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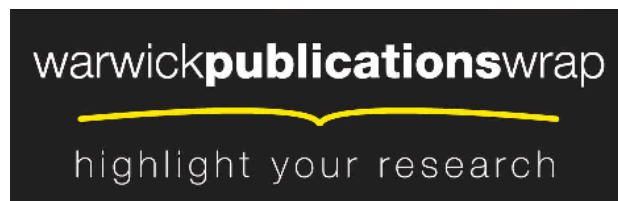
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# REFLEXIVITY IN PRACTICE. TOOLS AND CONDITIONS FOR DEVELOPING ORGANIZATIONAL AUTHORSHIP

**Abstract**

In this paper, we build on the results of a participatory action research project in healthcare to discuss a number of methods that can strengthen the link between reflexive work and authoring in organizational contexts. We argue that from an organizational point of view, the challenge is to devise new ways to configure (and consider) people as the authors of their work. This means assuming responsibility for, and constructively contributing to, the goals of the organizations to which they belong. Combining insights from theoretical reflection and experience from the field, the paper discusses the tools, process and material conditions for fostering practical reflexivity and organizational authorship. We conclude that much is to be gained if we distinguish between authorship and authoring. Authorship is the general process whereby managers and organizational members contribute to the reproduction of organizational realities. Authoring is constituted by the special circumstances whereby authorship is brought to critical consciousness and becomes open to deliberate reorientation.

## 1    Introduction

Contemporary organizations are trapped in a paradox. On the one hand, they need pro-active workers with imagination, creativity, and who can grasp the nature of the organizational objectives and adapt them rapidly to emerging situations and contingencies. On the other hand, they also want their members to pick up weak signals, be able to deal with complexity, and be resilient and highly reliable (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). Yet many of their management processes pull in the opposite direction: marked decentralization, downsizing, automation and the re-engineering of work processes often stop members from realizing their full potential and operating as value generators. Faced with complexity, unstable employment conditions, and rapidly-changing work environments, women and men at work struggle to hold on to the traditional features of their jobs and the horizons of meaning that go with them (Sennett, 1998; Gallie, 2013; Vidal, 2013). This makes it ever harder for workers to:  (1) find the will

and energy to add value to their work experience; (2) make the necessary investments in terms of commitment and trust; (3) become open to learning — all three being vital if workers are to perceive and pursue specific opportunities for influencing organizations and their contexts. It is as if 'flexible' workers (Sennett, 1998) have been denied the conditions, opportunities and practices that would enable them to give their jobs meaning through the creation of local work skills and knowledge (Oddone, Re & Briante, 1977). The risk is that of senseless work conditions which lack the dimension of 'authorship' (understood as being able to come up with one's own meaningful, sustainable narration of one's work).

Restoring sense to work (Weick 1995) by introducing spaces for reflexivity and thought on what one does, and on why one does it is therefore vital. Far from being a managerial fad, it is needed to cope with new working conditions. Recovering authorship is therefore key given that the performance of practices and activities requires: constant micro-interpretations; freedom of judgment; comparison between material and immaterial aspects, and the meanings commonly attributed to them. Here, we are not advocating a return to a mythical 'golden age'. The notion of happy, fulfilled craftsmen is very much an invention of twentieth-century, middle-class baby-boomers who grew up at a time of plenty. It does not match the reality of pre-industrial work (Epstein, 1991). Yet even in the heyday of unionised labour, work was still alienating and conducive to all sorts of personal and social pathologies (Oddone, Re & Briante, 1977)[1].

From an organizational point of view, the challenge is thus to devise new ways of making (and considering) people as the authors of their work. The expectation is that this will enable people to shoulder and contribute to the goals of the organizations they belong to. This in turn sparks the questions that guided our study: what is this authorship that we want to foster? How can we help workers achieve authorship in practice so that they can alter work practices and contexts? What approaches, techniques and tools can be used to this end? What conditions and processes need to be put in place? What are the opportunities and risks of pursuing authorship?

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[1] An interesting issue is of course how organised employee collectives i.e. the unions fit in the effort to restoring sense to work. Although the matter goes well beyond the scope of the present work, one may note that several of the past studies referenced in the paper stem from, or refer to, initiatives that were directly promoted by the unions (Oddone, Re, & Briante, 1977) or conducted in collaborations between unions and management (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). One can also note that for a variety of reasons in recent years such type of union-lead or union supported initiatives have become less and less common, with the result that the discourse of active involvement of employees and authorship has become prominently associated with (or hijacked by, depending on the view) management. We would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for attracting our attention to this important issue that certainly warrants further future investigation.

This paper answers these questions by building on the results of a participatory action research project (Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Koch, Selim & Kralik, 2002) conducted in a healthcare organization in Northern Italy. Participatory action research is a type of applied social science. It differs from other varieties in the immediacy of the researcher's involvement in the action process. Its distinctive feature is that it contributes to the goals of social science while also addressing matters of real concern to the practitioners involved in the research (Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Coghlan & Brannick, 2001; Koch, Selim & Kralik, 2002; Koch & Kralik, 2009). The purpose of the project was to support employees and managers in making sense of, and in shaping their organizational practices. The project therefore was a valuable opportunity to critically evaluate the practical purchase of these concepts and examine how they can be used in practice.

Both the study - which explored the possibilities for practical reflexivity and authorship in a specific organizational setting-, and the paper - which summarizes the learning that resulted from the project-, build on a variant of participatory action research, namely organizational reflection (Reynolds & Vince, 2007). Unlike individual introspection, public reflection builds on interactional practices that involve and presuppose the presence of others (Raelin, 2001; Boud, Cressey & Docherty, 2006). Its aim is to expand the existing repertoire of collective action, rather than simply recover the meaning in existing practice (Nicolini, 2009). Organizational reflection is thus especially suited to promoting the development of individual and collective authorship.

Our study pays special attention to the work of dialogical constructivist authors such as John Shotter and Ann Cunliffe (Shotter, 1993; 2005; 2006; 2008, 2010; Shotter & Cunliffe, 2002; Cunliffe, 2003). These scholars argue that staff in an organization can become authors of their own work settings when they can play an active role in the daily production, reproduction, and transformation of their work processes. Staff need to develop the capacity (and given the opportunity) to bring such processes at discursive level through the pursuit of practical reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2002). This is because the process of discursive articulation simultaneously influences their understandings and triggers new meanings and possibilities for action (Shotter, 1993). From this perspective, developing a sense of authorship of one's work context means gaining the ability to: (1) discover the richness and density of work experiences dialogues and discourse; (2) give value to the stock of tacit and situated knowledge that those experiences convey. This requires giving managers and practitioners occasions to reflect on their systems of action, so that their imagination, inventiveness and enterprise can take wing (Reynolds & Vince, 2007). Enhancing authorship of one's work

processes also means dealing with the messy, political nature of organizations and coping with the power-play that often hinders or precludes such engagement. Accordingly, the practicalities of developing a sense of authorship determine success or failure. It is on this aspect that we shall focus our attention.

In this paper we aim to contribute to the debate on reflexivity by proposing an approach that links practical reflexivity to the concept of organizational authorship. The aim is to foster the agential orientation of organizational members and to enhance their capacity to produce meaningful changes. We provide theoretical considerations on the topic and a methodological analysis of tools, processes and conditions requested at the individual and at the organizational level.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. We start by introducing the key concepts and theoretical framework that underpin our interventionist approach, including the notion of reflection, reflexivity and authorship (Section 2). This is followed by a presentation of our case study, with some methodological details provided (Sections 3 and 4). The final part of the paper draws lessons from the case in the light of our theoretical and practical approach and reflects on the nature of authorship in organizations.

## 2    Organizational Reflection in the Pursuit of Authorship: from Gazing to Practical Reflexivity

The contemporary debate on organizational reflection can broadly be described as an effort to develop a view of reflection as an active, social process as opposed to the traditional idea of 'gazing at one's own reflection' (as in the myth of Narcissus) or inner contemplation (as in the mystic tradition). This requires two things: (1) shifting from the old individual-based perspective stemming from the work of John Dewey and his followers (Dewey, 1933; Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1983) to an organizational perspective; (2) viewing reflection as a dialogical and productive activity (that is, reflection as practical reflexivity). In this section we briefly examine these two steps to clarify the links between reflection, practical reflexivity and authorship in modern organizations.

### 2.1   Reflection as a social and productive activity

Writing on the history of the concept of reflection, Høyrup and Elkjaer (2006) suggest that a step change in the understanding of reflection was introduced by the emergence of the social relations perspective (Raelin, 2001; Reynolds & Vince, 2004). The perspective, unlike the earlier tradition, sees reflection as a social activity rather than an individual one. According to Raelin (2001: 11), one of the main authors working from the social relations perspective, reflection is "the practice of periodically stepping back to ponder the meaning of what has recently transpired to us and to others in our immediate environment". Reflection "illuminates what the self and others have experienced, providing a basis for future action" (ibid). Reflection thus becomes a collective ability to question the assumptions that underpin the organizing process. Although individual reflection is not eliminated, the attention paid to the organizational level stresses the impossibility of isolating reflection from the social and organizational micro contexts in which courses of action are produced and reproduced (Reynolds & Vince, 2004; Vince, 2002).

The notion of reflection as social, organizational activity means one can replace the traditional view that the goal of reflection is understanding and enlightenment with the idea that reflection can and should be productive. Boud, Cressey & Docherty (2006: 19- 23) suggest that reflection can link learning and work and thus benefit both workers and the organization when conceived as a collective effort rather than merely an individual one. The downside is that productive reflection is open, somewhat unpredictable, dynamic, and changing over time. It also has a generative rather than instrumental focus — that is, it is not a process that can be controlled and directed to predetermined outcomes; rather, it is exploratory and emergent. In this sense, the pursuit of organizational reflection in all its forms entails empowerment and managers playing a facilitating, containing role rather than a controlling one (Raelin, 2013; Kelly, 2013).

## 2.2    *Reflection as practical reflexivity*

The idea of reflection as productive social and collective activity converges with the idea of practical reflexivity in the Heideggerian tradition. The notion of reflexivity stems from Heidegger's concept of meditative thinking (Heidegger, 1962): that is, the active 'turning back on oneself' to question ourselves as subjects and the accuracy and objectivity of our knowledge (Calàs & Smircich, 1999). Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith (2004) elaborate on the original Heideggerian notion by suggesting that reflexivity can and should be seen as a dialogical and relational activity that is undertaken to unsettle conventional practices: namely

practical reflexivity (see also Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009). Reflection conceived as practical reflexivity thus examines the habitual ways of seeing the world and the norms of thought and behavior acquired from authoritative sources and taken for granted. It is able to evaluate consolidated habits of perceiving, thinking, remembering, resolving problems, and feeling. Reflection as practical reflexivity consists of a constant process of interrogation whereby we re-construct shared meanings with others (Cunliffe & Easterby-Smith, 2004; Bruno *et al.*, 2011). By producing an interruption between the premises and the consequences of action, what Cunliffe (2003) and Greig *et al.* (2013) call 'arresting moments', it encourages social actors to see themselves as agents and as authors of the organizations and institutions in which they live. In other words, practical reflexivity is closely linked to the pursuit, enhancement, and development of organizational authorship.

### 2.3 Practical Reflexivity and Authorship in Organization

The concept of authorship and the related notion of managers as practical authors were first introduced in 1993 by John Shotter in his book *Conversational Realities*, and later developed in a number of studies by Shotter, Cunliffe and their associates (Cunliffe, 2001; Shotter & Cunliffe, 2002; Shotter, 2005; 2006; Cunliffe & Easterby-Smith, 2004; Cunliffe, 2009). Drawing on social dialogical constructionist assumptions, these authors conceive organizations, policies, procedures and practices as continuously created and maintained through interactions and everyday conversations with others. They argue that the language we use, what we say and how we say it, plays a central role in this process: "…Managing is a dialogic (multi-voiced) relationship of creating meaning and action with others in relationally responsive interaction[2]. Because managers have influence, they play a crucial role in authoring organizational realities and identities" (Cunliffe, 2009: 43). Managers (and other members of the organization) are thus seen not as rational problem-solvers but rather as authors of their organization's social realities: "Authorship may relate to how managers attempt to construct a sense of who they are, create a shared sense of features of their organizational landscape, and how they may move others to talk or act in different ways through their dialogical practices…" (Cunliffe, 2001: 351). What makes managers authors is that "they are concerned not merely with the design of organizational structures, systems, or

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[2] Attention for the social, dialogical and discursive dimension of the co-construction of organizational realities distinguishes the concept of authorship from cognate notions such as empowerment, autonomy or ownership (Shotter, 1993; Shotter and Cunliffe, 2003).

goals, but with creating new possibilities for actions, new ways of being and relating" (ibid: 352).

Authorship is thus closely related to the possibility of influencing the constitution of organizational realities and identities. One of the benefits of re-specifying the idea of practical reflexivity in terms of authorship is that this makes it possible to answer the practical questions of how we can promote practical reflexivity, and through what processes we can access and re-orient organizational authorship. For example, authors such as Shotter (1993) and Cunliffe (2001) suggest that this activity is carried out from within the flow of ongoing conversational activity in three main ways. First, managers attempt to make sense of the 'chaotic welter of impressions' (Shotter, 1993: 148) and multiple voices speaking in the organizational landscape. By articulating these impressions, they create possibilities for some forms of organizing activity to take place. Second, these voices co-construct a sense of self/others and ways of relating to others and moving on in the landscape. Third, they must also persuade others to talk and act in ways appropriate to the circumstances.

Shotter (1993; 2005; 2006) and Cunliffe (2001; 2002) mainly locate the locus of authorship among managers. From our perspective, this constitutes a restriction that runs against one of the basic assumptions of participatory action research, which assumes that knowledgeability and authorship are traits common to all members of an organization (McTaggart, 1991; Greenwood & Levin 1998; Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Koch & Kralik, 2009). At the same time, Shotter and Cunliffe mainly focus on discursive practices and discursive reframing without addressing the social and material conditions within which such discourse takes place and with which discourse in inherently entangled (Nicolini, 2013). The issue is thus how to extend the principles and insights of social constructivist scholarship to a broader constituency within the organization and how to take the approach outside the classroom, where most of Shotter and Cunliffe interventions have taken place (see, e.g. Cunliffe, 2002). In the rest of the paper, we discuss how this can be done by building on the Participatory Action Research (PAR) tradition and using a number of tools and a specific process.

## 3    Methodology: learning from the case of a Healthcare Organization in Search of Authors

PAR questions traditional views of what theory is and how it relates to practice (Toulmin, 1996; McTaggart, 1991; Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Koch & Kralik, 2009). That said, authors such as Eden and Huxman (1996) Checkland and Holwell (1998) and Greenwood, (2002) suggest that PAR should still try to combine the creation of useful local knowledge with an attempt to identify implications that go beyond the project itself. Theorization in participatory action research is, however, mostly the result of a second-order reflection whereby researchers mull over the result of the first-order research conducted collaboratively with practitioners. In this section we provide information both on the PAR project and briefly explain how we moved from intervention to theorization and produced the shareable learning that is the core of this article.

## 3.1 The project: a Healthcare Organization in Search of Authors

In 2008, a Local Health District in Northern Italy approached the academic unit of two of the authors requesting support for a large-scale reorganization initiative involving several community services and about a hundred healthcare staff.

We were contacted in particular by the Head of the Training and HR Department, who did so on the basis of personal acquaintance. In fact, we had previously worked for his organization using action research methods (reference omitted to preserve anonymity). This experience had sparked his interest and that of his staff in new training and development initiatives drawing on recent advances in the Social Sciences. It also forged trust and invaluable insights.

The Local Health District was to be reorganized for financial reasons and to prepare for relocation to a new hospital. The Head of Training and HR saw this as an excellent opportunity to foster good practices. The participatory intervention would prepare the ground for the imminent change so that it was not merely implemented top-down but was also interpreted and adapted by the practitioners concerned (doctors, nurses, charge nurses, and psychologists).

## 3.2 The design of the initiative

After a first round of negotiation involving academics and representatives of the organization, we decided the intervention should be divided into two main stages. The first stage would establish a collaborative process for identifying which good working practices ought to be

kept for fostered (the cultural and practical aspects of work) and which should be scrapped (either because they were deemed obsolete or because the new arrangements rendered them irrelevant). In this initial stage, an attempt would be made to accompany the first change processes by planning them so that practitioners became the active authors of the more general reorganization of the hospital. A later second stage (to be managed internally by the organization drawing on its own organisational development staff), would be devoted to the further development, implementation and institutionalisation of the PAR results (for reasons of space, we do not examine this second stage in this paper).

The intervention (Stage 1) was overseen by a steering committee consisting of staff of the Health District's training service and three academics, two of whom are co-authors of this paper. The intervention proceeded through the following stages:

*Phase 1: Introduction*. The process started with a one-day seminar introducing the PAR approach and the theoretical framework centered on the concepts of reflection and practical reflexivity. The half day seminar involved fifty participants and was repeated twice, in order to cover a hundred participants in total invited in taking part in the initiative.

*Phase 2: Enrolment.* During this phase, we recruited the participants from among those who had attended the initial seminars, who volunteered to enroll in the whole action research process. About 80 members (out of about 100 who were originally approached) agreed to take part in the project. When asked, many of those who declined the invitation said they were unwilling to make such a long-term commitment or aired their skepticism – two responses that reflect the historical conditions outlined at the outset. For those who joined, participation was not rewarded in any way, although attendance would allow participants to earn some of the learning credits needed to fulfil the yearly lifelong learning quota.

*Phase 3: Participatory Action Research* (PAR). This was the central phase of the intervention and lasted about six months. Participants met once a month in groups of about 20 participants for 4 hours at a time. The groups, each representing identifiable communities of practice (Wenger, 1998; Koch, Selim, & Kralik, 2002), were drawn from four departments: the local community hospital (doctors and nurses); community nursing (nurses and home visitors); nephrology and dialysis (nurses and managers); drug addiction and mental health (doctors, nurses, psychologists and other support staff). Each group, whose make-up followed

the steering committee's advice, was facilitated by one academic and proceeded in parallel. Participants of the four groups worked on three main tasks:

- *Exploration of work practices*: participants worked to explore, investigate and describe their own working practices and professional activities using tools proposed by the two academic researchers (the tools are discussed in detail later in the article).
- *Analysis*: participants were involved in critically examining their professional activity to identify their best practices regarding patients and the organization, as well as those practices needing improvements.
- *Action*: each group made suggestions for changing/improving services and discussed them with their colleagues. Some initial piloting of the proposed innovation was conducted at this stage, although implementation of the innovations constituted the second stage of the project.

The first task was intended to develop diagnostic capacities; the second allowed participants to refine their reflexive abilities; the third enabled them to engage in active authorship of new work practices and organizational arrangements.

Between one meeting and the next, participants were asked to work both individually and in group on specific emerging tasks. Opportunities were provided for planning, reflecting and reporting among members of the same group and with the rest of the staff. At the end of this phase, all groups were asked to formulate specific projects for implementation within their operational units, initially at the end of Stage 1 and in full during Stage 2. This was seen as a concrete way for staff to turn the results of their reflection into practice.

*Phase 4: Wrap-up seminar and Evaluation.* The four groups met at the end of phase 3 to share the results of their work and discuss future action. The meeting lasted half a day and involved participants, organizational colleagues, facilitators and the members of the steering committee. A specific section of this meeting was devoted to garnering feedback on the initiative from the participants.

*Phase 5: Final conference.* At the end of Stage 1, a one-day regional public conference was held with the participation of various stakeholders, from politicians and managers to the public and the press. The conference was titled "Promoting and Developing Communities of Practice and Learning in Healthcare Organizations". It was conceived as an opportunity to give wide visibility to the results of the innovative project. It was also an opportunity for politicians to publicize the training and research investments made by the

regional administration, as well as its ongoing innovations. The overall process is summarized in Figure 1.

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**Figure 1 here**

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*3.3    The tools and practices used in the project*

The main aim of the PAR project was to translate the idea and principles of practical reflexivity into practice. In our view, different methods could have been used for supporting participants in their efforts to investigate, make sense of and author their organizational practices. The methods that were chosen (which are summarized in Table 1) are a combination of what we considered worth fostering and feasible in the specific context.

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**Table 1 here**

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3.3.1    Exploring work practices

Because practical reflexivity involves questioning the usual ways of seeing the world or acting in it, we believed that a first method should provide new capabilities in 'learning to see' −as a precondition for 'seeing differently', thus removing the authoritative sources and what was taken for granted. The first task of the four groups working in parallel was therefore to raise and explore their own working practices.

To this end, we proposed a tool we called 'Writing Instructions to the Double', or 'Instructions to the Double' for short. This is a modified, written version of the 'Interview with the Double' (Oddone, Re & Briante, 1977; Gherardi, 2000; Nicolini, 2009). In its original version, the "Interview with the Double" is conducted face-to-face and requires the actual presence of the interviewer. The 'instructions', as we have labelled them here, are written individually and directed to an imaginary interviewer.

Participants were first asked to undertake the following 'assignment': "*Imagine that you have to be substituted by a Double who will take your place in doing your job. Write instructions (things to be done and how to do them, suggestions, warnings, recommendations) that he or she should follow when going to work tomorrow morning in your place, so that: (a) he or she knows what to do from the beginning to the end of the day; (b) nobody suspects that a switch has been made between you and the Double*".

The participants were free to write the texts (instructions) as they saw fit. The only requirement was that they should provide as many details as possible about the actions that the Double would have to perform throughout the entire working day. Unlike the writing of diaries (where the aim is to record and reformulate experiences) (Boud, 2001: 11), the purpose of writing the 'instructions' was to grasp events and to recall them, –enriching them through details on seemingly trivial practices. Assuming someone else's identity (taking distance from one's self and approaching from another standpoint), imagining one's workday, brings into focus practices, feelings, appreciations, and tensions which all workers experience on a daily basis. The use of the written form and the private nature of the task (which was completed individually) allowed personal, social and organizational dimensions to be brought into the narration, producing rich material that could then be collectively shared and used in later stages of the process.

Three key components of this technique in our view make it relevant for the initial task to raise and explore the very well-known phenomenon of daily practices and turn it upside down (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992: 73) to gain greater understanding.


The first component is at-home ethnography, on which the Instruction to the Double relies on asking participants to "describes a cultural setting to which he/she has 'natural access' and in which he/she is an active participant, more or less on equal terms with other participants" (Alvesson, 2009: 159-160). By adopting the wisdom of ethnography, the tool quick takes reflection from 'thinking-from-within' to 'thinking-about-the-within'. The 'researcher' is in this case the organizational actor, who not only experiences the organization, contributing to its creation through everyday transactions, practices and interpretations but also engages in an investigative process intended to deconstruct it and uncover connections and meanings. By taking the work practices as its main object of inquiry — rather than the individual practitioner as in the case of auto-ethnography (see Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 1999; Humphreys, 2005; Reed-Danahay, 1997) — at-home ethnography allows the participants to access and surface the specific and critical aspects of their everyday activity, to identify

critical junctures in the running of their services, thus revealing the tacit and invisible texture of action situated within the professional groups (Thomson & Hassenkamp, 2008; Tagliaventi & Mattarelli, 2006; Tsoukas, 2005).

A second component of the 'Instruction to the Double' tool is its narrative construction. Narratives connect apparently independent and disconnected elements of experience into a meaningful whole (Currie & Brown, 2003; Watson, 2009). In so doing, they offer ways to deconstruct the dominant modes of sense-making and organizing by offering alternative visions. At the same time, the creation of narratives is a tool with which to give meaning and opportunities to re-think meaning, thus fostering practical reflexivity (Bruner, 1990).
Narrative inquiry and ethnography complement each other. "Words are in fact only half the story" (Hansen, 2006: 1072) and the construction of meaning takes place in a context which in its turn can be only understood in light of specific material, historical and cultural details. Understanding the way in which stories are constructed and why some stories are constructed while others are not is crucial for the process of practical reflexivity.

A third component of the proposed tool is writing, a third crucial means with which to foster practical reflexivity. The mobility of the written description facilitates the move from individual to collective reflection, because sharing the writing became a first way to re-interpret one's own practice and compare it to the practices of others.
The principle that justifies the use of writing in reflexive processes has been well summarized by Richardson and St. Pierre (2005): "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: 967).
The use of writing as a tool to activate collective reflection in work groups has been developed especially in France by the Activity Clinic (Clot, 1999; Kostulski, 2011). The approach is based on the assumption that the translation of thought into language and writing creates new possibilities that expand the horizon of the possible: the articulation of what is difficult to express therefore becomes emancipatory. Nevertheless, this requires developing the process at the work group level. 'Writing' the work together, and comparing and commenting on the results, thus becomes a form of self-research that can also develop (if guided) into a form of intervention.

### 3.3.2 Analysis: Constructing the meaning of work practices

The completed instructions were collected and collated by the researchers, who also conducted the first round of analysis using the principles of inductive content analysis (Altheide, 1997; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This intermediate step (which is quite common in action research projects) was taken to cut the amount of material the group had to process so that the whole process from exploration to analysis to identification of future actions could be completed within the relatively short time available. Our approach was supported by previous observation that data reduction and synthesis produced by researchers is very often more accurate, clearer and more usable than that produced by the actual participants. The researchers thus summarized, coded and categorized the material on behalf of the group following a process familiar to many qualitative researchers (Krippendorff, 2012): we jointly read through the material several times; we coded the content (initially in pairs when the coding scheme was still tentative and individually later, once coding criteria had been agreed); codes were assembled into categories. The list of categories is summarized in Table 2. The results were fed back to the groups and used to develop and compare interpretations of the categories that emerged from the analysis. At the same time, each participant was offered a copy of the Instructions to the Double written by each colleague.

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**Table 2 here**

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Following the data reduction and synthesis by the researchers, the categories were plotted on a large map and the relationships between them discussed and debated within the groups.

### 3.3.3 Action: Exercising authorship

These exercises incorporated into the action research process generated a variety of questions, themes and problems. Once 'the box had been opened', however, the complexity

of these issues had to be reduced in order to deal with urgent matters first and to identify management strategies.

For this reason, we introduced a third tool, that we called 'Actionability Chart'. Each group was asked to highlight tractable issues using a scheme which linked the problems with their perceived causes (Figure 2):

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**Figure 2 here**

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This tool provided a practical way to define the problematic issues, to position them and to assign the priorities. Attributing positions and causes to problems was crucial in the process because the 'conversation' among different interests, expectations, interactions and materiality allowed people to position themselves in the context, linking the theory and practice from which they drew. In the project, the participants collectively reflected on practices that could be modified. The task, undertaken during one of the final meetings, was therefore to devise plans for improvement. Each group used the last two meetings to define the directions of change and try to implement them.

*3.4    Learning from the participatory action research: notes on the theorization process*

As suggested above, a second learning process was at work in parallel with that of the practitioners. This came about mainly at the level of the research and steering group and had to do with the project itself, rather than with its practical achievements. The outcome of this process is the present paper and other academic outputs, rather than changes in the organization itself. Of course, this second meta-learning process drew upon, contributed to, and intersected with the project itself and the learning of the healthcare practitioners, so that distinguishing between the two is somewhat artificial.

The data discussed in this paper derive from three main sources: (1) records/documents from participation in the activity; (2) materials produced during the intervention; (3) formative and summarizing feedback obtained from the participants at different times during the work.

First, as part of the design and conduct of the project, the research team produced a variety of minutes, personal notes, and flipcharts that were used during meetings. At the end of the

project, all the sources were used reflectively to trace and reconstruct the experience. They were critical props that helped the researchers to reconnect with specific situations and events.

A second valuable source of data consisted of the materials produced during the activity. These included flipcharts and drawings produced by the group, as well as the recordings of the discussion at the end of phase 3 described above. As part of the process, we systematically recorded, transcribed (in part), and analysed the conversations among participants during these group meetings. The purpose was both to produce summaries that could be fed back to the groups themselves and to clarify the various aspects elicited by the discussion on professional practices.

Finally, data on the process were also collected as formative and summative feedback from the participants, both the steering committee and the members of the group. On several occasions, in fact, participants were asked to comment on the process and the tools used. This feedback was not only immediately used to adjust the process but was also used at the end of the project to trigger meta-reflection on the overall design and journey (as is the usual practice in action research). A particularly valuable source of information in this respect was a dedicated session where summative evaluative feedback was elicited explicitly from participants. In fact, a one and a half-hour slot was devoted to this task during the wrap-up seminar in phase 4. Participants were asked to comment on what new kinds of exchange were arising among the members of the groups; what new relationships were developing with the rest of the organization (steering committee but also other colleagues not directly involved in the action research); and what new forms of practical application were being generated by the reflection. The feedback from the participants was tape recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Theorization emerged incrementally during the reporting phase at the end of the project, and it was deliberately pursued during two intensive theory-building project sessions attended by all three authors. Prior to the meetings, we read the notes, the transcriptions and documents collected during the project. During the first meeting we decided that one of the most promising sources of 'theory' would be the (second-order) reflection on the theoretical assumptions utilized in the project. We therefore examined the tools used and started to reflect on the theoretical assumptions guiding the project. We worked inductively by moving back and forth between data and interpretation until we could identify clear connections between data and theory. Several alternative explanations were formulated and discarded for lack of logical consistency or because they did not match our experience. In the second session, we used a variety of visual methods (post-it notes, tables, graphs) to refine our

argument and build theory from our case study. The process continued throughout the writing process, which was very much a collaborative effort. It follows that, whilst this paper is strongly grounded in participatory action research, its aim is to comment on the theoretical underpinnings of the initiative, rather than furnish an in-depth description of the process followed.

## 4 Findings: fostering practical reflexivity and reorienting authorship in practice

### 4.1 The tools in action

According to both our observations and the comments of the participants, the combination of approaches proved particularly effective in pursuing practical reflexivity and authorship. Work groups were able to engage in a kind of reflexivity that was truly productive and transformative both for the participants and for the rest of their organization.

The instructions guided the participants in their effort to identify and articulate for others their own tacit routines, micro-actions and everyday practices. Emotional and intentional aspects of their work as well as the technical devices and artefacts that they used were also covered. The tool's ability to combine at-home observation, self-narration, and writing about work together, were key to help making visible to organizational members what the normal conditions of work usually render opaque. An example of instructions produced by the participants is provided in Box 1.

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**Box 1 here**

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On average, the participants wrote two to three pages rich with details, and in a colloquial style. Some participants initially expressed annoyance about a 'task' seen as taking up their free time (because they had to do the exercise outside working hours). However, after discussion among colleagues, they came to see the exercise as yielding useful, interesting results. The task elicited a narrative reconstruction of the situations with a particular focus on what was considered important to guide the Double in the work context. The Instructions, in fact, prefigured meaningful events and situations according to a temporal sequence (the span

of a day) consistent with a social order of roles and transactions. The Instructions to the Double in particular forced the practitioners to engage in 'thinking-from-within' (Ybema & Kamsteeg, 2009: 104) while the writing process required them to choose from the manifold aspects and meanings present in their context, filtering them through their points of view and those attributed to other actors. Because they had numerous plausible perspectives available, they constructed narrative plots that supported the action of the Double, in the process uncovering the tacit assumption that regulated the collective action.

The creation of a map which displayed the links among the crucial aspects of professional practice ensured visibility and usability for all the professional groups involved in the research. In fact, collectively constructing the map highlighted the connections among common elements of the work and among practices in action. Both the process and its final product brought to the fore the ordering processes that shape and recursively re-produce the organization system of activities in which subjects are involved. The process of eliciting both activities and their connections in turn triggered collective discussion and negotiation about not only what members did but also what was considered legitimated and sustainable in a given context.

Consider for example the following verbatim extracts from a recording of the discussion among members of the Mental Health group during the session in which the categories were fed back (the 'second meeting' in Figure 2 above):

[X1] "I'm struck by the representation that emerges of our relationship with users. It seems to me that this is what we all find most gratifying in our service…."

[Z1] "In our map the patients are symbolically at the center but it lacks many of the other stakeholders we deal with. For example, we have relationships with the prison but nobody has put them here. I see that our work has been described as one hundred per cent inside our organization, even though at least fifty per cent is in the community!"

[Y1] "But what do you mean when you write 'patient'? There are direct patients, those in the beds, and 'referred', indirect patients that we deal with in the same way and with the same energy."

As we can see in the extracts, the joint analysis of the category map allowed participants to recognize similarities and differences in how they interpreted the collective work. All

participants agreed that working with patients was central to the mission of the organization: but 'what was a patient?' and what was this 'organization'?

In short, the map reflected back the sense that the practitioners gave to certain attentions and narrative punctuations of their own professional practice. This in turn triggered a process of adjustment, and thematic referencing relative to the interpretation and signification of the text was obtained in the course of the social elaboration. As one of the participants put it later during the same event:

> [K1] "There's a lot more knowledge in the things that we do than meets the eye. It almost seems a submerged reality. Seeing it together, making it public in this way, means that you stay with the service, not with the person who, if he leaves, takes it away with him."

The process did not always go smoothly. Comparing and constructing maps also brought inconsistencies and contradictions to the surface. Consider the following short exchange from the meeting of the Drug Addiction Unit:

> [E 1] "You've put the urine in your Instructions to the Double. You've given big importance to the urine."
>
> [G 1] "Of course. If we don't check the urine, the patients lie and spoil the treatment."
>
> [E 2] "But you are a *psychologist*. You shouldn't start from there in the relationship with your patient. Leave the task of collecting urine specimens to us (nurses). Otherwise the patients won't understand our roles, our joint efforts."
>
> [H 1] "I agree with her. You shouldn't be concerned with urine specimens. Sometime the data aren't legible or there's an error so you have to be careful. And then, what's the point of having a multidisciplinary team with doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists and nurses if we only look at the laboratory analyses?"
>
> [G 2] "It's not true: I remember that time when the patient took the piss out of me! If I'd had the urine specimen, I'd have understood immediately! You don't understand..."

The conversation highlights the conflict between the service psychologist and the other members of the team. At issue are interdisciplinary conflicts, integration, and the professional hierarchy but also the development of trust and functional relations among colleagues. However, the extract shows that, by focusing on the details of work, the conflict is framed around a practical issue that can be addressed in practice. Rather than raising the issue of professional relations in principle and therefore at a level where it cannot be resolved, the

type of practical reflexivity that stems from thinking from within the activity brings the issue back "down to earth", where it can be addressed in practice.

The use of the 'Actionability Chart' and the task of crafting concrete actions plans allowed participants to move from dialogue to specific action. For example, one group (Dialysis and Nephrology) decided to devise new forms of inter-service communication and information exchange covering patients and their movements from one department to another. Another group (District Nurses) devised a set of metrics with which to take into account and measure the significant parts of the nurses' work, which had hitherto been invisible and was therefore considered immaterial and given little value.

Not all groups were so successful, however. A specific group (Health Service and Drug Addiction Unit) lost its way during the process and thus never acquired the capacity to rethink and author some aspects of their work. The distances of power and work culture among the professionals (medical, nursing, auxiliary and psychological staff) probably hindered the process and so did a lack of trust in the possibility of collaborating with one another. The difficulties of this group remind us that failure is always a possible outcome of practical reflexivity. Fostering and modifying the nature of organizational authorship is not a linear application of a set method or a rational procedure; rather, it is a complex and uncertain process associated with social and situated dynamics, including political and institutional dimensions that require constant work to balance, nurture and convince different stakeholders and players.

### 4.2   *Making the approach work*

If we abstract from our experience and from the approaches and tools used in this project, it appears that if reflection is to express its transformative capacity, particular attention should be paid to five aspects: *(1) language*; *(2) pace* of the activity; *(3) sociality*; *(4) orientation*; *(5) direction*.

*Language* is the factor that empowers the organizational actors. It makes their representations heard and the voices arising from everyday practice audible. To be understood, things must be said to oneself and to others. "Reflection acts as a bridge between language and experience, providing a connection between personal reflection and the social natures of language linked to organizing" (Kayes, 2004). The Instructions to the Double does not saturate all the words expressible; it does not define the most appropriate form of language to be used; rather, it leaves the subjects free to decide what level of detail is needed.

The *pace* at which events occur is crucial in ensuring participants remain engaged and committed. Each stage of an intervention needs to be timed in the light of awareness of the cultural and organizational aspects, history, and the situation. Thus one cannot say what 'the right moment' is to introduce writing or narrative in the process — it varies in each case. If we consider the case discussed above, it was clearly needed before passing to an action plan and was a first phase in exploring the context and discovery of its characteristics 'from-within', through the eyes of the organizational actors. Moreover, planning the future requires imagination, desire, engagement, and these are often connoted by emotions and feelings that require a gradual approach (Giust-Desprairies, 2003). Each group sets its own pace in completing the transition from reflection to action, from being actors/spectators to actors.

*Sociality* refers to the situated, relational, collective, and dialogical nature of productive reflective processes (Reynolds & Vince, 2004: 6). Sociality and dialogue thus need to be engendered *in situ* using both social and material resources. In our case, a central role in this regard was played by graphics and maps on which participants plotted the collective dimension of what was being said. These visual aids helped in understanding details and interpreting words, and they often facilitated and recorded both agreements and disagreements.

*Orientation* and *direction* ensure that the process is 'firmly anchored to the ground' and oriented to tackling concrete organizational issues. They help to maintain the direction of the development, improvement and innovation that the participants can carry forward. The ideas of orientation and direction also suggest that much is to be gained if the process is externally supported, although the practitioners must remain at the center of the action in all phases. As shown by our examples, mapping and analyzing work practices exposes contradictions and disagreement. Learning, emotions and power are inextricably tied together and the resulting dynamics may quickly derail the process, as in the case briefly reported in the previous section (Vince, 2001; Galuppo *et al*. 2011). Researchers thus need to act as 'scaffolders' of the process, attentive to the architecture of the intervention, its pace, timing, and tools, but also to power dynamics and professional politics, both within the project and between the project as a system and its contextual conditions (its "environment").

## 4.3   *From tools to journey*

In this particular project, choosing the right tools for engendering practical reflexivity at the individual and collective level was a necessary condition but not a sufficient one. Activating

the authorial process required, in fact, a particular project design that made it possible to move *from* reflection *to* a different way to enact authorship of organizational matters. In other words, we had to conceive the process in terms of a journey. This is to design an intervention according to a processual view that allows participants to gradually develop a sense of practical reflexivity, and on this basis enhance their awareness of the existing organizational authorship processes (which thus become easier to change). The journey is not linear and may well include detours and steps backwards in the path through the four waypoints:

1. investigation of work contexts from within;

2. comparison of views and interpretations of those contexts;

3. identification of 'tractable' problems within everyday activities;

4. orientation towards action or implementation, and the future – so that reflection is conceived as a transformative process and not as an end in itself.

Steps 3 and 4, which are rarely mentioned in the literature, appeared critical in our project. Traditionally, the journey towards fostering and strengthening authorship in fact focuses on the first two aspects (steps 1 and 2 above). The idea is to help practitioners realize that organizational reality is socially constructed and therefore mutable. Change thus becomes a possibility. Most reflection-based (and practical reflexivity) initiatives, however, often stop at this point. Arresting moments are generated but individuals are then left alone to take the next step. Faced with organizational conditions often beyond the scope of their jurisdiction, they experience frustration and a sense of powerlessness, rather than empowerment (this is a traditional criticism levelled by critical management scholars against interventions of this type. See e.g. Fenwick, 2003 for a discussion). Our finding is that to engender more authorially-based approaches to reflexivity, it is vital to orient the discussion towards action and actionable ideas. Because authorship needs to be developed rather than re-discovered, it is also important that the issues on which participants are asked to work are perceived as challenging and complex but also tractable. We define as 'tractable' those problems on which it is possible to exert direct influence by joining a group of people with enough power to engender change and maintain it over time. Recovering a sense of authorship therefore relies on identifying practical situations that can offer the opportunity to achieve transformations and changes.

The story of the General Medicine Unit is particularly significant in this regard. Growing numbers of those in the discipline agree that clinical work should be patient-centered. Doctors and nurses in the hospital are required to comply with this mandate and to change their practices accordingly. Although the idea of patient-centeredness is widely endorsed,

*how* patient-centered medicine should be organized has different interpretations and implications. The process of sharing the Instructions to the Double and categorizing the different interpretations brought out different strategies of how this could be done in practice. It soon emerged, however, that the Nursing Record was considered a particularly crucial artefact. Hitherto, the Record had been often considered a chore and it was performed in a lifeless bureaucratic fashion rather than used as an opportunity for professionals to meet the patient at the center and share impressions. Reactions such as *"I really don't see the point of filling in this section. Nobody will care about what I write. I leave it empty"* or *"You can basically write whatever you want. Doctors will compile another Clinical Record, not even looking at yours"* revealed a lack of synergy among specialists that inevitably impacted on the patient.

Putting the artefact at the center of the discussion provided an opportunity for the participants to reflect on their strategies of integration with doctors and other professionals. The idea of specifically changing the artefact came soon after: collective reflections pointed out the need to eliminate those parts of the Record that were of no use to anybody, and the need to add spaces in the document through which to communicate with doctors. The joint effort thus focused on the tractable and concrete task of re-designing a more flexible instrument that could elicit suggestions, recommendations, and interpretations concerning the patient.

In sum, while particular tools and methods may enhance the connection between reflexive work and authoring within organizational contexts, the move to a more authorially-based approach to reflexivity also requires attention to be paid to the process through which this is obtained. Figure 3 summarizes the journey and tools used in our work, and how they contributed to reorienting authorship.

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**Figure 3 here**

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## 5    Discussion

Besides identifying a number of processual conditions under which to produce a more authorially-based approach to reflexivity, our project also helps to shed further light and expand on the concept of authorship. It does so in two ways. First, it brings to the fore the

social and material nature of organizational authorship; second it suggests the need to distinguish between authorship and authoring processes in organizations. In what follows, we discuss these two aspects in turn.

Our research first suggests the need to recover or simply re-emphasize the inherently social and material nature of organizational authorship (as opposed to the tendency to see re-framing of authorship mainly as the result of merely talking about it). From the perspective of the present research epistemic reframing through conversational activities and "everyday poetic talk" (Cunliffe, 2001, p. 352) is but one aspect of the process. Authorship must also be conceived as a social, institutional and material effort. This is both because the knowledge in question is not individualized but rather a feature of social entities (for instance, groups or communities of practice), and because the possibility of doing something about it ('agency') only arises at this collective level. Work practices and knowledge are in fact invested with collective interests, and every change made to them involves compromises, negotiations, and conflicts (Carlile, 2004). The latter observation is particularly important because, as we have seen, it implies that knowing practices 'from within', revealing implicit assumptions, questioning forms of action, and developing clearer understanding of cultural, structural and routine aspects of identification with work and/or the organization, is only half the battle. The next step is to turn this knowledge into action that has a real impact on organizational contexts. Authors such as Cunliffe (2001) conceive the reconstruction of management practice in terms of activities that help to shift the perception of "self, realities, and meaning" (p. 352). We, on the other hand, propose a more 'materialist view' where not only personal experience, but also institutional arrangements are the target of the 'reconstruction'. Generating agency as a result of reflexive processes therefore requires concrete ways to move from observation, knowledge and understanding to a subsequent phase of influencing reality.

This observation leads in turn to further elaboration on the idea of authorship, and it suggests the need to use two terms to identify two modes of organizational authorship.

As discussed above, the main aim of our project, in line with previous work on practical reflexivity, was to achieve something akin to what Paulo Freire called "conscientization". The term, which is usually translated into English as 'critical consciousness', refers to the process of "consciousness raising" whereby citizens, often from the poorest parts of the world, achieve an understanding of the social and political forces that make them poor and take action against them. This in turn is achieved through some form of educational praxis in which citizens take an active role in inquiring and changing their own social conditions

(Freire, 2005). It follows that organizational authorship exists in two quite distinct modes: a background, scarcely conscious, pre-discursive, taken-for-granted mode that is typical of the everyday activity of managers; and an 'enhanced' conscious, critical mode that unlike the former, is discursively accessible, at least to some extent. This distinction is of course not new and is in fact one of the basic assumptions of a number of thought traditions in the twentieth century, from phenomenology to post-structuralism and, more recently, practice theory (see, Nicolini, 2013, ch.1 for a review). To move from one mode of authorship to the other, we need a gear change that can be triggered either by a crisis or, as in our case, through a carefully designed intervention – what Freire calls praxis. The important point, which is often missed, is that authorship is not the outcome of such praxis. In fact, authorship exists even when we do not reflect or do not pay 'focal attention' to it (Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009). We are all authors of our organizational reality all the time. The question is the extent to which we are critically aware of this process and hence able to shape it according to our beliefs, desires and tastes. Our project suggests that it is useful to distinguish these two modes by referring to authorship in the first instance, and authoring in the second. Organizational authoring thus describes a special condition whereby authorship is both focally present, accessible to discursivity and open to reframing. Organizational authoring may occur naturally in the presence of breakdowns or be induced artificially through developmental interventions. What emerges from our research is that authoring is not an event, a sudden dramatic epiphany that helps people see the world differently. On the contrary, authoring is a collective condition that can have duration. During this time, authorship processes are relatively open to scrutiny and to change through experimentation and learning. Agency becomes infused with deliberation and purposefulness although always within the compromises required by the social and material conditions in which it takes place. Authoring is thus partly a mode of being, partly a mode of being together, and partly a space in which to be different. Of course, no organization or organizational member can last very long in what constitutes in effect a condition of expanded consciousness and ontological insecurity (Giddens, 1991). Organizational authoring, which in effect constitutes a window of possibility, can only be transitory, and at some point authorship must return to its normal state.

In this sense, one of the main contributions of our study is to identify a number of conditions, tools and design principles that enable organization to move from authorship to authoring and back. These can be summarized as: (1) *relating*, which means establishing dialogue and

negotiating meanings and mutual differences with others. The absence of this relational dimension may create distance from operational processes and material aspects and constraints, so that attitudes of closure and individualistic opportunism predominate. (2) *Reflexively questioning*, which requires the collective exploration of practices and relationships from within and on the spot. The absence of reflexive questioning may lead to the prevalence of stereotypes and inflexible views on organizational processes; to the defence of one's own positions and categories of analysis; to shortcomings and difficulties in activating spaces and moments of thought and reflection on one's activity. (3) *Positioning*, i.e. taking a stance on one's reality, recognizing oneself in one's work and seeking agreements with others to make it meaningful to oneself and of collective interest. The benefit of this stance is that it furnishes meaning, commitment, and a sense of organizational belonging despite physiological difficulties. Finally, (4) *authoring/mobilizing* — that is to say, agreeing to 'put oneself on the line' and take risks in experimenting with what is different, and accepting that this is a legitimate thing to do. As we noted at the outset, authorship is often difficult, and it arouses feelings of impotence and resignation. Deciding to re-read certain practices in one's activity system so as to identify its flaws and remedy them is a form of risk that requires both the mobilization of resources and the capacity to accept that other interests are at stake, and therefore that compromises and politics are intrinsic to authoring.

## 6    Concluding Remarks

In this paper we have discussed an approach to reflexivity that can foster the agential orientation of members of organizations and enhance their capacity to produce change in those organizations. Our starting assumption was that producing reflection individually and in writing raises the risk of isolation and it may reinforce already-existing beliefs and representations (Boud, 2001: 14). Engendering authentic practical reflexivity thus requires an active role in organizing the material, in mirroring the data through aspects of analysis (the process of categorization subjected to collective testing), and in activating a public conversation on the interpretations and meanings of taken-for-granted practices (Cunliffe, 2001; Shotter, 2006; 2010). Building on the results of a participatory action research project, we have discussed a number of methods that can enhance the connection between reflexive work and authoring in organizational contexts, emphasizing their functions and affordances. The combination of findings from theoretical reflection and lessons from concrete experience

suggest that promoting practical reflexivity requires attention be paid to both the tools used and to the process set in motion. The paper thus contributes to the current debate on practical reflexivity by suggesting concrete ways in which this particular individual and organizational condition can be achieved. Our subtext is that, although the combination of tools discussed here is very promising and worked well in our case, other tools and other combinations are feasible as long as they fulfil certain basic design conditions (which include attention to language, the pace of the activity, sociality, orientation, and direction). Moreover, the paper suggests that support and 'scaffolding' by facilitators and/or researchers is likely to enhance the process, speed up the procedure, and help participants to stay close to the task. Scaffolding and support are also needed to help participants abandon the passive and disengaged orientation described at the outset. To progress through ever-higher levels of engagement and responsibility, participants need to feel that they are involved in processes that are both safe and fair, a principle well known in participatory action research or collaborative management research (Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Shani *et al*., 2008).

The paper also makes a second contribution to the debate on reflection and practical reflexivity. Building on the analysis of the research results, the paper suggests the need to foreground the social and material dimensions of authorship. It also proposes using two different terms to distinguish between two different modes of authorship. Accordingly, we could call 'authorship' the normal process whereby organizational members, and managers in particular, contribute to concretely creating and re-creating organizational realities; and 'authoring' as the special mode whereby authorship is brought to critical consciousness. Here, authoring becomes open to deliberate reorientation by virtue of being accessible through and within discourse.

The paper also contributes to the current debate on the relation between academic and engaged research, and on the relevance of academic knowledge on management to practitioners (Nicolai & Seidl, 2010; Pearce & Huang, 2012). This debate is usually polarized between practice-oriented scholars who accuse more traditional researchers that their work is irrelevant to practice, and more academically-oriented scholars who accuse practice-oriented researchers of skimping on the 'science' (see e.g. Greenwood & Levin 1998, chapters 5-6). Our paper shows that a worthwhile conversation between these two camps is possible; and indeed that new and very sophisticated theories such as practical reflexivity can have both conceptual and instrumental relevance for practitioners when they are reflexively translated into practice. Our experience therefore suggests that we need to refine Lewin's famous statement that "There is nothing more practical than a good theory" (Lewin, 1952, p. 169) by

adding that even the best theory needs to be skillfully and reflexively translated into practice – and that this is a process that can be supported by other theory.

Finally, and strictly related to the former point, our paper contributes to the literature and debate on practice-based studies (Corradi, Gherardi & Verzelloni, 2010). Many of the tools deployed in our project, from the 'Instructions to the Double' to ethnography and the mapping and analysis of work practices and their relationships, are consistent with what has been defined as the return to practice in organization studies (Miettinen, Samra-Fredericks & Yanow, 2009). According to authors such as Eikeland and Nicolini (2012), many scholars have seen this return to practice from a traditional perspective and as just another way to observe work and activity from the outside. There is thus a risk that the return to practice may be just an academic fad nurturing instead of challenging the traditional 'spectator' position of pure academics. Our paper contributes to this debate by suggesting (as noted earlier) that profitable generative dialogue exists between positions. Indeed, practice theories are of crucial help to practitioners in mapping, analyzing, and appreciating the meaningfulness of their ordinary practices. Accordingly, use of the three methods proposed (ethnography, narrating, writing) yields data qualitatively different than those produced by organization research, which employs more traditional tools. Interviews and ethnographic observations – if and when they are allowed by an organizational context – may direct the researcher's gaze to what he/she wants to seek, rather than to what the practitioner needs to identify. The result is likely to be data that are richer and more detailed and analytically sophisticated (after all, this is what researchers have been trained to do) but not necessarily as relevant as those collected by the practitioners. This in turn suggests that much is to be gained from forms of collaborative inquiry where these two strengths can be combined.

The paper offers a number of opportunities for further research. Future studies could explore new tools and methods with which to sustain practical reflexivity and authorship, or different uses of the tools described in this paper (for example, the 'Instructions to the Double' method may be applied to individuals or groups, in oral or written form, with different outcomes). As said, there is no single tool with which to combine the relevant leverages for promoting these processes. What counts most is analysis of the conditions in place in any real situation and organization. A comparative study of different scenarios would be valuable.

Finally, we should also consider what the myth of Narcissus tells us: while few people can resist gazing into a mirror, it does not mean they are necessary doomed to share Narcissus' fate. Looking in the mirror makes us both passive spectators and authors. It is up to those who undertake this activity to ensure that it leads to the latter outcome.

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