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Episode 1 Introduction

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#Storytelling

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**GENERATIVE  
JOURNALISM**



## Generative Journalism Journalism for Change

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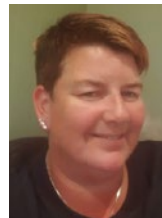
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## Research Review and Notes

# Appreciative Reflective Teams as a Method of Practice-based Learning

**This article presents a new method of developing and implementing ongoing research related to the SMART adolescence program in Norway, which those involved call 'Appreciative Reflective Teams'. Twelve co-researchers from eight services for children and adolescents used work by Tom Andersen to develop a collaborative research method, aimed at fostering professional and ethical practice-based learning in and across the services.**

Reflecting teams have become an increasingly popular training tool since the Norwegian psychiatrist Tom Andersen introduced the idea in the late 1980s, in particular in relation to couple and family therapy programs (Andersen, 1994, Cole et al. 2001; Shurts et al. 2006, Pender and Stinchfield, 2012). A literature study conducted by Pender and Stinchfield (2012) showed, however, that much of the research in relation to reflecting team processes has been theoretical or anecdotal, and that limited empirical research has paid attention to the client's experiences, reactions and perceptions of the process. They also emphasized the lack of professional ethical guidelines for best practices of reflecting team processes.

In this article, we wish to demonstrate how applying an inquiring ethical attitude toward one's own practice, may be developed through interactive learning processes, demonstrated within our research group. At the heart of our research is the following idea: By means of our research, to transform cultural conventions informing our current services and subject them to discursive change: from a pathological orientation (focus on problems), to opportunities, innovation and co-creation of a desired future (focus on strengths, workability, dreams and new possible actions), from "solving a child's individual problems by telling them what to do", to releasing their potentials in inclusive communities in which they take actively part.

We present a new method, "The Appreciative Reflective Team" (Hauger et al., 2018), which we have developed and implemented in our ongoing research connected to our work with the program "SMART<sup>1</sup> adolescence" in the municipality of Re (now Tønsberg) in Norway ([www.smartoppvekst.no](http://www.smartoppvekst.no)). Inspired by the work of Tom Andersen (1994), our research group constructed and developed further a collaborative research method, in which we strived to learn from our personal experiences, conducting what Marshall (2016) called "living inquiry" during our applied work with this program. Our applied model departs from Andersen's original reflecting team process in some important respects. First, we replaced the traditional roles in a therapeutic context (expert/counsellor-client) with a more open, egalitarian and democratic rotating collaborative team model of "co-researchers".

The participants alternated in their roles as practitioner (presenter), interviewer (first-researcher) and co-researcher over time in our reflecting team practice. Second, the reflecting team process applied an intentional positive lens perspective (Avital and Boland, 2008), drawing on strengths-based approaches and Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987), valuing

<sup>1</sup> SMART is an acronym and a value-based mindset which refers to: S, strengths-based; M, *medvirkning*, Norwegian for co-operation; A, appreciation; R, relations; and T, training.

“appreciation” and dialogical principles of polyphony (Hersted et al., 2020) as key elements in our relational-responsive ethical practice. Third, in addition to the original three phases of a reflecting team process (implementation process), we broadened the time our model covered (to two months), to include a pre-phase (preparation phase), as well as a post-reflection phase. The intention is to increase the possibility for the co-creation of cultural and social transformations in our services and professional relational practices.

Before describing how we used this method in our research, we will describe the metatheory underlying the ongoing SMART adolescence research, social constructionist theory (Gergen 2009; McNamee and Hosking, 2012). We will focus on the insights such a perspective provides in the choice and utilization of different research methods. We then give a detailed account of the method itself with reflective quotes from participants. We conclude the paper with a summary of our experiences and highlight possibilities for future researching practitioners working together in other local contexts using this method.

### Social constructionism as a perspective on research

*The main objective with our ongoing SMART adolescence action research is to initiate a bottom-up transformative change work ‘from within’ the services.*

The main objective with our ongoing SMART adolescence action research is to initiate a bottom-up transformative change work “from within” the services, and thereby to develop and implement new cultural, interdisciplinary practices (services) with greater capability to create resilience, health promotion and wellbeing for all children and adolescents in a community.

This mandate has implications for the way we have chosen to conduct our research. Research must be defined in reference to metatheories, or paradigms, research discourses and scientific perspectives (McNamee and Hoskings, 2012). Different research traditions have their own histories, presumptions about ontology (that which is), what kind of knowledge can be created (methodology) and which methods may be used (Hoskings and McNamee, 2012). A dominant and prevailing view (Woolgar, 1996) sees research as a scientific activity bringing forth knowledge about the world “as it is”. From this perspective, the aim of research is to develop descriptions of reality that can be tested and verified. The researcher, connected to an institution, must be objective and neutral.

Social constructionism does not contradict such an understanding of research; however, it builds upon utterly different assumptions regarding what research is, who can accomplish it and what the aim of the research should be. The goal of social constructionism is not to develop descriptions, but to create change (Gergen, 2015). Thus, the research should occur within the context where changes

are to be made, by those who know the context and who are motivated to use the knowledge developed to create the desired changes.

The research must be assessed by its usefulness for the participants (practice validity), and by whether or not the knowledge and implemented theories are seen as helpful in terms of achieving the desired goals. Terms like “statistical validity” (quantitative methods) or “authentic” (qualitative methods) have little relevance in research based upon social constructionism (McNamee, 2014).

Another distinctive trait of social constructionist-based research relevant to our context is the opinion that all research is “constituting” (Hosking and McNamee, 2012), meaning that research must be viewed as a process of creation. The researcher is creating data, method and theory through their research process. When the researchers ask a question of an “informant”, different questions give different answers. The relationship between the person inquiring and the person responding is interconnected. In a relational constructionist perspective, inquiries are viewed as an interactive process between people in relation to each other and their surroundings (McNamee, 2014). It is this interactive process which is being examined, not the “thing” in itself.

Table 1. Understanding what makes research consistent and inconsistent within different worlds of research (McNamee, 2014).

Scientific Method: Traditional, Quantitative (Let us prove) Diagnostic. Evidence- based practice	Scientific Method: Traditional, Qualitative (Let us understand) Interpretive	Scientific Method: Relational constructivism (Let us change the world) Creative
Prove	Understanding	Change
Observe	Describe/interpret	Co-create
True/False	Situated meaning	Create new meanings
Researcher/subject	Researcher/participant	Co-researchers
Discoverable truth and cause-effect mechanisms	Contextualized knowledge and diverse reality descriptions	Create new meaning
Statistically valid	Authentic to the participants	Useful to local participants/ generative
Possible to generalize and repeat	Knowledge possible to pass on	Locally and historically co-creative
Discover truth	Extend insight	Create possibilities

Research may also be viewed as a particular form of practice in which the participants in the conversation are given different (power) positions in relation to their work. This contrasts with traditional research, where the researcher is a

*Research becomes something everyone does and can do in their local discourses.*

knowledgeable authority and everyone else is a tool to be used by the researcher to enhance that knowledge (McNamee and Hosking, 2012).

Social constructivism invites us to take a generous view on research: research becomes something everyone does and can do in their local discourses. This understanding means the use of reflective teams is a way to honour local knowledge (Lundby, 2005).

### Social constructionist research and implications for choosing methods

When implementing a traditional (quantitative or qualitative) approach to research, the researchers' choice of method and ability to use it becomes fundamental to the researchers ability to prove that the quality of the research is trustworthy and reliable, and that the knowledge developed is validated.

When based on social constructionism, the research faces fewer demands into which methods are used and in what way. The term "method" holds no meaning in itself, write McNamee and Hosking (2012). Within social constructionist research, the main idea is that all research is a relational practice. All choices throughout the research, made from a given perspective, will be interpreted by the researcher and informed by the underlying philosophy of the research (Hosking and McNamee, 2006). This means that the methods used in the research process should give precedence to a cooperative way of developing knowledge and give opportunity to a diversity of voices and a diversity of interpretative possibilities.

In a social constructionist research process, it is also important to use "methods" to develop "data" about all aspects of the ongoing processes. Alvesson and Deetz (2009) recommend using the term empiric material instead of the term data when working with postmodern research. Data is referred to as testable (objective) observations of a phenomenon, or trustworthy reproductions of the opinions of others (subjective descriptions). The term empiric material indicates that all "data" (both quantitative and qualitative) must be understood as a construction and an interaction in which the researchers' own values, ways of asking questions and methods for choosing which data should be counted impact both the findings and their presentation.

*In social constructionist-based research, there is great freedom in the methods used to construct the empirical material.*

In social constructionist-based research, there is great freedom in the methods used to construct the empirical material. Our case, the research of SMART adolescence, contributes to the co-creation of new knowledge with the intentional aim of also supporting thriving of both participants and researchers

alike. In Re municipality, we have worked on learning and practice evolution based in a positive lens perspective<sup>2</sup> (Avital and Boland, 2008; Golden- Biddle and Dutton, 2012), meaning that we explore and investigate situations where we succeeded within a focus of choice. In every session, we start by examining what has been invigorating, innovative and noteworthy in our ongoing developmental work. Then, each one of us is given the opportunity to share from our practice, from our own perspective. In doing so, we intentionally direct our attention towards what is meaningful in our own practice, what our success factors are, and how can we overcome obstacles in our way.

### The construction of Appreciative Reflective Teams as a method

The inspiration to experiment with reflective teams came from one of the researchers, Bjørn, who was part of a course in social constructionist research at Vrije University in Amsterdam. The method itself, inspired by the work of Norwegian researcher Tom Andersen (1994), builds upon the social constructionist presumption (described above), that we do not have access to an objective reality. Andersen (1994) developed the method in a therapeutic context, emphasizing how to establish communities (teams) where persons with mental health issues are given the opportunity to reflect upon their own challenges without being subjected to the psychiatrist's knowledge regime. This is one of the many reasons why we see this method as relevant to our work as practitioners and researchers.

Elements typical in reflecting teams are:

- The professional language of the knowledge expert is replaced by everyday language.
- The person in need of psychological help is offered the opportunity to tell his or her story and freely collect ideas on how he or she wishes to work at solving the problems.
- The person who is working to develop his or her own practice does not receive guidance. Through the participation in a reflective team as a learning group, the "client" is given the opportunity to observe and construct his or her story from many different points of view.

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<sup>2</sup> Avital and Boland (2008, p. 3) define positive lens as "an emerging perspective in social sciences that emphasizes our capacity to construct better organizations and technologies through a discourse that encourages human strengths and participative action in leading to organizational change".

*The results specify a shift in communication toward trusting, rethinking, comforting and nurturing.*

- The team may consist of six to eight people where the participants shift their position in relation to the story being presented, by sitting in an outer circle (purely listening) or an inner circle.
- It is in the inner circle that dialogue about the client's told story happens.
- The client shifts between the inner circle (participating in the conversation) and sitting in the outer circle, listening to ongoing dialogues.

An initial study by Griffith et al. (1992) showed support for the use of reflecting team process to facilitate an alliance in a clinical context. The results specify a shift in communication toward trusting, rethinking, comforting and nurturing, and away from controlling, monitoring and blaming directly after the reflecting team consultation (Griffith et al., 1992). Hersted and Frimann (2020) argue that a reflecting team process opens up the opportunity to bring to light contrasts, dilemmas, paradoxes, doubts and opportunities of a given case. They also argue that this training method may give the participants a possibility to gain new insights and provoke changes in fixed patterns of thinking and acting, and thus, serve as an eye-opener in relation to new possible actions.

We started experimenting on how to implement the basic ideas of the reflective team method with our fellowship of researchers in the autumn of 2016. Our evolution of this existing process was to add an intentional appreciative approach to the methodology. As such, we were our own pilot group to begin developing the appreciative reflective team (ART) methodology. Appreciation is brought into the very heart of our ethical relational-responsive practice, drawing on Withney and Trosten-Bloom's (2003) understanding of the concept. That is, to see appreciation as "an act of recognition" and "an act of enhancement of value". This means 1) to recognize the best in people and the world that surrounds us; 2) to perceive the things which give life, health, vitality and excellence to living human systems, 3) to affirm past and present strengths, successes, assets and potentials, and 4) to increase in value (the investment has appreciated in value).

In the next section, we will outline and describe in more detail the evolution of the concept "The Appreciative Reflective Team".

### Our model: The Appreciative Reflective Team

Our method – more a reflective process than a method – consists of three main phases:



- A pre-phase
- An implementation phase (the reflecting team process)
- A post-phase (reflection note and new reflection on insights in retrospect)

### The pre-phase

In what we describe as a pre-phase, one or more persons in the research group are given the task of preparing a presentation of their evolving practice. This has an immediate effect on the practitioner. Knowing that we were going to be asked to present our own experiences of practice is in and of itself an “intervention” into our practice, activating reflections and affecting practice in the period leading up to the presentation.

### The implementation phase

The next phase is implementing the reflecting team process. In this phase, the actual reflective team method is used. Over the course of about two hours, we follow a structured learning process in which the participants are given different positions and roles in connection with the reflective process taking place, based on a narrated story. To distinguish between the person with the narrative role and the others – the co-researchers – we choose the term practitioner when in this position. The details for this phase are expanded below.

### The post-phase

Finally, there is a post-phase with two steps. The first step is that the practitioner writes a reflective note that is sent to everyone in the research group.<sup>3</sup> This becomes the foundation for new reflections shared in an ensuing research meeting (step two). A cycle of reflective teams stretches over two months. Repeating this cycle over the course of a year allows everyone in the team to take on the role of practitioner in the research gatherings, putting their own experiences at the center of the reflective team processes.

Below we will give a more detailed description of how we worked together in the different phases of the project.

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<sup>3</sup> In addition, one or two of the co-researchers have the task of producing their reflection notes regarding what they have learned. That is, examples of new insights from what they have learned from the presenter's/practitioner's practice, or a reflection regarding effects of the method itself.

## The pre-phase

Preliminary to the first researcher gathering, in which reflective teams were to be tested as a method, two of the researchers from within the group were asked (by Bjørn) to present how they went about the work of evolving as practitioners based on the ideas of SMART adolescence. No guidance was given in terms of which story was to be chosen or how the choice was to be made. Up until that point, there had been four different presentations. Those who were to present, were given 20–30 minutes for their presentation. One colleague chose to tell a story illustrating her leadership style in a private kindergarten. The story was supported by a PowerPoint presentation showing pictures from the kindergarten, accompanied by short texts describing her practice. The manager of the school care and another kindergarten manager (a public kindergarten) chose to bring pictures from their workplaces and the ongoing developmental work in their practices.

In the reflective note that one of the colleagues (Irene) wrote after her role as “practitioner” in one of the reflective team processes, she wrote:

*Our practice is not made up of huge processes, but rather many small ones in collaboration with each other.*

Throughout the preparations, I became more conscious of what I and we did in the kindergarten. Our practice is not made up of huge processes, but rather many small ones in collaboration with each other. It is good to become conscious of what I do as a leader, what I facilitate, what roles the rest of the leaders and personnel play, how we interact, and what we do with children and parents in our everyday life. It creates new reflections, not least pride about the work being done in Linnestad kindergarten...

I was anxious about presenting to the group but, at the same time, it felt good to share narratives from the positive work happening in my kindergarten between my colleagues and I. It was a good feeling to stand there, sharing subject matter that belongs to oneself. It was not until now I understood in what way I could contribute to a research group (reflective note from co-researcher Irene).

Another colleague (Anne Gry, principal primary school) expressed herself like this:

I was excited about the presentation, I felt confident and happy about showing that this is something we have done together in two years at Røråstoppen school. It was a powerful experience to hear others reflect upon my work, observe their positivity and curiosity. To listen to their interest

*We wish to honour each other's practice and highlight the value of locally developed knowledge.*

and what they consider as valuable about my work. I saw that as a great recognition – more than I can describe in words.

Lundby (2005) writes that the reflective team is an honouring practice. In line with this, we have chosen to name our method appreciative reflective teams. We wish to honour each other's practice and highlight the value of locally developed knowledge. We do this knowing that to give local knowledge an elevated status challenges and transforms the relationship between knowledge, expertise and power (Anderson, 2014). The individual telling the story is given an important position. The person who speaks about his or her practice, and we as a reflective research community, will take on the position of expertise. We display this by giving the story place and time, and by enlightening all that we find to be valuable, educational and good in what we hear and observe.

As seen from a social constructive perspective, an appreciative way of being is valued because it gives the participants the resources needed to establish contact with each other, collaboration and mutual learning (Hoskings and McNamee, 2005). Acknowledgement is all about wanting to understand the other on his or her terms, mutually understanding the other person's meanings, values and moralities without having to agree. When everyone in a community takes on such an appreciative stance, it is possible to cooperate despite disagreements. This is what we call "polyphonic dialogue": to acknowledge differences as a resource and as a possibility to gain new insights and new knowledge. Before getting started on the appreciative team process, we would normally have a session where everyone is given the opportunity to "share positive experiences with each other". This opening session helps us to create an atmosphere where everybody feels safe and comfortable when sharing from our own personal experiences.

### The implementation phase

A typical starting point would be to take about ten minutes to divide into pairs, taking turns to share something, which has been joyful, inspiring or uplifting. Then we share the "good news" with the whole group, meaning everyone will have shared their experiences, heard others and been heard. Through this, we strengthen the proximity to each other and (re-) establish the appreciative discourse, which we want to underlie the work in appreciative teams.

The person tasked with presenting his or her practice has between twenty and thirty minutes to tell the story in any way they wish, without being interrupted.

After, the listeners are given an opportunity to present short, descriptive and appreciative feedback<sup>4</sup> on what we find inspiring.

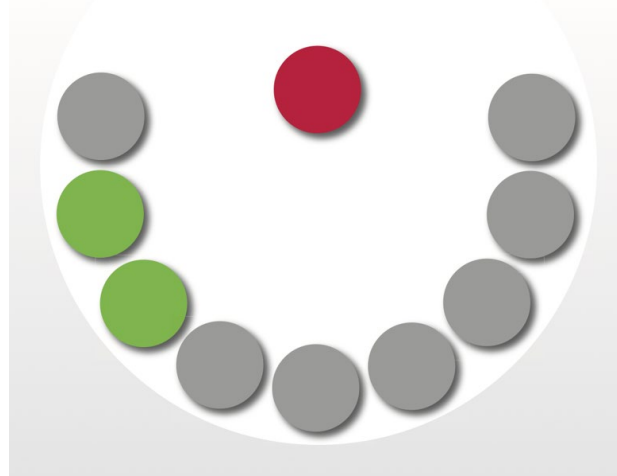


Figure 1: The start of the reflective team process. The presenter (red circle) narrates. The other participants listen. Two participants (green circles) lead the reflection process.

Then there is a reflective team process. The participants sit in inner and outer circles, usually with three participants in the inner circle, the “practitioner” with two research colleagues. The researchers in charge of the learning in the inner circle are the “first researchers”. The other co-researchers (eight at the most) are in the outer circle. In the inner circle, dialogues about the practice presented example takes place.

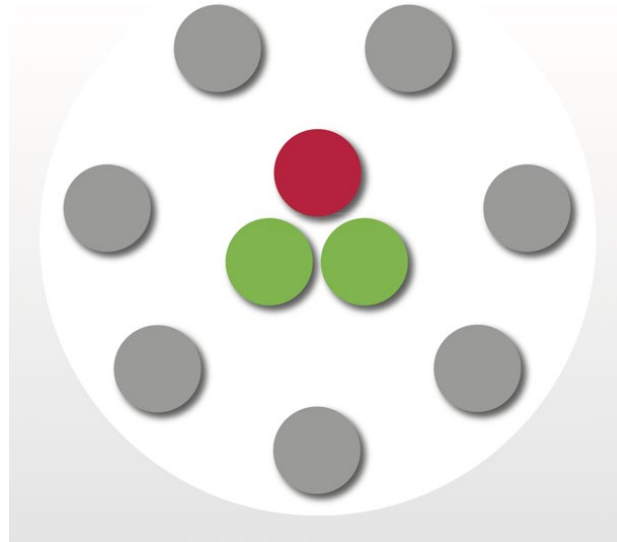


Figure 2: The presenter/ practitioner (red circle) is now situated in the inner circle. The colleagues in charge of leading the reflective process undertake an appreciative interview with the presenter/ practitioner.

The role of the presenter/ practitioner changes from being purely narrative to dialogue-based. The two co-researchers in the inner circle lead the conversation by asking prepared and improvised questions of the presenter.

<sup>4</sup> Refers to the concept ‘Active constructive responding’ (Gable et al, 2004).

The co-researchers in the outer circle listen actively to the conversations in the inner circle. There are no rules for what to listen for, except for what is implied in the discourse-based expectations of listening in a “positive lens perspective”: we listen for what is good, what inspires, what is valuable. We write down thoughts, questions and new ideas emerging from this process.



From the left, outer circle: Vidar Bugge-Hansen, Bjørn Hauger, Elisabeth Paulsen, Henriette Arnesen, Anita Karlsen, Lars Tore Carlsen, In the inner circle, from the left: Tina Feyling, Henrik Arnesen and Siri Schmidt.

Those in the outer circle look for that which holds the most meaning for them individually, compared to their evolving practice in their context. Each person is free to pick ideas from their co-researchers to evolve their practice. One of the co-researchers (Vidar) made a note about being a listener:

It happens here and now. How do I act in meeting you? Small encounters with another can have huge impact and great ripple effect. In my case, this makes the meaning of meta-reflection emerge with great force. Our ability to reflect upon our individual and generic practice using SMART as a value-based compass is of great significance to our ability to build capacity. It allows each of us the opportunity to develop our SMART practice so as not to become copies of each other. It is not satisfying to anyone merely to copy.

In the position as the listener, one’s own experiences interact with what is being told, allowing us to vocalize important aspects of our own practice that are meaningful to the success of our practice, our practices in general and the ongoing developmental work. In the quote above, Vidar describes how he, through a position as listener in a reflective process, becomes more conscious of how we can create transformative changes through taking hold of the present and working with “micro situations” to focus on “meta reflections” in our SMART work.



In the inner circle, to the left: Anita Karlsen, Anne Gry Kaldager and Vidar Bugge Hansen.

This is the kind of revelation that we cannot predict and that will lead to improvements in our own practices. These kinds of eye-opening experiences and new discoveries happen all the time when working in these team processes.



Figure 3: In the inner circle the participants from the outer circle share what they have learned and new ideas from the presentation and the appreciative questioning of the presenter (red) who sits outside the circle, listening.

After twenty minutes, those previously in the outer circle move to the inner circle, while the presenter sits (alone) in the outer circle. From this position, he or she will listen to the dialogues taking place in the inner circle. In the inner circle, the “first researchers” lead the conversation, which starts with presentations from the outer circle about what they have learned or received

in terms of new thoughts and ideas after listening to the conversations in the inner circle.

I hear from others that my leadership is strongly anchored in theory, and that theory is shown through my leadership. I live it – in all situations and in all relations. It is powerful to hear this expressed. It became clear to me that this is how I deal with challenges and obstacles ...

There is a description of a confidence in me and a belief in what I wish to achieve at my school. I dare to face difficult situations and keep going through “the storm”. Through working together, we also stand stronger in facing challenges. It is easier to get where we want to be when we focus on the desired future.

From the people around me, I hear that I am present, have a good overview, and play a part in every joint in the organization. I reflect and facilitate reflection with others; collaboration is important in teams, and networks. It is important to rehearse – no one improves without practice. In rehearsing, it is also important to make corrections along the way, if necessary. I work to make it feel safe to do things differently. There is room for making mistakes – we can learn a lot from mistakes. I am not afraid of showcasing my mistakes – I am a learning individual. I want us to be a learning school.

I am seen to be strong in relationships. I show relational understanding. There are “we-effects” throughout the organization, openness and open resources giving the opportunity to collect experiences, experimental practice is described, the language is not one of theory, but theory directs actions. I see a great degree of collaboration/involvement between co-workers. I dare to take time in order to get people onboard. We create cultural change over time...

A co-researcher, Anne Gry's reflections while in the outer circle, listening to the conversations between the other participants in the research group, reflecting on her presentation.

After another twenty minutes, we invite the presenter into the inner circle. Everyone in the research group is now in the inner circle. The concluding reflection process starts with the “practitioner” forwarding his or her reflections on the dialogues as perceived from the listening position in the outer circle. The other researchers then ask follow-up questions and elaborate on what is said.

Based on the questions from the rest of the group, I got the feeling of being acknowledged and seen. My contribution could also inspire others, and bring new ideas to their practice. It gave me a sense of pride and a good feeling that I, well knowing how to, am able to bring something concrete into the group which I have ownership of. Deep diving into some of the things I said is valid because it spikes further reflection and gets my mind going as well.

Extract from Irene's reflective notes

It strengthens and explains why things work well and leads to quality in my kindergarten. At the same time, it makes me want to tell so much more. Areas that may be important that were touched, but I did not get a chance to talk about.

## The post-phase

Those tasked with making a reflection note from the reflective team process do this shortly after the implementation of the process. The smallest result is a reflection note from the presenter. One chooses what to outline as being important new insights or learnings, and the way in which to present these reflections.

The note is then distributed to everyone in the research group. In the meeting following the reflective team process, we continue working on the reflection note.

*Anita uses terms like 'spark' and 'power' when describing what she wants to achieve.*

Anita tells about her start as the manager of a (to her) new kindergarten. She has become more aware of her own competency, what happens, how she can get a positive development amongst the employees in the kindergarten. How she works to identify and activate the strengths of the employees in working with problem-solving, etc. Anita uses terms like "spark" and "power" when describing what she wants to achieve. I notice that Anita started using a log/diary to become more aware of her own practice. I think, this is important to learn more about: How do you work with your diary, Anita? How can this become a method that may help others to achieve an evolving reflective practice?

### **How to build competency in an area where we "are not great"**

Anita describes how an innovation takes place in terms of ways to do domestic training in a workplace.

The example Anita presents is practising using computers. The employees described themselves as not good at this. Her goal was to show them that it was possible to turn such a defensive attitude around, so as to think differently about "assumed truths" (we're no good at this) and see in new and different ways how the employees can become assets to each other in working to learn. Anita's attitude was that we should enjoy and "play" when working with this.

Anita tells us that the developmental work was initiated in a personnel meeting where they discussed the meaning of being good – good enough.



What Anita started her work with was the attitude of the employees towards their own competency and what they were supposed to learn. In the meeting she led, they reflected on what it entails to be good and began examining all the knowledge the employees had about computers. Through this process, Anita experienced the employees' attitude changing from a defensive to a more open attitude.

Anita states that some of the employees truly knew little, but that was not a problem. Those who knew more than others in areas where someone wanted to excel were asked to set up "classes" for their colleagues. When they started with this form of training (instead of calling in an expert or sending employees on workshops), they also experienced challenges. It is not easy to take on the role of educator in your own workplace, says Anita. A new role must be mastered. If one is to become good at leading learning processes, this must also be learned. Through the process, a huge competency-lift took place within the personnel. Everything happened through existing resources by employees who initially believed that IT was an area in which they were no good.

In practice, Anita shows great confidence in her co-workers. She is brave, takes on a playful attitude (lower your shoulders – we shall have fun) and dares to let go of control. Anita has transformed her own leadership role and the employees are transforming their roles. The way in which employees and leaders collaborate to learn is now coordinated in a different way than before.

Bjørn's reflection upon and new construction of Anita's story. Sent to Anita.

In the following meeting within the research group, the reflection notes form the starting point of new conversations and new processes of creating meaning. Typically, co-researchers work in pairs and share their thoughts about what they see as meaningful when reading the text. Normally such a conversation will last about ten minutes. Afterwards the group gathers and shares what we find to be important, valuable or inspiring.

### Developing ethical competency in communities of practice

The method is a way of privileging local knowledge, the unique knowledge developed through communities of practice. According to Wenger (1998), this refers to a group of people sharing an interest or passion, and a joint commitment to excel in that area. Excelling relates to regular meetings where the participants learn from each other and share different resources: tools, stories, experiences with how to deal with obstacles, etc. Our community of learning is tied to the developmental work SMART. What unites us is the common will to

*The ambition of social constructionist research is to develop research characterized by subject–subject relations, where the researcher does not take on the role of knowledge expert.*

develop a new practice, making it possible to better the wellbeing and health of children and adolescents in the municipality.

One distinctive trait of social constructionism is the occupation with the constituting role of research (Hosking and McNamee, 2006). In traditional research, the “researcher” is positioned (and positions him– or herself) in the role of knowledge expert: the one who knows how research–based knowledge is developed. He or she will be the acting subject, gathering data from (more passive) informants (objects). Such a practice contributes to a knowledge hierarchy where the developers of theoretical knowledge gain power over those with practical knowledge.

The ambition of social constructionist research is to develop research characterized by subject–subject relations, where the researcher does not take on the role of knowledge expert, or where some forms of knowledge or life represent a more privileged position. In this perspective, one can say that an important aim of social constructionist research is for the research to be ethical. To achieve this, it is important that we as participants in the ongoing research reflect upon the construction of our community of research.

Does, for example, the PhD researcher (Bjørn) act as a knowledge expert? Does he withdraw from the group to make analyses of the practice of the other researchers, or does he contribute to enabling everyone’s possibility to act as knowledge experts?

One new reflection is the significance of good role models. Once again, we hear that these good role models are formed in close relationships... It is not coincidental who becomes role model for others. When we enable close cooperation and close, good relations, it is probable that this will become a chain reaction within the organization...

What particularly gave inspiration in Karina’s presentation was her ability to see things from the children’s perspective, to understand their situation and converse from there. Her ability to create participation. She works quietly, is goal-oriented within her organization and gains great respect and recognition for her excellent work. I see the significance of a leadership lifting and acknowledging all good practice. It has greatly inspired Karina to continually developing new practice.

The research makes us lift each other as good role models. Extract from Vidar’s reflection note.

In traditional (quantitative and qualitative) research, the environment and the people are primarily sources of information. Bjørn’s research, shaped by social constructionism, supports the ideal that the research should be collaborative, and all forms of practice should strive for subject–subject relations.

*The aim of social constructionist research is to change the world.*

### Academic implications

When research takes place in an academic context, the research must meet the requirements of documentation in a “strictly academic perspective” (Herr and Anderson, 2015). The research is expected to explain the steps taken in the research process (McNiff and Whitehead, 2009), how data is chosen and collected, by which method, and how “data is collaboratively analyzed and how findings are negotiated” (Herr and Anderson, 2015).

As explained previously, the aim of social constructionist research is to change the world. Meaning that, we who work together in this community of practice want to create something better. The knowledge developed must point those collaborating on the research in the direction of new, inspiring possibilities. To achieve this, we must search for the unique and new in each other’s practice. This means to create dialogue. Monologues only confirm one’s own assumptions (Anderson, 2014). Through using reflective teams as a method, the individual researcher gains the authority to decide which stories will serve as data about his or her developing practice. Instead of analyzing each story, we have worked through a systematic reflection process that has contributed to developing new insights and thus new opinions of one’s own and other’s practices, and new thoughts and ideas of how to develop practice.

When I first presented to the research group, I felt an incredible pride, and once you start telling, it is so hard to stop. Fifteen minutes is a short while!!

The opportunity to present your work makes you more aware of what it means to work like this, which is incredibly important. At the same time, you feel highly motivated to keep going. Becoming more aware of what works makes you want to go back to your own workplace and do more.

From researcher Karina’s reflection note.

These new constructions of meaning appear through the continuous shifts of position by the participants in the reflective team process:

- Everyone is given the opportunity to present their story, purely as narrator/presenter, without interruptions or having to answer/defend.
- Everyone enters the role as purely a listener of others’ stories. This position shifts through different phases of a developing story. Sometimes you will be listening in relation to a story of practice being told for the first time. Other times, you will be in a listening position to others’ reflections and a mirroring of your own story of practice.

Sometimes you will be in the position of a conversationalist where, through dialogue, you explore others' stories of practice. Individual's practices will form a frame of reference for the understanding of others' stories, when listening. You may freely pick ideas from what you hear and experience.

- Everyone will participate in dialogues about his or her own or others' stories of practice.
- Everyone will take on the role as dialogue leaders, with the opportunity to ask appreciative, inquiring questions of the one who has presented a story of practice.
- Everyone will enter the role as process leaders. This entails leading and shaping the appreciative team process.
- Everyone will contribute to the development of common empirical material, taking pictures, writing notes, drawing etc. Everyone will be given the opportunity to contribute to the decision-making when it comes to what "data" will count from the reflective team processes. Thus, many different voices will be heard, and we will harvest a magnitude of possible answers to our research questions.

The way we have chosen to organize our reflecting team processes, we argue, represents interesting new insights in regard to efforts of democratizing processes of knowledge formation. Our example illustrates, in accord with the core idea embodied by social constructionist practitioners, the will and ability to counteract overpowering relations (subject-object) in our daily relationships.

This may mean transcending our roles as teacher, leader, therapist or researcher (McNamee and Hosking, 2012) to see ourselves as equal partners and co-researchers. This agrees with the social constructionist ideal of behaving congruently (Anderson, 2014). Andersen's work pointed us towards ways to avoid placing the knowledge expert in the role of expert at the expense of others, an ideal we have tried internalize and perform in practice.

The reflections have given me greater confidence in my daily work as a leader. Confidence in how I can aid my employees betterment, in how I can create good structures, work with developmental work and action research in collaboration with the whole team. The reflections have given me insight into the meaning of structured work and playfulness, and the importance of safe environments to dare to "play", learn, make mistakes, reflect and share. The method has enabled me to reflect upon my own journey and see what has

What have the reflections meant to me?  
Extract from Anita's reflection note.

*In our work with reflective teams, we have been committed to the idea of learning together ways of developing insight.*

been gold to me. I am encouraged to keep working further and deeper with what I already do. Professional confidence.

### Stories in different versions

The stories of our own and others' practice will have been constructed in different versions throughout the reflective team process. Each researcher constructs a version at the beginning of the process. The storyteller will, at that point, construct his or her story purely as a narrator. From then on, each story told will be subject to new processes in order to create meaning. In traditional research (qualitative and quantitative research), this process will be described as "interpretation" and "analysis". In social constructionist research, the term "meaning-making" is used. Another term, more easily comparable to analysis in traditional (qualitative and quantitative) research, is "reflected relational" (research-based) knowledge. Alvesson and Deetz (2009) point to a process for developing research-based knowledge in a postmodern discourse, achieved through a systematic reflective process. The aim of the process is to create knowledge characterized by insight, achieved when the participants have learned something new about the matter at hand.

In our work with reflective teams, we have been committed to the idea of learning together ways of developing insight. What kind of insight will be developed is impossible to predict. We have chosen a relatively open path for the reflective team processes. Everyone is at a different stage in the team process, and is given the opportunity to "set the focus" for the research and bring forward their questions about their own and others' practice.

As a leader of a private kindergarten, you can feel alone. However, the strengthened collaboration with the second in command and the pedagogues makes Irene less alone. The personnel give a lot of acknowledgement and appreciation. From being singular departments, a "we" has emerged. In addition, being "we" is appreciated. Together we grow stronger. Employees are enabled and empowered to use their strengths throughout the entire kindergarten. You are able to think for yourself.

Describing the construction of new meanings. The first passage describes new thoughts about Irene's (presenter) practice; the second, new thoughts on the impact of learning in the ongoing reflecting team process, written by two co-researchers, Anne Gry and Tina.

Another pair of co-researchers reads the note in light of the impact this method of work (using appreciative reflective teams) has had on Irene:

We hear her speak warmly about how the process of reflective teams have sparked something in us, and has an impact on her. It is the creation of something new, between appreciation and becoming aware. Reflective teams lead to awareness. Awareness of the role as leaders. It contributes to

*Many of us will say that being together in this fashion, while working to learn from each other's practice, enables us to co-create individual and collective wellbeing.*

classification/sorting. Highlighting what is seen as meaningful elements. The creation of new meaning. The impact of belonging to a group is given greater value.

Everyone in the research group is tasked with formulating new insights about their own practice, in a reflection note. We have also drafted reflection notes where we specify what we have learned (new insights) of the reflective team processes around a colleague's practice, and reflection notes in which we present insight (newfound understanding) about the method that we are testing and the community of practice under construction.

### The powerful impact of appreciative reflective teams

Appreciative reflective teams, illuminated from a social constructionist point of view, is a particular type of relational practice under construction in our research group. A distinctive trait of this research practice is its explicit grounding in appreciation. Everyone in the research group who has written about their experiences with presenting and being in dialogue about their experiences from practice points to the exhilarating power felt when their stories of practice are met by appreciation.

Bjørn adds: "The appreciative way in which others listen, converse about and honour my practice goes on for nearly two hours. When I reflect on this, I return to our starting point for the research: it was started to create a practice in daily settings, where everyone (including ourselves) experiences inclusion and wellbeing, and are enabled to be at our best."

Anne Gry summarizes her experiences after being honoured through reflective team processes: "You lift what I do to new heights. It humbles me. It is very daunting to receive. I must listen and take it in. So much appreciation to accept."

This reflection led co-researcher Vidar to comment: "We are starting to see the unforeseen consequences of appreciation."

Many of us will say that being together in this fashion, while working to learn from each other's practice, enables us to co-create individual and collective wellbeing.

One discovery made by every one of us in the research group is how much more has been done and accomplished by our colleagues in their place of work, in terms of innovative developmental work, than we knew about. The reflective team processes bring these experiences to light and become assets to furthering our practice.

*We were all given a central position as knowledge developers.*

Several of us in the research group discovered that it was not until we used the method that we became aware of our role in the research group, and how we could contribute as a researcher in the ongoing developmental work. What happened is that we were all given a central position as knowledge developers, through presenting our own practices or the different roles in developing new knowledge. Our own practice also stands at the center of the reflecting processes, and each and every one of us may pick freely from elements of the reflection processes and others' stories in order to evolve our own practice.

The way we used the method shows how learning from your own practice can happen through collaborative learning. Using appreciative reflective teams as a method is a clear alternative to individual (and cognitive-based) approaches to experiential learning. An appreciative reflective team process stretches over many weeks.

Throughout this process, every one of us must take on different positions in reference to our own and others' practice: as a presenter, as a leader of conversation processes, as a listener, as a dialogue partner. Furthermore, we are all active participants in the construction of new understanding. These construction processes happen on many levels: in reference to each person's individual practice (twelve), the other researchers' practices (eleven) and our common practice within the research group.

These processes of constructing meaning happen continuously in our research meetings.

Through all these text-context processes and dialogues, room is made for our practices to develop in different directions. At the same time, the experience of realizing a common dream is strengthened. Vidar writes in his reflection note:

*Resilient children are able to handle what life throws at them.*

One thing that stands out for me is the great importance of our common dream or vision. The child/adolescent and their needs are at the center. Resilient children are able to handle what life throws at them. This is a clear guide for many people in Re municipality. This vision gives energy and eagerness. We have a common direction as a base for sharing and exchanging experience. Many people use a lot of creativity and energy to realize the dream.

## Summary

In this article, we have explained the emerging method of Appreciative Reflective Teams. Our research was approached as an action research process, led by a group of twelve researchers from eight different services devoted to children and

*An important task for us was to bring the research into the very heart of the ongoing developmental work.*

adolescents (Hauger et al. 2018). We have used this as one of several methods both to improve our own practice and to evolve a reflective research-based knowledge about the ongoing processes of change taking place in and across our respective work-organizations and services. An important task for us was to bring the research into the very heart of the ongoing developmental work.

We have described how our method in some important respects departs, and is further developed, from Tom Andersen's (1994) pioneering work on reflecting teams. We have taken the concept out of its original therapeutic context, and constructed and translated it into a more open, egalitarian and democratic, rotating collaborative team model of "co-researchers". The model represents a comprehensive training-practice, in which all the participants alternate in their roles as practitioner (presenter), interviewer (first-researcher) and co-researcher over time in our reflecting team practice. One of the intentions is to implement the will and ability to counteract overpowering relations, such as the traditional knowledge expert-client relationship (subject-object) in our daily relationships and work settings. We have also described how we have applied an intentional positive lens perspective (Avital and Boland, 2008), drawing on strengths-based approaches and AI (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987), valuing 'appreciation' and dialogical principles of polyphony (Hersted and Madsen, 2018) as key elements in our relational-responsive ethical practice. Finally, we have broadened our reflective team processes in time (two month cycles), by adding a pre-phase and a post-phase, with the intention of gaining direct impact on our daily practices and fostering professional and ethical practice-based learning in and across our services.

Evidently, more research is needed to shed light on the practice, organizing, perception and effects of Appreciative Reflective Teams. It is our experience so far, however, that this methodology of working and relating creates an inclusive, innovative and productive work environment in which everyone is valued, acknowledged and empowered. Power and support are given to develop practices in the directions each participant sees as inspiring. At the same time, we see our practice becoming more collaborative and coordinated as well as ethically based, due to increased awareness of our own and our colleague's relational honouring practice. In our community of researchers, everyone must take on all roles and positions in the ongoing research processes. This is a highly personal, demanding process that requires time. At the same time, as is demonstrated in this article, the method opens up the possibility of bringing to light new insights, contrasts, dilemmas, paradoxes, doubts and opportunities which function as a starting point for improvements and the implementation of innovations.



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