) create passionate teachers in a situation where they feel under severe pressure due to the continued increase in activities and changes in student composition?'

The category 'passionate teacher' is coined by the consultancy company making the survey. They define a passionate teacher as an employee who makes an extra effort and is proud to be employed at the high school. In addition to passionate teachers, they employ the following categories: 'core staff', 'zappers', 'sofa employees' and 'soon-to-leave employees' with a decreasing level of commitment to their work.

Sue's experiment aims to enable the high school teachers to influence the content of staff meetings and thereby engage them more. Sue does this by convening a staff meeting where teachers have to prepare the agenda. It turns out that the topic that the teachers find most important is 'focus on our pupils'. Sue interprets this as the teachers' wish to focus on the daily work and a lack of desire for making the extra effort that is part of the concepts of the 'passionate teacher'. However, through her interviews with employees and subsequent analysis, Sue makes another interpretation, namely, that the problem is the organization rather than its employees:

"The foundation for the passionate teacher is that the school has a framework for work that fits the passionate teacher's values and ideals. However, this framework is not present at the moment due to the recent changes. The number of pupils has increased, half of the management team has been replaced, and there has been a number of changes in the administration. Thus, it is very difficult for the teachers to identify with the organization because there is no longer a common narrative about what type of school it is".

Therefore, she concludes that her management challenge was incorrectly phrased, that it should have concerned the conditions the organization makes available to employees rather

than targeting the employees' attitudes to work. Hence, Sue changes her idea of what the problem is (represented to be) though her analysis where she uses concepts and understandings from the 'reflexive' curriculum. She draws on the diagnosis 'Multiple expectations of the employee' to show that if the employee is expected to be 'passionate', the organization has to provide the employee with an attractive narrative in which the employee can recognize him/herself.

The close connection between the degree programme and the participants' work in their own organization is – in our opinion – one of the strengths of the teaching format, but it also creates some challenges. We return to those later.

To learn through experimenting presupposes the will to experiment and thereby to risk something and the will to share doubts. This presupposes confidence and a trustful atmosphere in the learning situation. We therefore work consciously with creating a good social climate during class and emphasize this when we begin working with experiments. When reflecting on this during the interviews, one student said: 'You have been really good at it [building a social climate]. Good at welcoming us, nice atmosphere, lots of laughs – humour is a brilliant means of communication. No one felt stupid or in-superior'. Another participant emphasized the importance of being able to share experiences in an open and trustful atmosphere. She said that they really cared for each other and were genuinely pleased when the one struggling to become 'an academic' finished his exam with a good grade. Other participants mentioned the importance of talking with each other, of using each other for feedback. Spending time on group discussions, allowing participants to tell about the work experiences and receiving feedback are important elements in building a good and safe social climate.

This takes time that could have been spent on lecturing, but we find it worthwhile and so do the students: 'When it is so closely related to practice, I learn a lot'. The small number of participants also makes these activities possible without being too time consuming. We are present nearly all the time, as well as when we are not teaching. The purpose of this is that we should be able to link together the different inputs, translate between different lectures, so to speak. We also draw on our own experiences in making translations between theory and practice. This is important for the students; one said: 'More connections, more learning. What we are taught is constantly being exemplified'. Moreover, our presence is a confidence building measure as we are available for answering questions and clarifying uncertainties. This has given us goodwill among the students, which was evident when one of them was willing to drive for two hours to take part in an interview with us for this paper.

In some understandings of reflection this serves as a link between theory and practice (see Quinn in this issue). By drawing on this understanding of reflection, we will now illustrate how working with experiments can serve as a means to enhance students' reflective competences. We argue that translating from theory to practice and vice versa are a way of reflecting and sometimes entail reflexivity. Furthermore, we argue that the teaching format 'experimental management' provides the students with a number of opportunities for reflection and reflexivity as shown in Figure 2.
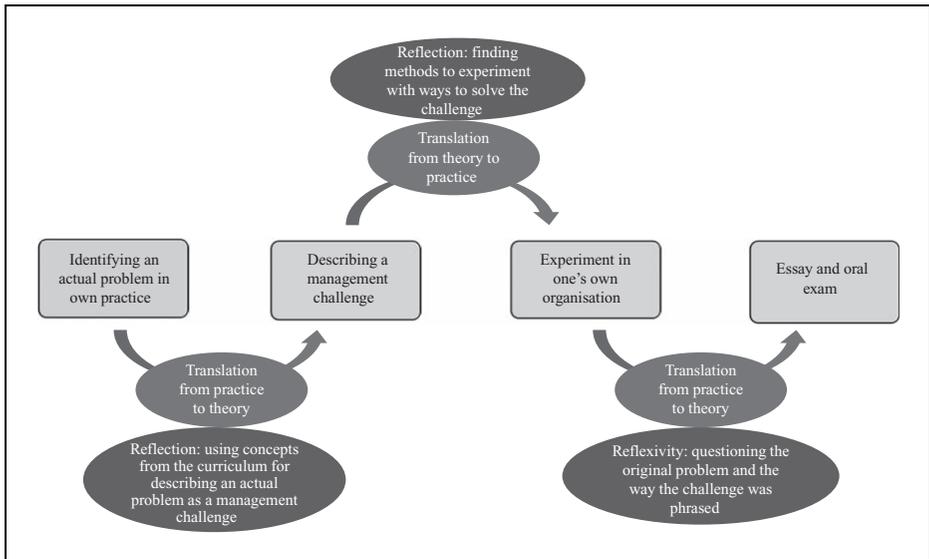
Figure 2. Elements of reflection and reflexivity as well as types of translation during third term 'experimental management'.

By reference to the example with Sue, we can see that not only does she translate and reflect; she also exhibits reflexivity by translating from practice back to theory and by reconceptualizing a new management challenge.

While experiments are a useful means for translating the reflexive curriculum and new language into practice, it is not without problems to have acquired new language when returning to work. One student was given two months leave of absence from work to write his masters dissertation, but only 'on the condition that I do *not* return to my work and talk academic'. Therefore he foresees that it would be challenging for him to maintain what he has learned.

Teaching reflexivity – some reflections

For reasons outlined above, there is a call for teaching managers reflection and reflexivity (Cotter and Cullen, 2012; Cunliffe, 2004). Often, reflection and reflexivity end up being extra-curricular activities taking time away from the 'real' content (e.g. Meer and Marks, this issue) or accomplished through journal writing (e.g. Adriansen, 2010). The special contribution by MEM is that MEM provides both a curriculum and a pedagogy that promote reflexivity. Hence, we have managed to build in reflection and reflexivity as part of the content. Our expectation is that this leads to deeper learning of these skills. Providing students with both a new language and a practice-based pedagogy where they train this new language should also enable them to handle unexpected and complex problems they inevitably will meet in their (undefined) role as public managers.

Table 1. Typology of three different ways of using experiments.

	Experiments as research methods	Experiments as development method in organizations	Experiments as teaching methods
Purpose	• construct new knowledge • test hypotheses/ theory	• improve practice by creating new knowledge/ new opportunities in/for the organization • minimize risks by conducting small-scale experiments before large-scale implementation	• learning • transfer/translation: what is learned can be applied in other contexts
Typical types	• laboratory experiments • field experiments	• laboratory experiments (e.g. innovation labs) • field experiments (e.g. municipalities with special conditions)	• laboratory experiments (e.g. simulation, training games) • field experiments (e.g. experimental management practice)
Learning	• construct new knowledge – for science/research	• construct new knowledge – for the organization • build experience – inthe organization	• to see the relevance of something you have learnt in another context, e.g. transfer or translation of knowledge – for the participants
Reality and authenticity	• laboratory experiment: isolated thereby unreal; partly attempted un-authentic; other parts attempted authentic. Controlled thereby unreal • field experiment: attempted authenticity, partly controlled	• in the laboratory, reality is 'dissolved' in order to construct new possible futures • the field experiment is most often attempted realistically	• there is a conscious distance to reality in simulations and training games while maintaining a clear reference to reality • field experiments take place in situ, i.e. in reality, but reality is reshaped because problems are rephrased
Boundaries	• in the laboratory, boundaries are sharp in terms of time and space	• laboratories are often delimited in time and space (or even 'outside' time and space)	• laboratory experiments are delimited in time and space

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

	Experiments as research methods	Experiments as development method in organizations	Experiments as teaching methods
	• in the field, space boundaries are vague but time boundaries are often sharp	• field experiments are delimited in time and space • there is a full-scale ambition inherent in the experimentation i.e. transfer to the whole organization	• field experiments are most often delimited in time • boundaries are not the main issue; instead links and connections are important – links between theory and practice, the students' ability to create transfer
Ethical issues	• should the researcher take future applications of the new knowledge into consideration? • side-effects and spreading from labs and field experiments (e.g. diseases, GMO) • how much should participants in (e.g. socio-psychological) experiments know beforehand?	• Should leaders/ politicians be aware of (and responsible for) all consequences? • how much can a leader/politician experiment with people for the greater good? • successful experiments can lead to hope and wishes that cannot be fulfilled – who are responsible and who should tackle this?	• should the teacher only allow students to experiment if the teacher can foresee the consequences? • what should the teacher do when students are 'in too deep'? • how far should students go in order to learn (risk taking contra playing it safe)?

We think they are good and relevant suggestions, but we would like to conclude by pointing to some of the difficulties that we have experienced. With regard to the pedagogy, it should be noted that asking participants to experiment in and with their own practice entails a number of ethical issues. Among other things, participants are embedded in two different worlds at the same time – as students at MEM and as managers. Polyphony is also the case here; see Table 1. What constitutes a good experiment for a student may not be the same good experiment for the manager. Where the former can learn a great deal from a failed experiment without risking his/her position, the latter wants the experiment to be a success in order to maintain his/her position. Moreover, the manager has a number of ethical obligations in regard to employees, which makes working with experiments a tricky business.

With regard to the reflexive curriculum, we find it pertinent to question whether we create too narrow a path for the students. By this we mean that we insist that they should pose reflexive questions concerning the construction of problems, thereby hindering them in posing practical questions, and finding practical solutions to their problems. Some students find it difficult to handle our ambitions with regard to critical reflexivity and they react to this in different ways. Based on our reading of the students' essays and our observations, we have made three different abstractions or so-called ideal types[3] of reactions:

1. Some accept posing reflexive questions; they learn what critical reflexivity means and manage to employ the new language not only for their professional work but also for their personal life. In this case, they may also become self-reflexive.
2. Some react by omitting the reflexive questions and maintaining the way they used to regard their challenges. This can be done by turning the analytical concepts into 'how-to' concepts; or they use the theories and concepts they have learned as new norms which then inform their practice.
3. Some become so overwhelmed by reflecting and reflexing that they become almost paralysed. They learn the new language, but find themselves stripped from their usual ways of handling problems and find that they have not been given a new way of acting, only the capacity to be critically reflexive.

These are ideal types of reactions; participants can go through all of them or only some of them. The first ideal type is our 'ideal student', while the second is difficult for us to handle. The second reaction can be understood when considering that the students are also managers, used to taking responsibility for making decisions and reducing complexity. To be reflexive also means to increase complexity. Our reaction to this ideal type is to invite them to reflect on the position from where they talk – and suggest they should let go of the responsibility of solving problems, at least as long as they are studying. The third ideal type is often a phase. The experimental course is a way to help students remain students and let go of the constant need to solve problems as managers. The course is an occasion for them to open up new opportunities and be more playful in their attitude to problems.

Concluding remarks

We think there is no way back concerning reflexivity among public managers. Society is not getting less complex and there is no one coming from 'above' to solve the challenges confronting public managers, no one will define the role and present explicit expectations to managers. Therefore reflexivity is needed more than ever.

In this paper, we have shown how MEM meets the need for reflexivity by providing students with a new language with concepts they can use to reframe their challenges, their role and relations to superior, employees and users. The programme also aims at letting this new language have an impact that reaches out of the class room, by working with forms of translation, as for example the experimental part of the programme. But we

also experience a series of dilemmas and challenges that needs to be handled to actually teach managers to fulfil an undefined role:

- It is a challenge to create a social climate that makes it possible for students to experiment and to share experiences. This requires confidence and a trustful atmosphere. Various elements are necessary to do this; one is the simple possibility for us as teachers to be present throughout the programme and for us as programme planners to create connections and links and to help students with their translation processes.
- The students translate what they learn in various ways. What was originally a critical analysis may turn into a base for decisions and a new norm. This creates the challenge for us as teachers to maintain the dynamical invitation for critical reflexivity, avoiding creating new norms for management.
- On the one hand, we provide the students with theories and processes that we take responsibility for, also because we are the ones to assess the students. On the other hand, we want to provide the students with knowledge that is relevant for them, and in that respect they are the ones to judge. Sometimes we have worried whether we have created too narrow a path for students by insisting that they pose reflexive questions concerning the construction of problems, thereby hindering them in posing practical questions and finding practical solutions to their problems. This dilemma cannot be solved but has to be continually addressed.
- What was meant as an invitation to be courageous and do experiments may be wasted in a work-day with demands for quick decisions and a reduction of complexity. Luckily action and reflexivity are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as one student illustrates: 'To formulate the new questions for employees in our concept for dialogue took a long time. We were not paralyzed but it took a long time. Our school is very 'acting' and every reflection slows down the speed – which works fine.' But it creates the challenge for us as teachers to create a teaching format that can make obvious how critical reflexivity can be useful.

As teachers of educational management we can feel almost paralysed by the impossibility of providing participants with what they 'really need'. However, we find that by providing our students with a new language and the ability to translate from theory to practice, we have provided them with some tools that can help them solve problems at a different level of thinking than the one that created them, and to define their own role as public managers.

Notes

1. One of the authors is the study leader of MEM as well as coordinating and teaching first and third term. The other author is co-coordinating and teaching third term.
2. For an analysis of parallel tendencies in the public sector in the UK, please see Clarke and Newman, 1997; Newman, 2001; Newman and Clarke, 2009.
3. These are called ideal types because they are 'pure' types and cannot be transferred directly from the empirical material. We draw on Max Weber who has suggested ideal types as a means to understand social action (Weber, 1949).

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