

# Leadership for Sustainability Learning: The role of Active Learning Methodologies

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**Abstract:** Learning to lead for sustainability in your enterprises has emerged as a new concern for top leaders in many industries, educational institutions, and regions. The higher education institutions may have a generic role in affecting leadership for sustainability learning in both theory and practice. From an action-based leadership for sustainability perspective, we propose that more attention be devoted to leveraging the developmental work in the everyday learning settings, and especially in local organizing for leadership learning. This explorative paper specifically seeks to understand the role of active learning methodologies in affecting sustainable leadership in an adult learner and student group setting. It is of broad interest to help diverse students' learning groups to both enact and engage recurrently as co-creating learners for their own leadership development.

**Keywords:** leadership learning, sustainability, action learning, learning methodologies, executive education

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## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to understand the role of active learning methodologies to better educate for sustainable leadership in an adult learner and student group setting. Leadership learning in general (McCall, 2010) as well as in business schools (Murcia et al., 2018) have been criticized (e.g., Gosling and Mintzberg, 2006) for not developing actionable capabilities closer to everyday leadership and organizing practices (Hansen, 2018). There remains a lack of understanding and orchestrating higher education course strategies for learning leadership and organization development 'as practice' (Nicolini, 2012). In the following, we address especially the role of active learning methodologies with ingredients such as creativity, action-reflection-learning, linking to real organization experiences, and critical thinking (McCall, 2010), which can all contribute to a debate on improving business education based on understanding their mission (Murcia et al., 2018). In other words, we focus on active learning methodologies that may also foster executive students' own learning to learn, which seems essential for sustainability-oriented leadership because it can open new horizons for what is possible or not (Jevnaker and Olaisen, 2022).

For this paper's explorative aim, we specifically combine processual philosophy and sustainability-oriented action learning to help us understand the role of action learning methodologies in leadership learning settings. We draw on more than 20 years of experimentation involving leadership learning as ongoing practice. A relevant, revelatory case in a Scandinavian higher business education context allowed us to start exploring the following research question: In what ways can active learning methodologies enact leadership learning activities?

The higher education institutions have tended to be slow to embrace action learning and emergent human conditions and business needs in their teaching and learning practices (Coghlan, 2019; Murcia et al., 2018; Rocha et al., 2021). On this background, we address our research question drawing on a real course case in bachelor management executive education that offers several active learning approaches including action-based learning in its part-time learning over two semesters. In the remainder of the paper, we explain our approach and contribute by identifying and discussing active learning methodologies in use that involved both direct and indirect roles of organising and stimulating learning activities. Both ways seemed necessary for fostering adult students' learning, as well as for future leadership for sustainability.

## 2. Perspectives

In this paper, we adopted two perspectives – experiential action-reflection learning and process philosophy, a combination that allowed us to shed light on what ways active learning methodologies can enact on-going use of learning activities. Each is briefly presented below.

### 2.1 Experiential action-reflection learning

Experiential learning has been around for some decades (Coghlan, 2019) but is recently being re-discovered (e.g., Hansen, 2018). This may be regarded as part of the current practice turn in management and organization studies (see Nicolini, 2012), where 'practice' is understood in a broad sense of enacting recurrent practices of

doings and sayings. Practices involve both dynamics and some social ordering and need to be understood beyond repetition/sameness (Schatzki et al., 2001).

Yet, how leadership learning activities can unfold and constitute a nexus of what we call 'leadership-in-action' to embrace whoever or whatever contributes to leading in practice (beyond formal leadership levels), are still not sufficiently understood (Jevnaker and Olaisen, 2022).

By the word 'sustainable', we point to the capacity to be upheld and endure, while not harming the surroundings, in an inclusive philosophy sense (Naess, 2005). Despite increasing attention on countries and companies' sustainability goals, we know less about leadership for sustainability as continuous practices in micro, at the layers of more concrete developmental activities (Jevnaker and Olaisen, 2022). On this background, we propose that more attention could beneficially be devoted to experiential ways of leadership learning. According to McCall (2010):

*Experience—not genetics, not training programs, not business school—is the primary source of learning to lead, and although our understanding of this kind of experience is far from complete, it is absolutely the place to start.*

In management and organization change literature, several authors point to the importance of attending more to real-life phenomena in management (Schwarz and Stensaker, 2014). In a business school education context, both resources (e.g., courses, literatures, students, group-rooms) and possible actions (e.g., class visits to other sites) exist, although perhaps somewhat underused.

## **2.2 Process philosophy**

In our concept of leadership in an 'organization' context, we include extra-organizational efforts beyond the formal organization (Tsoukas, 2005), and 'leadership' with and beyond formal leaders. Accordingly, we adopt process thinking (Langley and Tsoukas, 2017) that involves emergent wayfinding (Chia and Holt, 2009). As we shall see, action-based executive learning often entails finding other ways than what students (and sometimes also instructors) may have thought in the beginning. Thus, we propose to reimagine how we understand leadership learning for sustainability allowing us to capture some more inclusive learning dynamics (for example from a student class day off campus, which can enact other collaborative learning processes).

The idea of inclusion is adopted from the philosophical idea of inclusion, proposed by the American pragmatist philosopher *John Dewey* (1928/1998). In this paper, we seek to include multi-faceted resources and processes when relevant. We contend active learning methodologies can include and/or affect the social, the physical, the economic, as well as the envisioning or imaginative capacities of interest for human development.

To illustrate our process-based leadership reasoning, we draw on exemplary learning endeavours from Scandinavian business school settings, where leadership ideas on sustainability have spread like a virus, yet little is known of ways to enact more concrete, renewed learning practices (Jevnaker and Olaisen, 2022) in a higher education setting.

## **3. Research methodology**

The paper is positioned as an explorative discussion paper drawing on inductive qualitative research within leadership and management learning. As introduced, the theoretical foundation for the paper is a processual practice-based view within leadership and organizational studies (Nicolini, 2012; Langley and Tsoukas, 2017). This means that we are zooming in on actual and recurrent learning practices treating higher education executive learning as a real-world organizing context.

In qualitative research, both the context and the researchers are essential (Yin, 2018). For this paper's explorative aim, we build on observations and reflections from exemplary learning practices in a Scandinavian business school education setting to help us understand the role of active learning methodologies in a higher education leadership course case. Especially, we revisit one final comprehensive, final Bachelor of Management course in executive education, which means that it offers students both breadth and some depth in learning. In this course, we draw on more than 20 years of exemplary leadership course participations involving relevant elements of action-based leadership development and forms of collaborative learning. The co-teachers including the author have participated in and across several classes in this leadership course, the author from the start of this course (1999-2022), some co-teachers for around 10 years, and three more recently, yet all highly

experienced teachers running and co-leading multiple other executive courses, some with strengths in leadership, HR, and teams, or alternatively, in processual organization change, innovation, and design. These faculty differences helped ongoing preparations, observations, and debriefings to engage with fresh, yet trained eyes, sustained curiosity, naïve asks, and some cumulative familiarity on what was unfolding in the various classes and student groups.

The teacher teams' ongoing developmental work in the course, and debates in the relevant literature, triggered thoughts on how sustainability-oriented leadership learning can become fostered in higher education student learning settings. Specifically, we explore and identify some active learning methodologies and their related learning activities, which may impact on executive students' learning. Exemplary real learning practices are explored through a set of active *learning methodologies, tasks & activities* recurrently enacted.

The material we draw on includes collective actions and events shared by participant teachers and students. Participant observations and reflections were often shared orally in individual, group, and plenary dialogues in or immediately after a course element, as well as in individual reflective writing and student feedbacks at the end of a task or course module. Teacher/instructors were also sharing own observations and reflections using their field notes from learning activities in group tasks, sharing examples of online communication with students and/or with course team members. Many pre-briefs, consultations, and debriefs were organized among teachers and facilitator teams. Following students/groups in action over a 10 months' course period and visiting several sources of experiential and other data (exam results, Assess of Learning (AoL) data, showed some recurrent patterns (e.g., student learning results exceeding expectations), and helped ensure trustworthiness and internal validity. In our interpretive analysis, we focus mainly on organizing and otherwise enacting stimulating learning practices. Based in Gioia et al. (2013), the author coded exemplary quotes from student feedback narrative inquiries, and by that could identify interesting relevant themes. Thus, we attempt in the following to synthesize learning activities in use that are constituting recurrent use of active leadership methodologies.

We propose this approach has the necessary grounding, as we explore learning activities unfolding in a real-life continuing business education context (Yin, 2018). The executive course case we draw on here can furthermore serve as a revelatory case (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007), because this course was, and still is, considered to involve several novel combinative features such as stressing 'active learning' embracing collaborative learning and leadership 'in action' rather than just teaching with questions and answers afterwards (see next section). The course offered and developed through more than two decades, allowed us to observe and gain process experiences from student performances and narrative inquiries from several classes and campuses. In sum, learning activities with, for, and among executive students in this course provides a highly appropriate setting for this research.

#### **4. Executive case with multiple active learning components**

Learning leadership in a business school higher education context can entail a set of learning goals including learning theories on leadership and organization development, some relevant skills, and general competencies such as attitudes of mutual respect for other people and raised awareness of their competencies. But how to enact learning to match or exceed the broad scope of learning goals?

In one bachelor executive program in Scandinavia that attracted students with diverse and interdisciplinary industry backgrounds, leadership learning (in a broad sense) was offered with action-learning components involved in every module. As teachers we could follow the students in the executive classes that we co-taught over a two semesters (ten months) course.

To be relevant for leadership and future work careers, tasks or processes in this course were deliberately challenging. 'Active learning' methodologies encompassed designing exercises as a challenge to link to key aspects in the course curriculum as well as prepare students for the needed 21st century skills, such as creative opportunity recognition, reflexive judgments, and co-creative action learning. Student teams were also working with identifying and formulating strategies for emergent challenges in organization change cases or entrepreneurial team-based start-ups.

Preparing for their exams, in this course the students were stimulated and had to find own relevant theories to an independently formulated problem statement in own theory-driven ‘synopsis’ paper. The completed short theory-reflective paper as first exam component then became a shared ground for conducting a reflective dialogue in their next, an oral and dialogue-based exam. Students were further conducting a project based on primary experience-based research in own or other relevant organization, a key part (60 pct) of their total exams.

Last, but not least, students in groups were practicing action learning and constructive-critical reflection in and beyond the classroom in every course module. Quotes and related coding from one leadership executive class the author followed over a full non-pandemic year is offered below – grounded in class module-related feedback narratives from individual students (see Table 1).

**Table 1:** Identified learning activities grounded in students’ narrative feedback from one executive class in the exemplary leadership course case

Learning activities – student narratives Quotes in first-order categorisation	Second order themes	Aggregate themes
<i>‘Making team and working as team was unfamiliar in the beginning, but I think I learned very much about myself and my interaction in collaboration with the others. Felt safer and got myself challenged more.’ (1<sup>st</sup> module, student 2017).</i> <i>‘I’ve learned to know the people in the group better.’ (3<sup>rd</sup> module student, 2017).</i> <i>‘Learning much from people I am in the group with and don’t want groups to be changed.’ (3<sup>rd</sup> module student, 2017).</i>	Getting to know each other in class through ‘learning groups.’ Continue with same groups over several modules.	Recurrent, increasingly familiar groupwise connecting
<i>‘I’ve learned that I function better in collaboration than I thought.’</i> <i>‘Very interesting to be filmed’ (in group performances).’ (3<sup>rd</sup> module student, 2017).</i> <i>‘Found out more how I am in the leadership situation’ (1<sup>st</sup> module student, 2017).</i>	Experiencing performative insights on oneself and others in collaboration – while doing groupwork.	Interactive performing
<i>‘The section with dreams and related barriers/possibilities was also useful and something I will actively use further.’ (3<sup>rd</sup> module student, 2017).</i> <i>‘I personally feel that I have developed myself and learned more about myself these 3 days, thanks to this course.’ (1<sup>st</sup> module student, 2017, this module incl. Action-day outside of the campus).</i>	Variety of learning tasks trigger self-learning and self-development. Much learning can happen intensely, which potentially come in further use.	Self-directing
<i>‘Various forms of observation made me reflect and think somewhat differently.’ (3<sup>rd</sup> module student, 2017).</i> <i>‘I learned very much about myself on day 2, that was super!’ (Day 2 was “Action-day”. (3<sup>rd</sup> module student, 2017).</i> <i>‘I learned a lot by challenging myself, stretch the comfort zone.’ (3<sup>rd</sup> module student, 2017).</i>	Learning with enriched observation tools. Students become engaged by challenging activities (in a relatively safe group environment), which trigger self-learning.	Deep experiencing

The learning exercises used in this exemplary executive course involved regular action-reflection-learning activities (see below), individually and in groupwork. Groups (5-7 students) were established on the first day of this course and they were continuing throughout several modules but not necessarily for all tasks. Learning exercises were actively related to lecturing and further recall of relevant theories, a recurrent conceptualization to provide an improved visible ‘red thread’ in this final, integrative bachelor level executive course.

This combined theory- and action-reflection learning is not always easy to capture in the beginning but makes the course different. In the first module, this course already includes one action-day often off campus, such as to a guesthouse in the forest, to make a common, relatively safe ground for the student learning groups. As pointed out by one student in his first feedback at the end of the first module,

*‘The class encounters were very good. More dialogue than theory, and unexpected in relation to other subjects (courses). But very rich learning.’*

## 5. Discussion: The role of active learning methodologies in leadership learning settings

The call for ‘recasting’ leadership in an experience-oriented, learning to learn direction (McCall, 2010) seem accentuated by many expected and surprising changes to be faced in societies and organizations in the wake of ongoing technology transformations, international conflicts, re-locations, pandemics, and other challenges (e.g., Rocha et al., 2021; Jevnaker and Olaisen, 2022). However, this recasting appears more problematic than it first may appear (McCall, 2010), which deserves further discussion.

In this paper, we thus ask, in what ways can active learning methodologies be enacted for leadership learning as practice? Drawing on one comprehensive, somewhat different executive course, we identified both direct organizing roles and emergent co-creative roles in-between students and their teachers (see Table 2).

**Table 2:** Identified learning practices and roles embedded in some active learning methodologies

<b>Learning practices</b>	<i>Directly organizing roles</i> - with/for both task and process action	<i>Indirectly inspiring co-creative roles</i> - with/for collective and individual learning
<i>Enacting fresh and ongoing active learning relations</i> - through connecting, acknowledging-cum-encouraging learning	Organizing relationship building through icebreaking, new learning group formation, and room for reflection in diverse student2student (‘peer’) relations - with inclusive competence and mastering orientations, and - a few meta principles for class sharing of reflections.	Dynamically using learning events and tasks to co-generate action, experiences, and reflections in and on own learning with others, e.g., via - individual notetaking (logbook), - dialogues in groups, and - emergent theory-/practice-informed reflective plenary conversations.
<i>Enacting interactive learning work as action learning based</i> - through inclusive collaboration and reciprocal performative action	Staging and inviting in all participants to well-prepared action tasks - staging joint aim, tasks, time, and place for group autonomous action and reflexive peer interaction.	Using emergent learning incidents to co-create and expand learning - in and with unfolding of process work, - with use of materials and tools, - allowing for broader spontaneous interacting, and reciprocal self-reflective learning conversations.
<i>Evoking deeper learning loops</i> - through facilitating action reflection learning (ARL) circles	Facilitating deeper action-reflection-learning loops - through getting to know students and their learning, - ‘being there’ following ARL circles, - orchestrating learning roles, - being prepared for facilitating suitable interventions and - fostering focused dialogs and stimulating open conversations.	Exploiting emergent situations to explore and reflect deeper in and on interaction - through follow-up learning roles, - facilitators and students’ time-outs and sharing moments for exploring ‘what happened here?’, and - orchestrating giving-cum-taking constructive feedback, as well as - linking to theories, and - leveraging creative and critical thinking in experiential dialogue.
<i>Evoking individual and group self-direction progressing own integrative learning tasks and reflections</i>	Supervising autonomous formulation of own possibilities and challenges, finding, presenting, discussing, and reflecting critically on own chosen perspectives, own work, and cumulative insights - e.g., in own research literature and compulsory literature, work examples and findings (synopsis, and project work).	Stimulating creative independent navigation in student learning work through focusing broader integrative process work, e.g., via - iterative cycles of individual and/or group creation in workshops with reflective feedback & discussions, and - preparing and performing own exams-related work, with - moments of interactive supervision, - and some sharing ‘synopsis’ presentations.
<i>Enabling potential student transformative experiencing of meaningful learning journey</i>	Enacting and orchestrating sharing of creative perspectives on own learning journey, e.g., from holistic sustainability stance.	Inspiring potential self-development through affording multifaceted learning encounters, challenging learning efforts with independent flexible choices and recurrent collaborative support in the students’ personal learning journeys.

### **5.1 Contributions**

Grounded in the identified pattern of actual and potential learning practices, we may draw three propositions. Firstly, learning for leadership as practice calls for *creatively combining* directly and indirectly enacted relevant and interesting learning activities. Across the development and implementation of these leadership programs (several classes each year, from 1999 – 2022), we saw a blend of both purposive (intended) direct facilitations and more spontaneous evolving approaches that in combination contributed to enacting multifaceted learning activities. Notably, both ways were purposive processual, and action oriented as this is part of the course intentions. In other words, this makes learning practices co-generative and co-creative. Secondly, as Table 1 shows in the vertical heading and columns, enacting an increasingly rich *cumulative* learning process mastery was essential – from getting to know fellow executive students (fostering active learning relations) to engaging in self-directing learning work to enabling potential self-transformative learning. Thirdly, learning leadership as practice is thus not an event, it is a challenging, potentially *transformative journey*.

It seemed important for students to experience learning efforts both intensely (such as in a collaborative group task) *and* recurrently, over the course period. For many students it took some time before they fully ‘got it’ and appreciated self-navigating or co-creative learning tasks. Humour and linking well to students’ interests/backgrounds could help reducing some emergent tensions. Cumulative experiencing was essential as students often orally referred to the first module’s action-day with awareness-raising ‘blind-folded’ outdoor exercises as well as a special feedback session in each learning group at the end of the day as an eye-opener. For example, in one 2021/22 class, we heard one group member who was absent in the first module, reflected to another member of her group that ‘you were very lucky to experience that!’.

For facilitators, stimulating executive students to meet-up and engage in constructive and critical reflexivity is not easy, as often new teachers and facilitators have reflected upon in the many internal ‘debriefing’ events and annual course development seminars. Yet, teachers as well as students have found it recurrently possible and enriching to learn to reflect, both proactively and reactively in the action learning class tasks we have experienced. “What I take with me (after this course), is overall this capacity to reflect,” one student wrote in his/her learning letter at the end of the last module.

For each teacher and the whole course team (with administrative staff) who contributed as action learning facilitators, this statement is not surprising. Reflection work unfolded in many recurrent ways, such as in the sense of becoming able to share spontaneously here-and-now in the class situation or to expand reflection elaborating in more precise language – what you observed, how you personally reacted or felt, how you judged it, and so forth, or to reflect on more fundamental business and human needs in or after the class individually and in between students. This resonates with past literature and respond to a call for more reflective and purposive leadership learning (e.g., Murcia et al., 2018).

The learning practices were typically embracing collaborative learning among the students meeting up in the respective course module as well as seeking to stimulate and actively reflect ‘on’ and ‘with’ the participants’ personal learning in potentially deeper and ‘transformative’ ways (see Petriglieri et al., 2011).

Each student actively attending course modules in this course, experiences both a personal learning journey and a co-creative one with other students in his/her groups/classes, because all modules provide both plenary, individual, and group action tasks and iterative processes, such as between action, reflection, and take-aways.

Taken together, we propose the learning activities identified can, in principle, help opening for a more experiential and action-based leadership orientation where theories and practices meet in ways that can potentially benefit engaging students.

### **5.2 Strengths, limitations, and implications**

There is currently a gap of understanding actionable ways that may enable renewed leadership learning as practice in educational, business, and individual daily work settings. A theoretical implication of this paper is to pay further attention to the *combination* of direct and indirect ways of enacting learning activities that can together constitute a challenging, yet potentially highly beneficial learning journey for the executive student.

A strength in this case, is the proximity and triangulation of materials and insights from preparing the course, conducting the course, and following the students over the full course period, in teacher/project coordinator

teams with multiple contact points with students, getting to know their individual results, and receiving personal feedbacks. Notably, almost all the students learn to do the three challenging exam components successfully, few drop out. In fact, after some common initial frustration most perform surprising well and embrace their theory-driven reflective 'synopsis'-paper and the oral individual exam, although the students are highly diverse in educational, professional, and intellectual backgrounds.

As suggested in the case we have drawn on, enacting a variety of leadership-related learning approaches are possible to *realise recurrently*, with some site and class variations over time. Enacting a stimulating variety of action-based learning practices combined with 'learning to learn' theory work relevant for own research questions linked to a real organisation, became an essential part of hundreds of students' learning journeys, as reflected upon in student feedback, sometimes in letters/emails long afterwards, as well as different teachers' observations in several classes. Still, a few students do probably not fully embrace the action tasks, which is not surprising, given the diverse adult students (average age around the mid 30ies) and their career/family lifecycle squeeze, and accustomed to mainstream teaching. Also, the ways this leadership course constitute an experiential nexus of learning activities housed in group work and/or embodied in each student, is evidently dependent on the students' own engagements and co-presence such as in the modules and the class activities between modules, or in learning groups in between students on or off campus.

Practical implications are many. One essential one is to better explain the possibilities of action learning efforts as part of executive learning practices. For the adult executive students, solid introductory and follow up information in combination with compelling self-experiences of relevance in the first modules, seemed crucial. This is key because most students seem to move through some frustrations and the course includes final bachelor "thesis" exam, yet felt challenges are also regarded as a sign of (expanded) learning by experienced teachers. Nevertheless, everything that can help create a triggering, yet 'safe' situation to cope with the respective learning challenges are essential.

For course designers and teacher teams, an important implication is also learning to include and facilitate well-prepared 'practicing activities' in each course encounter (modules, webinars, supervisions, etc.). Furthermore, exam design can channel executive student learning towards expected collection of primary, experience-based research data, to allow for more experiential insight into own or others' organization. Consider pluralistic, self-chosen approaches in theory and method foundations to offer flexibility and adaptability, given that executive students work in teams from diverse organizational settings and 'action research' (seeking to involve a wider learning in own organization) is just one way of doing research while working with improving some focused situations (Coghlan, 2019).

## **6. Conclusion**

This paper unpacks the critical role of active learning methodologies in leadership learning settings. Drawing on one revelatory higher education executive course case, we identified the importance of stretching and sustaining active learning work through a variety of knowledge- and action-focused relational, broad, deep, and potentially transformative learning practices. The specific course methodologies unfolded in both directly organised and more spontaneous co-creative learning situations, which could affect students' experiential learning.

All in all, in the context of a comprehensive executive course at bachelor management level, a cumulative variety of supportive iterative and integrative learning approaches are essential. Given that executive students at this level commonly have a practical grounding in rather diverse backgrounds, capabilities, varying self-efficacies, and somewhat implicit learning preferences, we contend that the action-reflection learning methodologies need to make room for richer, experiential learning where theories and practices can meet. Learners including teachers can thus expand own competencies towards new leadership for challenging times. Last, but not least, students narrated the value of their own 'learning journey' – appreciating mastery of the most challenging exam-components and pointing to unexpectedly personal learning experiences that link to their everyday organization work and/or future careers.

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