

# Reflections on systemic ideas in my teaching practises



3rd semester 2006

Systemic Leadership and Organisational Studies

University of Luton and KCC Foundation

By René Kristensen, Assistant Professor

2984 words

## ***Introduction***

My approach to the Msc in Systemic Leadership and organizational Studies is characterized by my educational position as an assistant professor (adjunkt) at CVU Lillebaelt University College creating and presenting courses for teachers and pedagogues.

## ***Meta-reflections***

It is important for me to as a start to reflect on some important deontological assumptions, that influences my working life to a rather large degree.

Georg Von Wright's description of Deontic Logic as it is borrowed and used by Barnett Pearce in CMM (Pearce, 2004 pp 27) has made me understand with how much force my teaching is ruled by especially one strong, deontic logical premise!

With deontic logic Pearce focuses on:

- What I am permitted to do
- What I am not allowed to do
- What I must do
- What I can choose to do<sup>1</sup>

I have a very strong deontological fight with my experience telling me that I have to teach people "the right things said by the right people" using the methods contained in the metaphor of "the attendant filling a car with gasoline". This "must" is expected by most of the participants in the system and it is deeply inherited in my own unconscious assumptions of "being a good teacher"! "If I am not talking, presenting new stuff, I'm not worth my wages".

I have been working hard to overcome this assumption, creating space to change my language and my exercises to support another context for teaching and learning without resistance.

## ***My vision, my dream of the future***

Peter Lang & Elspeth McAdam are working with the idea of creating a detailed dream of the future and create a back casting to what actions the dream makes possible and necessary in the present. (In Kristensen 2006). This approach is based on the ideas of Appreciative Inquiry, developed by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) as a way of making research in organizations. Peter Lang and Elspeth McAdams describe the use of AI in school systems as well.

---

<sup>1</sup> Notes from Master class with Barnett Pearce, 2005, Dispuk, Aarhus.

It is my dream of where to be in my development in maybe five years, “I am using the fantastic ideas from the systemic field in my way of working with education and research and I am creating a vivid and exciting educational environment where I, as well as the participants, am leaving the room afterwards with a feeling of having taught and learned a lot through exchange of knowledge in meaningful human relations. I have become an educator who is sensible to the participants, the changes of language games and I am open to constantly changing the way we work together in the educational environment.

My actions in the present due to my dream is to develop my educational practice using the most suitable parts of the systemic, social constructionist ideas from different positions (Pearce, 1999) in an hopefully chiasmic interwoven practicing (Bateson in Shotter, 2005) constantly changing due to my Msc studies, my curiosity and a maybe irreverent combining of the systemic approach with other ideas.

Some of the important positions and language domains in my exertion to create new ways of teaching (and learning) right now are:

- Exploring the systemic, constructionist ideas as ways of developing different forms of leadership in the classroom, among others to introduce “shared leadership in the classroom”<sup>2</sup> in a form that is consistent to the laws and frames of the Danish school system.
- Developing my own knowledge by creating chances to share knowledge and practises with and be mentored by some very experienced and inspiring people and then bringing this new experience into action in my own practising and in my Msc studies:
  - Interviewing<sup>3</sup> and co-writing<sup>4</sup> articles is and has been a very important and privileged way of learning for me. I am constantly reflecting and connecting a meta-level context of theory with (and in) my teaching about teaching and learning processes.
  - Creating conferences with some of the most exciting people in the psychological and educational area has added new opportunities to my sharing and development of knowledge and it has created some amazing, inspiring and helpful relations to a

---

<sup>2</sup> Peter Lang supports my idea of examining “shared leadership”, because it would be “examining new land”.

<sup>3</sup> I have made interviews with Daniel Stern, Peter Lang and Barnett Pearce among others.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Armstrong and Jan Tønnesvang among others have been co- creating articles with me and I am in the beginning of creating an article with Peter Lang right now.

number of fantastic people<sup>5</sup>, who are inspiring me to constantly developing my practise.

- The organizational approach has suddenly become important to me within these months, because the CVU Fyn in October joined a fusion of several minor centres and institutions, where 700 educators should work together teaching 7000 students as a new centre called CVU Lillebaelt. I see a great opportunity to suggest the use of and at the same time examine some of the processes working with the sharing of knowledge in this new organization and developing ideas of how to co-create education without resistance.

All of these positions and language domains are already working, but they are at different stages of development.

I am educated as a “systemic consultant” at a two year course at the DISPUK in Denmark and I have started to develop systemic appreciative practise in extension to this. I have a feeling of this chiasmic interwoven knowledge growing from these different positions, being supported by the need of transferring my reflections of practise into practising in my teaching and at the same time as a parallel describing my teaching practise at a meta-level in the context of the Msc.

### ***One week teaching special education***

I have chosen within this context to describe one week, a module of one of my courses for teachers and pedagogues, to show the way the developmental process from these different positions leads to current changes of practise as well as evolving systemic practise.

The course was concerning children with behavioural problems, relational problems and fragile children being afraid and nervous in the public school system. This module is a part of a larger course of five modules concerning special education in a broad sense. The participants are all experienced teachers and pedagogues already working with this group of children in their daily practise.

During this module, which actually took place in October 2006, I introduced a systemic and appreciative understanding to the participants as the main tool to create different ways of relating to the children, who was named and framed with a lot of “trouble words”.

---

<sup>5</sup> In my Anthology “Fantastiske forbindelser” I have gathered articles from some of these inspiring people.

## ***The frames***

I will describe the schedule for the week and connect to my considerations about methods and ideas.

Monday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Introduction of each other and the main issues for the week.</li><li>• Neurological constitution of the pupils</li><li>• Attention and memory - how is it working and how do we improve?</li><li>• How can we examine and explore the best ways of learning for each of the children?</li><li>• Working with cases from the participants<sup>6</sup></li></ul>
Tuesday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The relation between teacher and pupil</li><li>• A basic, systemic introduction programme</li></ul>
Wednesday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• AI in special education</li><li>• The development of relations in childhood (Daniel Stern)</li><li>• Identity as a social construction- what possibilities could be created in education</li><li>• Introduction of Peter Lang and his way of working</li></ul>
Thursday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>A conference with Peter Lang at the CVU in Odense<sup>7</sup></b></li><li>• AI in special education</li><li>• How can we use appreciation to approve the situation for children having difficulties in relations at school?</li></ul>
Friday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What were the best ideas from the conference connecting to your own practise?</li><li>• Leadership in the classroom in a relational perspective<sup>8</sup></li><li>• The relational competences of the professionals<sup>9</sup></li><li>• Development and sharing of ideas and inspiration from the entire week in the group.</li></ul>

---

<sup>6</sup> Some of the participants were given the task at module 1, two weeks before.

<sup>7</sup> I'm arranging a conference twice a year with a significant people who can inspire the participants from different courses in an extraordinary way.

<sup>8</sup> I have written an article about this issue based on AI ideas among others in a new anthology about "Class room leadership and leadership of learning". (Kristensen, 2006B)

<sup>9</sup> I have tried to frame some of the important skills in a definition. (Kristensen & Andersen, 2004)

### ***Reflections on and connections in my practise***

The context of my present educational practise developed from being a “speaking book” facilitating other peoples’ “objective knowledge” from books and presentations 11 years ago. I started as a teacher working with tools to focus on the different intelligences, their attention deficits and memory problems. I was soon involved in developing the material<sup>10</sup> and I introduced another language game. Instead of “searching for the truth”, I introduced “pedagogical hypothesis” as what we were looking for. When we were looking for hypothesis we were changing into a dynamic language of describing what we see instead of what we assume, and we made the assumptions and ideas of what worked out the best. This idea changed the way of observing the pupils and these dynamic hypotheses were discussed with the pupil to create optimal learning for exactly this boy or girl. The ideas were generated together and brought into the different kind of learning processes for the child.<sup>11</sup>

This idea of “Pedagogical Hypothesis” has become a “mainframe” of an “Appreciative observation model” connecting three language games in an irreverent way, but based on what works in the local context of the pupil and the teachers! This idea is presented to the participants as a suggestion for trying to use “new pedagogical glasses” for a while.

### ***The start of a course - introducing the context***

After a short introduction of each other, I have challenged my own deontic logic and the risk of loosing control, when I, inspired by Peter Lang, made the participants interview each other about what is important to learn during the course. The main frame of the themes was given by the description of the course. Afterwards the participants shared their ideas with me. I was able to adapt a large part of their ideas into my planning and I suggested other ideas to be shared with my associate educators at the next module of the course. But in a way I think the most important effect is, as Maturana says (about children with problems) “It is profoundly healing to be actually seen to regain self-respect” (Maturana/Poerksen p.129). Therefore I intend, with this exercise among others, to treat their teachers (my participants) the same respectful way to introduce the feeling of being treated well and appreciating.

---

<sup>10</sup> PAS (Hilling 1997,2004) Pedagogical Analyzes System, and Hilling & Kristensen (1997)

<sup>11</sup> This idea of pedagogical hypothesis has been developed further in Kristensen & Andersen (2004)

I introduced my idea of new language games switching from “right or wrong” to “Let us look at what we exactly see<sup>12</sup> the pupil do and what that could reveal about the best ways of relating and learning the strategies of action, for every unique person”.

In pairs the participants discussed the implications of this idea shortly to start developing their own language game. The rest of the day I alternately introduced exercises for the teachers to do with their pupils and made the participant try the exercises together evolving their appreciative language about how “their child” was working. My goal was to introduce an alternative dynamic, language game to the psychologist’s diagnostic labelling the pupils.

This alternative language connects an appreciative approach to the field of labels, which cannot be ignored, because only labelling releases money from the system when needed. Finally we, as a curriculum, went through videos of participants trying to use the materials generating strategies, acts which were successful, and good ideas of how to examine and play with learning processes with the children.

The next day we dug one step deeper and I introduced “Autopoiesis”<sup>13</sup> and underlined the implications of giving up “the uni-verse of truth” and the need of examining the “multi-verse”. Context and punctuation was mentioned and described as a basic “about-ness” introduction and some stories were introduced to underline the differences between different contexts and how important it becomes to focus on “the editor” who “punctuates” the story, to understand the actions in the classroom. The participants were introduced to the relevant parts from the book “Systemisk ledelse” (Hornstrup et al., 2005) if they wanted to know more. During my presentations I once suggested 10 minutes of sharing ideas with someone new in the classroom. Even though I know it is often useful to co-create knowledge my deontic logic forced me to make these sharing- moments too short and too rare!

When I think back I will have to reduce the complexity and instead of introducing new language games all the time I should try to reduce the number of new words and make the participant create a lot more connections to their “daily language”.

Wednesday was “Appreciative Inquiry day” in the version Peter Lang creates it, but as a start I introduced the back-ground of AI (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) and the participant were working together to generate ideas to connect appreciatively with the children having relational trouble in the classroom.

---

<sup>12</sup> I am very fond of Wittgenstein’s idea: “Just see, everything is actually there”, which supports this idea of working perfectly. (Referred from Shoter, Master class at MMB, 2006)

<sup>13</sup> (H. Maturana, 1987)

Afterwards I shortly introduced Daniel Stern's research of relational development<sup>14</sup> and from his new<sup>15</sup> idea of a narrative self as one part of the self-development; I connected to Ken Gergen's ideas of the self as a social construction<sup>16</sup> and what possibilities this idea could create in teaching fragile children or children who are fighting with everybody in their surroundings.

At the end of the day I shortly introduced Peter Lang, his way of working and my own excitement of meeting him on behalf of the group.

As a kind of introduction, the participants in groups found "The most important sentences and keywords for you in Peter Lang & Elspeth McAdams article in the anthology "Fantastiske forbindelser". They discussed ideas and consequences in connection to their keywords from the article and generated ideas for their own practise.

On Thursday I had asked Peter to do a conference for teachers working with this particular group of pupils. At the same time we made an open invitation to other participants and every of the 400 seats were taken!

I worked as a facilitator, translator and as responsible for the educational frames as a whole. This conference was one of the ways I manage to create some "meta learning" for myself, discussing the stories and exercises Peter chose to introduce. At the "meta level" the co-creation of this day supports my change towards more "Witness" in my teaching. I learn a lot being together with Peter every time he is working for the CVU (University College) discussing new ways to create more space and appreciation in schools as a kind of "mentorship learning process". This is an example of what I call the almost chiasmic interwoven learning that is developing further more as Peter is one of the advisors at the Msc studies.

Another project we are co-creating with Peter in the new CVU Lillebaelt is an international conference in Austria about best practise in schools, kindergartens, and clubs all over the world<sup>17</sup>.

All these interwoven experiences on different levels and from different positions makes my teaching more vivid and challenging, I guess, and somehow it is even changing my deontic logic in the creation of new courses and learning processes!

On Friday I asked for the best ideas from the conference connecting to the participants' practises to make them create connections. Just as expected the participants were quite fond of Peters'

---

<sup>14</sup> A change in the new edition of "The Interpersonal world of the Infant" (the updated edition, 2000)

<sup>15</sup> It is interesting that Daniel Stern has added the narrative self to his model of relational development from 2000, inspired by social constructionism.(Interview in Kristensen, 2006)

<sup>16</sup> *Realities and relationships – Soundings in Social Construction*, the Danish edition (2000)

<sup>17</sup> [www.bestpractise.dk](http://www.bestpractise.dk) This project is intended to be an issue of another Msc paper.

presentation and creation of processes and some of students even said they wanted to stay in the appreciative environment Peter had created, instead of going home.

The most important evaluation remark was from an experienced teacher who had a consultation with a family the same evening, where she found herself suddenly asking “a difficult boy” what was important for him instead of scolding and admonishing as intended. She was amazed and told with pride to the other participants how different the dialogue turned out and how the boy changed his attitude and told her how he imagined he had to take responsibility and work more intensively. I felt this story had an immense influence on the rest of the participants who were already very sensitive in their utterances and I think it even removed “another brick from my deontic wall<sup>18</sup>”, too!

At the end of the day the participants each wrote one sentence of the most important learning they had achieved through the week. And they were asked to add in a parenthesis from one to six of anything they were inspired to use (☺ ☺ ☺ ☺ ☺ ☺). Stars, drumsticks, flags, fruits and smileys were used among others - to give a very short evaluation of the week to the teacher and the university college. The evaluation confirmed with more than 95 % of “five or six smileys” that the increasing use of systemic ways of working were impressive and was accepted by most of the participants. BUT after the course one teacher was very much in opposition (in an evaluation form delivered to the office) and claimed that “this was therapy and “The Milan School” and it had nothing to do in schools!” It made me sad to read and I have struggled to “listen without resistance”. She/he must be appreciated “in absentia” for daring being in opposition! I think I have to be much more transparent from the start coordinating the use of the language games of the systemic approach even more carefully and respectfully as a choice of description instead of risking to introduce “the new pedagogical Milan-truth”. On the other hand I was comforted with the fact that so many participants were satisfied. Even though I have the feeling of positive changes, I am not quite satisfied with my invitations to the participants as long as one person can be in the classroom for a whole week without expressing what she felt! HmMMM!

### ***Reflections of the future***

I see the ongoing chiasmic process as very inspiring and adding new energy, new psychological oxygen<sup>19</sup> to my teaching. I feel I am relating to a lot of exciting people – in presence and through their papers or books - that inspire me and make me feel open to a lot of new ways and possibilities.

---

<sup>18</sup> As a metaphor inspired by Roger Waters’ record “The Wall”.

<sup>19</sup> A metaphor for the important effect the teacher can add by being interested, involved and attentive. (Jan Toennesvang, 2004)

But I feel my position is very vulnerable, because the responsiveness to the participants makes me very open to their comments often without knowing their context behind their answers.

My main intention in the future is to develop more transparency and to develop a larger variety of teaching positions<sup>20</sup> and thereby different learning possibilities for my participants.

## Literature

- Cooperrider, David L. & Suresh Srivastva: "Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life" in *Research in Organizational Change and development, Vol. 1 pages 129- 169*
- Gergen, Kenneth: (2000) *Realities and relationships – Soundings in Social Construction*, the Danish edition. Dansk Psykologisk Forlag.
- Hilling, Steen: PAS (1997, 2004). Jelling: Munkholm Kursuscenter.
- Hilling, Steen og René Kristensen. *Opmærksomhed. Et centralt problemfelt i pædagogisk afdækning*. Specialpædagogik nr 2, 1999. ( download : [www.rkris.dk](http://www.rkris.dk) )
- Hornstrup, Carsten, Jesper Loehr-Petersen m.fl. *Systemisk ledelse – Den reflektsive praktiker*. Dansk Psykologisk Forlag. 2005
- Juul, Jesper & Helle Jensen. *Pædagogisk relationskompetence*. København: Forlaget Apostrof. 2002.
- Kristensen, René (Red.): (2006A) *Fantastiske forbindelser - Relationer i undervisning og læringssamvær*. Dafolo.
- Kristensen, René & Frans Ørsted Andersen: (2004) *Flow, opmærksomhed og relationer*. Frederikshavn: Dafolo.
- Kristensen, René: (2006B) Klasseledelse i et relationelt perspektiv ("Leadership in the classroom in a relational perspective") in *Klasse- og læringsledelse*. (Ed. Peter Andersen) Copenhagen: Unge pædagoger.
- Lang, Peter W & Elspeth McAdam: "At skabe positive læringsmuligheder I skoler og samfund – værktøj til anerkendelse i handling" in Kristensen, René (red): (2006) *Fantastiske forbindelser – relationer i undervisning og læringssamvær*. Frederikshavn, Dafolo.
- Maturana, Humberto & Bernhard Poerksen: (2004) *From Being to Doing - The origins of the Biology of Cognition*. Heidelberg: Carl Auer Verlag.
- Maturana, H & Varela F.J: (1987) *The tree of knowledge*. Boston Shambhala Publications
- Pearce, W. Barnett: (1999/2004) *Using CMM The coordinated management of Meaning*. [www.Pearceassociates.com](http://www.Pearceassociates.com)
- Pearce, W. Barnett: (1999) *Using CMM to understand how change happens (Part III)*. Pearce associates.
- Shotter, John: (2005) *The short book of "withness" thinking*. London: KCCF.

---

<sup>20</sup> In connection to Maturana's remark: Pupils (participants) learn teachers- as ways of living. (Maturana/Poerksen p 128)