

Problem-Setting and Problem-Solving in Reflexive Dialogical Action Research Using Metaphors

Christy P. Gomez

Dept. of Construction Management, Faculty of Technology Management and Business, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia, 86400, Parit Raja, Batu Pahat, Johor, Malaysia

*Correspondence: cpgomez21@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

There seems to be a predilection by action researchers to view themselves as agents for knowledge transfer, rather than actors in the process of collaborative knowledge engagement and knowledge generation (production). The former is aligned to positivist thinking and the latter is of constructionism. This paper focuses on the creative use of first-level and second-level constructs (particularly those associated with key metaphors for aiding sensemaking and generative knowledge construction) as an important skill of the action researcher in problem setting that is crucial to generating possibilities for problem-solving. The main purpose of this paper is to provide action researchers with clearer insights regarding the potential for utilising metaphors for the purpose of reconstructing and redirecting activities in the situated context of doing reflexive dialogical action research aimed at optimising the potential for generative action. This work is based on a social constructionist understanding that reflexive dialogic action research, as a practice, is socially constructed and is fundamentally undertaken as a form of generative practice aimed at improvement (change). Evidence is provided of how the 'social constructionist practitioner' as well as the researcher, use categories or constructs related to key metaphors to form the basis for joint problem-setting and problem-solving as part of knowledge creation in reflexive dialogical engagement.

Keywords: Social constructionist perspective, Reflexive dialogical action research, Generative practice, Metaphors.

INTRODUCTION

Action research (AR) is considered to be an applied research methodology that bridges the divide between research and practice. Kurt Lewin developed the AR model in the mid-1940s to respond to problems he perceived in social action (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Noting that there was a lack of collaboration between practitioners and researchers to tackle practical problems, Lewin called for social scientists to bridge the gap and combine theory-building with research that is relevant to those practical problems. This collaborative mode of research practice amongst the action research community is very much a movement away from the professional expert model of research. In the professional expert model, it is the expert who leads the research effort, with relatively little direction or involvement provided by organizational members; and the research effort culminates with recommendations for action to be undertaken by the host or client organization. This conventional approach is very much premised on a positivist notion of objective knowledge and the dominant notion of knowledge transferability.

Following Marcos and Denyer (2012) and very much in line with social constructionist thinking, the view taken here is that knowing and practising need to unfold in a space of collaborative dialogue to bridge the different worlds of the researcher and practitioner. AR is based on a social constructionist understanding of knowledge as being socially constructed in an interactive (collaborative) sense. However, it cannot be denied that action researchers tend to be influenced and also sometimes 'pressured' to take on the professional expert model wherein the action researchers generate theories that practitioners are expected to apply. This approach is premised on the notion that the researcher is expected to be a professional expert, with a high level of competency in researching the relevant practice and having a 'bag' of ready-made solutions to choose from.

There are many different classifications of action research. Following Newton and Burgess (2008), action research is classified as emancipatory, practical, and knowledge-generating. Based on the researcher's interpretive lens, the action research reported here is taken to be aligned towards knowledge generation whilst addressing issues that are practical in nature. Knowledge here is understood as not just theory or information, but also knowing from within (Shotter, 1993). This knowing from within is a practical consciousness of everyday sensemaking. Hence, besides "knowing-that" (theoretical knowledge), and "knowing-how" (skill knowledge), there is also much to be gained from engaging in a reflexive dialogical situation that becomes a 'space' for "knowing-from" (knowledge one has from engagement within a group).

Following Wenger (1998), the form of collaborative engagement within the action research team (researchers and practitioners) is understood here with regards to being engaged within a community of practice, wherein "membership in a community of practice is [...] a matter of mutual engagement" (p. 73). This is seen to enable the provision of accounts pertaining to such aspects of the research that are directly reportable; and additionally provide descriptions that satisfy meaning-adequacy, based on what is termed here as historical (on the basis of longitudinal research) and culturally-contexted descriptions (in terms of being 'situated'). Here, language is viewed as a medium, which is the basis for human rationality, and in this case taken to mean communal rationality.

Communicative rationality is seen to be the basis on which communicative action (a competence), which is oriented towards shared understanding takes place. It is in this sense, that I find Habermas' view on communicative action in terms of achieving interpretive understanding - verstehen (see Brand, 1990: p. 30), as an adequate conception of a methodologically informed approach to achieving understanding and interpretation (data construction) of practice. This is based on a constructionist ontological position and is key to 'understanding in the situated context of being a member of the action research community and so able to achieve 'shared' understanding based on coordination through language. The position that I often take as an action researcher is of one who is oriented towards understanding in the performative sense (see Habermas, 1986).

According to Habermas (1986), the fundamental form of coordination through language requires speakers to adopt a practical stance oriented toward "reaching understanding," which constitutes communicative action (unlike strategic action). This is presumed to take place between knowledgeable social actors who conduct themselves in a rational and pragmatic sense. The context for communicative action in the research project reported here, which is the focus of this research analysis, was framed by the agreement between the academic research team and a group of construction industry practitioners to work as a steering group to develop continuous improvement tools for the construction industry.

It is important to note that the action researcher under no circumstances is believed to practise a wholly exclusive approach (aspects of the research could require alternative methods) or is enabled by privileged access to knowledge. It is without doubt that there are practical limitations posed in carrying out field research. These include problems of not being allowed access to commercially sensitive information; the researcher having to maintain 'confidentiality' in the interest of respondents; as well as research ethics that impose constraints on the research so as not to compromise the interests of collaborative partners. This paper presents the key dialogical aspects of an action research project entitled the Culture of Quality (CoQ) Research Project that took place in the UK with the specific aim of finding ways to embed a culture of quality within the construction industry. One of the key objectives of this paper is to draw attention to the use of metaphors in guiding the reflexive dialogic engagement process among action researchers (practitioners and academic researchers).

The research project was mooted by members of the Midlands Construction Forum, consisting of construction contracting organization's quality managers who were keen to engage academia to assist in designing continuous improvement tools for the industry. This was an EPSRC research project involving 5 construction contracting organizations represented by 5 practitioners. The approach was to have the 5 practitioners together with 4 researchers as members of the research Steering Group. Essentially, after much deliberation, this Steering Group "arrived" at the idea that the participating construction organizations undertake self-assessment with respect to a business excellence framework to identify individual performance and then proceed with benchmarking processes as a route to continuous improvement.

It is important to note that the initial methodology that was proposed for the research project was to do ethnographic research. However, this was not well received by the industry practitioners. Much of the initial posture of the industry partners regarding the research can be best described as fitting with the professional expert model of research. Finally, by default, the research evolved into action research. Here, it is more accurate to use

the term 'action research' to describe the methodology that was used, as any reference to participatory action research (PAR) would require justifying a more deeply rooted participation by both researchers and subjects (co-researchers). Additionally, for it to be considered PAR, the space that is co-created would need to function beyond the life of the specific targets of the action research project.

Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) remind us of two key features of action research:

- the recognition of the capacity of people living and working in particular settings to participate actively in all aspects of the research process; and
- the research conducted by participants is oriented to making improvements in practices and their setting by the participants themselves (both practitioner and researcher).

Reflecting on the Reflexive Dialogical Action Research Methodology

Action research (AR) is seen as "a process co-managed by the interested parties, not a technique applied by a professional researcher to other people. This means that action researchers visualize research processes in unique ways, and use these visualizations to help keep the processes moving in useful directions without imposing an overall direction from above" (Greenwood et al., 1998; p. 96). It is within this context of action research, that Gergen's (1978) proposal for the creation of social science that has a generative capacity is conceived here. Generativity is defined as the creation of new images, metaphors, physical representations, etc. that have two qualities: they change how people think so that new options for decisions and/or actions become available to them, and they are compelling images that people want to act on (Bushe, 2013).

In undertaking the role of an action researcher, I am convinced that we should not attempt to engage in dis-embedding knowledge as a traditional form of reflexive logic that betrays the logic of practice, a position expressed by Gherardi (2000). As Burkitt (1998) puts it: "Objects of knowledge cannot be independent of the accounts given of them, and that our understanding cannot be separated from the sociolinguistic practices in which it is achieved" (p. 124). In this respect, it is important to report on the accounting practices of actors, which enables a better understanding of how order and meaning are negotiated within a 'space' co-created that allows for generating alternative ideas or constructs.

Hence, a specific case is described here with regard to the practitioner's first-level constructs and the researcher's second-level constructs in the context of practical authorship within a reflexive dialogical mode. Authorship is the general process whereby members contribute to the reproduction of organizational realities. However, some instances of reflex and reflective responses are also identified in order to aid with a clearer understanding of the differences between reflex, reflective and reflexive. Here, the first and second-level constructs (metaphors and their related constructs) are centred around the sensemaking devices (in this case, the adapted self-assessment tool for business excellence) and benchmarking. This paper is an attempt at recognizing the manner in which metaphors can enhance the generative capacity of the reflexive dialogical action research effort, both in the problem setting and the problem-solving phase. Additionally, one of the aims of this paper is to act as a timely reminder to the action research community that there needs to be greater clarity to their work in distinguishing and illuminating the research process.

It is often the case that in action research the researcher's second-level constructs are intertwined with the first-level constructs of the practitioners in a reflexive manner to realize possibilities in a situated sense. This is seen here as being a critical part of the reflexive dialogical process of problem-setting (reflecting component) and problem-solving (generative component) that is crucial for collaborative engagement aimed at improvement or change. In this work, the purpose of drawing a distinction between the first-order constructs of the people studied and the second-order constructs of the researcher differ from that referred to by Schütz. Here, both the first-level constructs and second-level constructs are not separated as proposed by Schutz's (1967) two-stage model of social methodology. Any 'clinical' attempt to undertake a task of 'separation' of both types of constructs (the metaphors and their related terms) is seen as problematic from a constructionist perspective. Both types of constructs are deemed to be intricately embedded within the body of action research work (a blend of the scientists' knowledge and the practitioners' knowledge).

Thus, the approach taken in this paper differs from the discipline-based approach of Schutz's model, where "actions must first be described, and understood in terms of actors' meanings after which they can be explained by concepts meaningful to the analyst and the audience" (Knorr-Cetina, 1981: p.18). It is interesting to note that Knorr-Cetina (1981) as well expresses the point that the explicit commitment of micro-sociologies, such as

symbolic interactionism, is however not evident in practice – which in this case is that of reflexive dialogical action research. As such it is my strong conviction that any commitment aimed at separating the first level and second level constructs in the practice of action research can be limiting and reduce the opportunity for developing wider conjoint collaborative action.

Following Ripomanti et al. (2016), the methodological approach taken here is that of doing reflexive dialogical action research. Critical to this approach is the creation of a space for collaborative dialogue, and supplementing it with a reflexive mode that is used to create generative moments (Shotter, 2010). This paper highlights the reflexive thinking mode that is integrated within the reflexive dialogical approach, which is iterative in nature, leading to problem-setting and problem-solving. Key insights towards engaging in such a practice are presented in this paper. This is explicated in terms of the use of first-level and second-level constructs (specifically in terms of metaphors and their related constructs that are crucial to creating generative moments) within the reflexive writing mode as part of the broader interpretivist research paradigm. Hence, this paper is presented within the context of research that was undertaken by individuals performing as social constructionist researchers engaged in reflexive dialogical action research.

The Social Constructionist Perspective

According to Schon (1994):

In the constructionist view, our perceptions, appreciations, and beliefs are rooted in worlds of our own making that we come to accept as reality. Communities of practitioners are continually engaged in ‘worldmaking’. Through countless acts of attention and inattention, naming, sensemaking, boundary setting, and control, they make and maintain the worlds matched to their professional knowledge and know-how. When practitioners respond to the indeterminate zones of practice by holding a reflective conversation with the materials of their situations, they remake a part of their practice world and thereby reveal the usually tacit processes of worldmaking that underlie all of their practice.” (p.245-6).

The domain of inquiry addressed in this paper is essentially an *a priori* commitment to what is empirically accessible, with a focus on the methodological aspect of ‘what passes for knowledge’, informed by a social constructionist perspective with regards to ‘reality’ construction. As noted by Green (1998), “the notion that reality is socially constructed, and therefore, continually re-negotiated is widely accepted within the interpretive paradigm of management research” (p. 381). Hence, the very ‘practices’ that are the source of mutual engagement need to be investigated in-depth, keeping in mind that the action of engagement is not the work of a neutral observer. Additionally, as pointed out by Gergen and Gergen (1991), the “accounts of objects are never independent of the observer” (p. 77).

Often, we are faced with members of the research community who are determined to have the researcher identify the research problem or issue on their own terms. The constructionist’s invitation is to comprehend how aspects of the world that are taken for granted are socially constructed. Fundamentally, this opens up the space for a variety of alternative intelligibility (Galbin, 2014) that broadens the scope for co-creating new spaces for generative dialogue. In a broader sense, the constructionist perspective is very much postmodernist in nature. According to Lax (1992), postmodernist writings “focus on ideas regarding text and narrative, with attention to the importance of dialogic/multiple perspectives, self-disclosure, lateral versus hierarchical configurations, and attention to the process rather than goals” (p. 69). Additionally, as pointed out by Steedman (1991), meaning does not lie around in nature “waiting to be scooped up by the senses; rather it is constructed” (p. 54).

It is evident that in trying to articulate what there is, as pointed out by Gergen (1999), “what is truly and objectively the case - we enter into a world of discourse- and thus a tradition, a way of life, and a set of value preferences” (p. 222). In social constructionist terms, this constitutes an aspect of ‘reality’ in its own right and not just an attempt to represent reality. This stands in contrast to the Cartesian approach to research, which sees the world as fixed and external, where words have fixed referential meaning and in which rational agents are engaged in linear communication of ‘information’ (see Rommetveit, 1987, cited in Lave, 1991).

Thus, as an action researcher, it is important to use concepts (second-level constructs, as opposed to first-level constructs of actors) in a sensitising manner. These serve as explanatory devices within an interpretive framework and also are key to the reflexive dialogical practice that serves to realize options for solutions (generative capacity). Reflexive dialogue is an essential part of the sensemaking, learning and generative process. Essentially, reflexive dialogical practice means reworking knowledge as “knowing-from within”, where we grasp a sense of our situation in what we do and say (Shotter, 1993:18). Simply stated, the work of a social constructionist

researcher engaged in reflexive dialogical action research entails an explicit attempt to situate the research, providing deep insights in framing the research process. This is termed by Alvesson et al. (2000) as “data construction (interpretation) and text production (authorship)” within current intelligibility. It is in this sense that this work is considered as being aligned with postmodernist writing, and is dynamic even in terms of generating actionable outcomes.

Research Background/Context

The wider research project was a collaborative research initiative between academia and industry (the construction industry, to be specific) to develop tools and techniques for continuous improvement relevant to the construction industry. This was envisaged as being the issue or problem at hand as experienced by the industry practitioners, who were part of an organization in the UK called the Midlands Construction Forum. With respect to the above-mentioned research focus, a key aspect of the research that developed through weeks of collaborative discussions entailed the exercise of a ‘business excellence self-assessment’ of the participating construction contracting organizations. This was agreed upon as a means to provide more tangible outcomes that could help identify ‘best practice’ and indicate current performance, with the specific aim of undertaking to benchmark between participating organizations. As such, the existing generic European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM®) Business Excellence Model was customised as an assessment tool for enabling continuous improvement.

For want of a better description of any one particular method used within the wider research project, the reference here is made specifically to the use of metaphors as a method to elicit different narratives of experiences and possibilities. The aim here is to set in motion a description of some of the ways to conceive a problem and initiate the generation of solutions by doing action research. However, we must always remember that in AR, action comes first, which is the engagement in the practice itself. This is very much different from the approach taken by quantitative researchers. Often this has been a problem with novice qualitative researchers, as they seem perturbed by what may seem initially as a lack of a systematic, organized and deterministic research environment. Another aspect that often has been a bone of contention with thesis examiners who are not exposed to the broader qualitative research paradigm is the importance of placing emphasis on the description of the research process, which from a reflexive constructionist perspective is the ‘heart and soul’ of defining and understanding the project and its outcomes.

Whilst there will always be concerns in terms of the possibility of having still further insights to explicate the full research (closure), this is never seen as being a problem based on social constructionist understanding as there is no fixed reality (multiple realities) out there. Hence, this piece of reflexive dialogic research work focuses mainly on the use of metaphors (and their related constructs that are presented in snippets of unstructured interviews), in aiding problem setting and problem-solving; and some brief descriptions of the research method. The practitioners and researchers involved in the ‘Steering Group meeting dialogic process’ enabled the evaluation of the self-assessment process (using a sensemaking device and engaging in reflective thinking) and the construction of their understanding of benchmarking through mainly reflexive dialogical interpretive work, engaged as practical authors.

Interpretive Insights into the Reflexive Dialogical Process

An initial challenge facing the research Steering Group was the difficulty faced by the two diverse sets of members (academic researchers and practitioners of the construction industry) in deciding on the field research techniques to be used to identify construction industry-relevant tools and techniques for continuous improvement. Key to this effort was the realization that much of the initial discussions (the practice of researching practice) required having to take on an exploratory mode. Soon it was apparent that the research methodology that evolved was an AR approach (although the term AR was never mentioned).

The participating industry practitioners were initially focused on obtaining the ‘value added’ from the research team in terms of developing relevant and credible tools and techniques for continuous improvement - the thinking that is very much aligned with the professional expert model of AR. Thus, began the ‘discussions’ and ‘negotiations’ at Steering Group meetings to arrive at a mutually agreed method to be used in order to benchmark so as to identify best practices within the industry. This required efforts of engaging in a reflexive dialogic process that involved ‘explorations’ towards generative theorising utilising key constructs that served to aid problem-setting (defining the problem) and problem-solving.

The reproduction of the 'reality' with respect to benchmarking is abstracted as follows:

A critical juncture that gave a sense of clear direction to the research was the realization that a focus on just metrics can misdirect effort. From the discussions with the participating construction contracting organization's Quality Managers (practitioners) it evolved that merely identifying the performance gap (a form of quantitative analysis of the output of a process, as a form of comparative metric analysis relying on Key Performance Indicators) without having justified reasons for the performance gap was not going to be of much use. After much 'discussion', the practitioners were convinced (from having used the customised EFQM® model of business excellence to do a self-assessment aimed at benchmarking) that more significantly, there was a necessity to learn from each other (performing analysis) and understand the underlying business processes through a yet to be defined process of engagement.

The rest of this section provides excerpts of Steering Group discussions and interpretations of the instances of using constructs (in terms of using metaphors and their related constructs) for purposes of problem-setting (sensemaking) and problem-solving (generative practice) within the reflexive dialogical action research process. The two constructs that were crucial in redirecting and reconstructing the focus of the research activities with regard to identifying continuous improvement tools were *benchmarking* and *best practice*. The group dialogical process and one-to-one reflection of key areas of engagement are classified here broadly as a reflexive dialogical practice, although there were elements of reflex and reflective dialogue.

Talk related to the Benchmarking Metaphor:

Background information and description of the reflexive dialogical process and one instance of the researcher using metaphors/related constructs allowing for multiple perspectives and alternative interpretations to redirect and reconstruct activities as part of the problem-setting and problem-solving process in relation to the benchmark metaphor. A form of knowledge-generating action research.

From reviewing extant literature on the practice of benchmarking, it was evident that commentators often use the term benchmarking as a mixed metaphor. Although the emphasis is often on achieving competitive advantage (Camp, 1989, Karlof et al., 1993), following Cox et al. (1997), here the term 'benchmarking' is distinguished from 'benchmarking'. The root term for the former is a *benchmark*, which is grounded in the metaphor of 'mark' or standard, with related connotations of having to reduce performance gaps. The latter term is grounded in the metaphor of "a bench placed next to a table around which there is room for several people/organizations to visit and meet figuratively, if not literally" (p. 291). The dominant relationship in *benchmarking* is that of joint collaboration and sharing rather than competition. Thus, by using alternative metaphors, the common (mainstream) conventions of making sense which is employed are intentionally 'violated', allowing for alternative interpretations (see Gergen, 1982: p. 139).

Although for Alvesson (1993), the purpose of utilising metaphors (and their related constructs) is to challenge the predominant practice and to investigate the power of each metaphor in guiding reasoning and observation, here it is used ultimately for the purpose of redirecting and reconstructing the practice. Here, the *benchmark* metaphor (as a first-level construct) is understood as being initially in vogue with the practitioners, and later through reflexive dialogue there being a preference for undertaking benchmarking based on the benchmark metaphor which is more aligned to a constructionist epistemology.

One of the key aspects of traditional benchmarking practice, entails the use of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). The initial approach of identifying the status of KPIs as an aid for the measurement of performance (with a high focus on metrics), is conceived as a form of 'dominant industry research practice', which is commercially oriented and aligned with a positivist orientation to practice. This form of practice is seen as biased towards a rationalist paradigm that focuses on abstraction and the modelling of fields of social action as natural systems (see Seymour and Rooke, 1995). At the initial stages of the research project, the members of the Steering Group from the industry were keen on performance measurement related to the *benchmark* metaphor. However, a sense of knowing from within emerged as they seem to have reservations about focusing on metrics (measurement) and there was a 'realization' that more important is the process.

"You can measure that, if you ever connect, if we decide that our procedures are understood as a heading, we could brainstorm on that, there are subheadings. How are you going to measure that? So, you might want to look at corrective actions, a way of measuring it. Are we getting lots of corrective measures on design, will lead to the conclusion that people don't understand design procedures for example? Practitioner 2:

: *“Yeah! Because, the parameter, you don’t know, one assumes everybody does it on the same basis, but they don’t. We found three or four different ways for measuring Health and Safety, we found numerous ways of measuring profitability.”* Practitioner 3

Midway through the research project, after having decided to use the adapted EFQM® model as a tool for enabling benchmarking, the practitioners were engaged in a reflective/reflexive dialogue. One excerpt of the dialogue is provided below.

“Where I am at the moment, is I’m just about to undertake merging of huge chunks of the business [...]. So, what I’m looking for is who’s got practical experience and knowledge rolling improvement across the group. In construction, the answer to that is zero [...]. ...we’re using it [the EFQM® model] in our day to day business, to change the business. That has nothing to do with assessment. What I do is I start off with the business ... determine the key business processes that we have to do superbly well to deliver these jobs.” Practitioner 4:

At the final stages of Phase I of the research, the practitioners engage in reflexive (generative) dialogue in discussing the concept of benchmarking.

“Strictly speaking, that’s the trouble, benchmarking has different meanings. Benchmarking, you could say, you’ve done the benchmarking, that’s where you’re all at. What we are talking about benchmarking is actually, well, how do you do that process - benchmarking the process? [critical questioning posture, that is reflexive and the focus is towards benchmarking the process] - Practitioner 4

“I don’t really do any self-assessment. But I’m using the framework to tease out key objectives, key business processes, then underneath that we look at the processes and KPIs. So, it gives a consistent message; consistent benchmark for everybody is the model.” Practitioner 4

“But having carried out a rough exercise like we did last year. Certainly, my concern is that, which you share [referring to Practitioner 1], it didn’t appear that there was much scope” Practitioner 4:

“There weren’t any startling differences [...].” Practitioner 1:

[...]. So, I think our concern last year was well, is there actually any ‘meat’ there to get in and start benchmarking, because I mean, I’m To me personally, it’s got none! [...]. Personally, coming from different industries and different background, I’m much more interested in identifying processes and looking at processes rather than ‘playing’ the numbers game. [...]. Practitioner 4:

Thus, from wanting to primarily use the EFQM® adapted model as a benchmarking model or framework, there seemed to be a clear indication of preferring to move towards that of benchmarking. The clear movement away from metrics to an emphasis on the metaphor of benchmarking involved Steering Group meeting ‘discussions’ oriented towards a reflexive dialogic process. This resulted in an initial self-assessment process to identify ‘performance gaps’ together with the identification of ‘strengths’ and ‘areas for improvement’ of each organization over a period of about 10 months. This is captured through further reflexive dialogical action as noted in two excerpts of ‘post-1st phase research’ interviews.

This approach is seen by Practitioner 4 as using the excellence framework beyond that of assessment, and more towards that of an organization-wide performance enhancement tool. But as yet to move into the performative act of learning through sharing as implied by the benchmark metaphor. The sense of the ‘sharing’ to be experienced by working in a community of practice was expressed by one of the participating QMs/BIMs who was invited to join at a later stage (phase II) of the research project. This was disclosed, during an interview that took place after the research project had been completed (from the perspective of the academic research team). Practitioner 2 expressed disappointment over the ‘dissolution’ of the Steering Group, which was initially agreed as being important for the primary purpose of pursuing further interests in the area of benchmarking.

Practitioner 1 clearly indicated that reflecting on the word ‘compare’ and having had the experience of doing a comparison, he realized that the benchmarking exercise has to be more about learning from each other through engagement. With regards to benchmarking it is obvious that for practitioner 1, the preferred route is likened to the benchmark metaphor, wherein the focus is on learning from each other’s practice.

“I suppose going back, one of the disappointing things is that the sort of group that we were looking to set up did not materialise and move forward, as we would have liked it to have done, because obviously there is great comfort in working with other people. Uhm! Also, gain, I mean that’s uhhh! If you’ve got six or seven around the table, you gain from their experience as well”. Practitioner 1

When asked whether he wanted to use that framework [the EFQM® Framework] to compare the five firms, he replied:

“I’m thinking of the word ‘compare”. Practitioner 1

It would appear that both the researcher and Practitioner 1 were looking to learn from each other.

Talk Related to Excellent Practice: Description of one instance of the researcher using metaphors/ representations to enable development of better practice leading to excellence based on a social constructionist understanding of knowledge construction as part of the problem-setting and problem-solving process. A form of practical action research.

Following Gergen (1982) and Alvesson (1993), the approach in this paper is to generate new metaphors to challenge established ones and to investigate the power of each new metaphor in guiding reasoning and observations (both that of the practitioner as well as the researcher). This brings to focus the taken-for-granted preconceptions that confer the status of objectivity and certainty on contestable meanings in terms of ‘shared presuppositions’ (see Turner, 1994). By assigning a label such as best practice to knowledge, there is an implied notion of a fixed reality wherein a ‘knowing subject’ is able to access this knowledge which can be abstracted and stored in the ‘objective world’. Thus, here the term ‘excellent practice’ is used, which implies that it refers to a cluster of better practices and is adjudged to be so, based on contextual-in-use criteria of excellence.

This is seen to be consistent with a situational-and-contexted notion of such descriptions of practice, as a descriptive rather than an objective concept. Additionally, this is a relativistic approach to practice; taking into account that what is revealed about practices as well is a matter of available comparisons (see Turner, 1994). It is in this sense, and consistent with a constructionist epistemology, that the notion of Good Practice (GP) or Excellent Practice (EP) is used in this paper in place of what is traditionally referred to as Best Practice (BP).

Hence, another key construct that the researcher used as a problem-framing and problem-solving device within the domain of metaphorical analysis is that of Best Practice (BP) and Excellent Practice (EP). This is based on the argument that the notion of BP, a first-level construct, is seen to imply a prescriptive approach to knowledge, which has functionalistic connotations for objectifying knowledge in terms of being ‘effective’ knowledge that is a “fixed reality” and can be transferred. Thus, EP is seen as a metaphor that allows for a social constructionist understanding of practice that allows for developing solutions that have a more generative capacity.

Here, EP is the ‘consensual’ approach as framed by practitioners –as the framework of the EFQM® excellence model was used as the basis for the evaluation of EP. As noted by one of the practitioners, ‘self-assessment against the EFQM® excellence framework is seen to provide a measure of excellence’. Additionally, the uneasiness amongst the practitioners with a focus on best practice as a holy grail warranted a more accurate descriptive term for good practice that was worth learning from. This is also with reference to the use of the term ‘good practice’ by the Researcher being reciprocated with a response by members of the Steering Group in their use of the term ‘better practice’ and ‘good practice’. The following excerpt of the Steering Group discussion illustrates the reality construction or practical authorship by members regarding the practice of benchmarking so as to generate the possibility of achieving better practice, or as reflexively referred to here as good practice.

“Strictly speaking, that’s the trouble, benchmarking has different meanings. Benchmarking, you could say, you’ve done the benchmarking, that’s where you’re all at. What we are talking about benchmarking is actually, well, how do you do that process - benchmarking the process [of a better practice]?” Practitioner 4

“If I get a result that says they are world beaters in this. But I’d say based on what? But that could well come out at the next stage, down to doing ‘proper’ benchmarking on the processes that have delivered the results.” Practitioner 4

The Researcher then asked:

“So, we’ll have some different points of view. In one sense, what we’re looking for, is good practice for the benchmarking exercise, and that will be a matter of looking through the data that is produced and spotting something.”

Practitioner 1 replied:

“If I stop you there for a moment, you said good practice, these questions are quite open-ended. So, how are you going to, uhm! narrow that output down and do something that’s tangible, that company A can move up to company B’s level, whatever.”

This is another instance of a clear reflective moment and acceptance that what the organizations should be interested in is that of good practice, and the notion of moving up the ladder [towards excellence] opening up the discussion towards a reflexive dialogue that is not constrained by having to identify best practice and searching for the holy grail in terms of an elusive objective reality. Hence, the term EP (identified through the self-assessment process using the adapted EFQM® business excellence model) and its related construct of good practice were used to distinguish a new discourse from its earlier version. As pointed out by Xu (2000), discourse is subject to mutations and a discourse changes shape when a link is cut. “To sustain a discourse, one either reinforces established links by reiteration or makes them absent from presence [...]” (Xu, 2000: p. 431).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This experience of having engaged in reflexive dialogical action research has provided the opportunity to the Steering Group (practitioners and researchers) to redirect and reconstruct their activities related to benchmarking to fit with a more contextual theoretical model. Thus, as expressed by Ripamonti et al. (2015):

“Reflexive dialogical action research allows researchers to learn how to reflexively question their own “normalized” ways of generating knowledge and to explore new ways of collaboratively developing knowledge of relevance to both theory and practice.” (p. 65).

This paper highlights four significant contributions to knowledge pertaining to reflexive dialogic action research. First and foremost is that reflexive dialogic action research is inherently generative, as it provides the ‘communicative action space’ - an invitation to improve practice contextually by leveraging on not only researcher knowledge but practitioner knowledge as well. Secondly, the practitioner functions as a co-researcher functioning in an active role, a ‘legitimate’ co-author engaging in reflexive dialogic action research. Thirdly, in doing reflexive dialogic action research, what might be initially taken to be chaotic, becomes more ‘manageable’ by focusing on metaphors to aid sensemaking and guide knowledge construction. Fourthly, this form of knowledge production allows the leveraging of the practitioners’ and researchers’ existing resources of knowledge, and also the construction of ‘new’ knowledge arising from the generative component that is a characteristic of the generative reflexive dialogic process.

Through the reflexive dialogic action research process, the two important phases of problem-setting and problem-solving are deemed to be co-authored within the iterative process of engagement. In this paper, the problem-setting is with regards to identifying excellent practice or good practice using the adapted self-assessment process and doing benchmarking to learn and improve. Using the two alternative metaphors of benchmarking and excellent practice, the researcher was able to focus on using related constructs to jointly redirect and reconstruct the efforts toward the objective of identifying mechanisms for enabling improvement within the participating construction contracting organizations. The snippets of the discussions at Steering Group meetings provide ‘a reality’ of the practitioners’ speech acts (in the context of seeking out continuous improvement tools and techniques) of wanting to perform benchmarking and the related concerns for the exercise to be of value.

Following Cuncliffe (2002), conversations are viewed as a reflex-reflective-reflexive process. It cannot be denied that there were elements of reflex and reflective action involved. Reflective dialogue involves sensemaking

devices, like that of the dialogue involving the EFQM® model, whilst reflex action entails acting out of instinct, feeling or habit that draws intuitively on past experience (see Cunliffe, 2002). The reflex response as cited in the interview snippets centre around the issue of metrics. Reflexive dialogue places us as practical authors and critical questioners within our social experiences. One can find embedded within the reflex-reflective-reflexive process of the dialogue that there are a number of related constructs to the metaphor of benchmarking/benchmarking and best practice/excellent practice. The reflexive dialogical aspect, which is the focus of this paper, can be discerned mainly in relation to practical authorship of the practice of benchmarking and using the self-assessment process to help identify good practice and generate practical knowledge.

DECLARATION STATEMENT

The author affirms that this manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study being reported; that no important aspects of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned (and, if relevant, registered) have been explained. The insights shared in this paper are entirely the author's, made possible by the initial exposure to qualitative research received at the University of Birmingham.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest in this study.

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