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## **Orientations to Social Constructionism: Relationally Responsive Social Constructionism and its Implications for Knowledge and Learning**

**Abstract** *This article maps the various interests and orientations of social constructionism as a basis for: (1) situating work in the field, (2) understanding differences in its interests and scope, (3) making deliberate choices about our own approach to social constructionist research and (4) thinking about how these choices might play through our teaching. The article suggests that these orientations are based on various underlying assumptions about the nature of social reality, which influence how we conceptualize and study organizations and management. It offers an example of one such orientation—relationally responsive social constructionism—and explores its implications for knowledge and learning. **Key Words:** dialogical; intersubjectivity; knowing; reflexivity; social constructionism*

### **Introduction**

Within the social sciences, and particularly organization studies, the predominant idea that there is a reality ‘out there’ of which we become conscious and act into as individuals, forms the basis of mainstream research and knowledge. We study institutions as entities, individuals in terms of their traits, roles and identities, and develop models of communication based on the ability of the speaker to convey meaning and intent and the ability of the listener to grasp this meaning. This assumes a social world consisting of self-contained individual actors, each becoming aware, and developing accurate mental images and understandings of the world. ‘Good’ knowledge is that which accurately and objectively captures and represents the processes, systems and laws underlying the way the world works, which, when theorized and/or modelled, can be used to improve the way things are done. These assumptions underpin, either explicitly or implicitly, many Business School curricula, especially in the USA.

Over the last 40 years or so, these assumptions have been challenged by scholars from a number of disciplines, including sociology (Garfinkel, 1967; Pollner, 1991), anthropology (Clifford, 1986; Marcus, 1986) and philosophy (Derrida, 1976). One such challenge, a social constructionist one, is based on the idea that social reality is not separate from us, but that social realities and ourselves are intimately interwoven as each shapes and is shaped by the other in everyday interactions. However, within this 'constructionist' challenge lies a whole range of work—from more sociological to poststructuralist-based studies. Some studies pay lip service to its philosophical underpinnings, appearing to view social constructionism as being 'just about language'. So how might we make sense of the field? How can we research, write and teach from a theoretically informed and grounded social constructionist perspective? And how might we figure out what our own orientation to social constructionism might be? The contribution of this article is to offer a way of: (1) situating work in the field, (2) understanding differences in its interests and scope, (3) making deliberate choices about the form of social constructionist-based research we might want to engage in and (4) thinking about how these choices might play through our teaching. As a means of doing so, I begin by mapping the various interests and orientations of social constructionism, suggesting that these are based on underlying assumptions about the nature of social reality, and consequently, knowledge. I outline my own choices and approach—relationally responsive social constructionism—as an example of one such orientation. Finally, I explore the implications of this orientation for knowledge and for management learning.

### **Mapping Social Constructionist Orientations**

Social constructionist-based work has become increasingly popular within organization studies over the last 20 years, and scholars have developed an array of methodological approaches to study the ways in which organizations, identities and knowledge are socially constructed (Shotter, 1993; Watson, 1994; Weick, 1995). While social constructionism commonly rejects essentialist explanations of the world, a survey of the literature in this area reveals different orientations, as evidenced in the various research concerns, designs, methods and ways of theorizing of social constructionist scholars. These differences can also be seen in the range of articles within this Special Issue. I would therefore like to begin by offering a way of mapping the various approaches to social constructionist work. This is not for the purpose of a comprehensive review and critique, this has been done elsewhere (Fairhurst and Putnam, 2004; Gergen, 1999; Ramsey, 2005), but as a means of helping scholars situate their own and others work—along with the articles in this issue.

The origins of social constructionism can be traced back to a number of intellectual traditions: notably sociology, social philosophy and the sociology of knowledge. This early work drew attention to ways of thinking about social reality that formed a basis for social constructionism. Some sociologically based work emphasized the experiential nature of reality, for example, Garfinkel's (1967) notion that a sense of the real is a practical accomplishment, achieved through the contextual, embodied, ongoing interpretive work of people. This particular

orientation often focuses on the context in which interaction takes place, as well as the interaction itself. Within social philosophy, Schutz (1960) focused on the life-world, proposing that our personal experiences are shaped by social interaction and taken-for-granted uses of language. He later worked with Thomas Luckmann (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973) to explore the implications of such a position for knowledge. A third root lies in the sociology of knowledge, from which emerged Berger and Luckmann's influential book *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966): the acknowledged origin of social constructionism. Berger and Luckmann proposed that society exists as both an objective and a subjective reality, and argued that our social world can be understood as a dialectical process of externalization, objectivation and internalization, i.e. 'Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product' (p. 61). They argue that the social world is humanly produced in ongoing activity and routines (externalization), yet experienced as being objective in that it affects our lives on an ongoing basis, and we have to go out and learn about it (objectivation). We are socialized in the world as we interpret meanings of events and/or others' subjectivities, and in doing so we take on the world, the identity of others and therefore our own place and identity (internalization). Berger and Luckmann believe that it is when we become conscious of our identity as a 'generalized other', that we are 'an effective member of society and in subjective possession of a self and a world' (p. 137). From this perspective, knowledge itself is socially constructed and facts are social products.

Their main premise, that social realities and identities are created and maintained in conversations with others—rather than in structures—has been taken up by scholars in a number of disciplines, who have further developed the notion that social reality, identities and knowledge, are culturally, socially, historically and linguistically influenced. While Berger and Luckmann's treatise provided a starting point, contemporary scholars have offered an increasingly textured body of work, drawing from a variety of disciplines, theoretical perspectives and more nuanced interpretations of the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of social constructionism. Within organization studies, such work covers the range of sociological-based studies grounded in ethnography (Watson, 1994), ethnomethodology (Samra-Fredericks, 2004), discursive approaches (Boje, 1991), critically based work (Deetz, 1998), poststructuralist-influenced work (Ashcraft and Mumby, 2004; Collinson, 2003) and relationally oriented work (Cunliffe, 2002b; Hosking and McNamee, 2006; Shotter and Cunliffe, 2002). Consequently, social constructionist-based research spans such methods as: narrative analysis, semiotics, discourse, analysis, conversation analysis, social poetics, ethnography and autoethnography.

I suggest that if we wish to take a social constructionist approach to research and teaching, it is important to think about our underlying assumptions regarding the nature and processes of socially constructing reality, the impact of these assumptions on how we think about the knowledge and how these then play through our research and our approach to management learning. I offer Table 1 as a way of foregrounding a number of interpretive tensions and choices faced by scholars taking a social constructionist orientation to research. Although these choices are depicted in two columns and therefore may be seen as dichotomous, I suggest that they are more appropriately viewed as a continuum. Similarly,

**Table 1** Choices within social constructionist-based research***Nature of Social Reality***

Subjective reality: individuals negotiate meanings within social situations, e.g. Bruner, 1986; Watzlawick, 1984.

Objectivation of social reality, focus on social facts, institutional practices, and symbolic products, e.g. Jun, 2006.

***Process of Socially Constructing Reality***

Reality construction and sense-making as a cognitive process.

Focus on language and reasoning processes, e.g. Schön, 1983; Weick, 1995.

Social reality as a discursive product, which influences its members, e.g. Deetz, 1992; Giddens, 1984; Stokowski, 2002.

Social construction as a power infused process, e.g. Mumby, 1998; Phillips and Hardy, 1997.

***Epistemological Interests***

1. Social construction at macro levels: e.g. cultural, institutional, ideological. How socially constructed categories are discursively produced and enacted, e.g. gender, race. Often within broader historical contexts, e.g. Ashcraft and Mumby, 2004; Gergen, 1991.

2. The process of construction. How discourse and language operate to create meaning in practical contexts, e.g. Potter, 1996.

Theoretical generalizations about organizations, identities, organizational processes, and linguistic practices and systems. Search for patterns.

Research and learning as a reflective process.

Intersubjective realities: people create meaning and realities with others in spontaneous, responsive ways, e.g. Shotter and Cunliffe, 2002.

Emerging social realities, focus on processes of meaning-making, no one person in control, e.g. Cunliffe, 2001.

Reality construction and sense-making as a relational process.

Focus on responsive dialogue and conversation between people, e.g. Cunliffe 2002b; Shotter, 1993.

Social realities as relational and experienced in interaction and dialogue between people, e.g. Shotter and Katz, 1999.

Social construction as a benign process, e.g. Watson, 1994.

Social construction at micro levels: between people in everyday conversations. An interweaving of past, present, and future conversations in the moment of dialogue, e.g. Cunliffe et al., 2004, Katz et al., 2000.

Context-related interpretive insights. Meaning created in on-going moments.

Research and learning as a radically-reflexive process, e.g. Cunliffe, 2003.

I avoid any overarching labelling of each column—because there is no particular form of constructionism that neatly fits into each. However, having said this, there are connections between some of the choices within each column.

In thinking through these choices, we need to consider consistency between our assumptions, and how these assumptions affect our focus of study, our research method and ways of theorizing. And, as shown later, these will also influence the

type of knowledge we generate, and how we engage with the learning process. At this stage, I outline each set of assumptions, starting with those in the left-hand column, and examine the implications for knowledge later.

Two critical choices that result in very different orientations to social constructionism are those between the notions of subjective or intersubjective realities, and between an objectified reality and always emerging in-the-moment realities. Taking the first choice, those scholars taking a subjective approach to reality assume that reality is negotiated by individuals within social settings, each of whom has their own perception, meanings and ways of making sense within a broader social context (Schön, 1983; Watzlawick, 1984). That 'reality' also plays back into individual sense-making. Thus, the focus of research lies in discovering how individuals make sense of their surroundings (language used, ways of talking about experience), negotiate some sort of collective meaning and the nature and impact of that collective meaning (Rosenthal and Peccei, 2006). In terms of the second choice, scholars implicitly or explicitly taking Berger and Luckmann's position that social realities, although produced in human interaction, do have a degree of objectivity and social facticity, study organizations as interactively and/or discursively produced, existing over time, having a degree of continuity through artefacts, routines, stories, discursive practices, language systems, etc. From this perspective, researchers often take a macro-level focus. Some are concerned with examining *the products* of construction: what objectified institutions, practices (technology, strategy, etc.), identities and so on are, and the discursive forces shaping them (Allen, 1998; Kornberger and Brown, 2007; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003); how different constructions of reality compete and are resisted (Boje, 1994); and how social facts such as stories, metaphors and narratives produce and are products of organization culture, identities, etc. (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). A second approach from this perspective focuses on *the process* of construction—how particular discursive and/or conversational practices produce meaning (Creed et al., 2002; Heracleous, 2006; Oswick and Richards, 2004). Potter (1996) aptly summarizes the concerns of this second more process-oriented approach: 'If we treat descriptions as constructions and constructive, we can ask how they are put together, what materials are used, what sorts of things and events are produced by them, and so on' (p. 98). Work from this perspective tends to be ethnomethodologically based (using discourse or conversation analysis), discursively based (using discourse and critical discourse analysis) or incorporate a semiotic analysis as a means of examining how social facticity or a sense of *out-there-ness* (Potter, 1996) is constructed.

Some authors see the process of sense-making as a cognitive one. Weick (1995), for example, suggests that organizations are socially constructed as organizational members make sense of and order their surroundings through cognitive maps or images—at an individual and a social level. Members enact, i.e. order and talk into existence, organizational realities. The type of knowledge generated from this perspective is knowledge about what forms of reality language constructs (e.g. social categories of race) and how it does so. These assumptions have an impact on how the researcher then theorizes: general conclusions are usually offered about the process of socially constructing reality and the impact of that reality on participants. For example, institutional theorists and social construction of technology (SCOT) theorists take a macro perspective to social construction—that

institutions and actions are relatively repeatable actions and activities shaping and constraining the behaviour of actors operating within a social system—and often view this process as relatively benign (Bjiker et al., 1987; Christensen and Westenholz, 1997). By contrast, critical theory and poststructuralist-influenced approaches are based on the notion that both the product and the process of social construction are infused with power relations, which privilege some groups and individuals over others (Mills, 2002). Research methods are often based on asking participants to reflect on their experience and/or on studying textual and symbolic material, interactions and practices within the organization. The focus of learning lies in helping students identify how language influences organizational and management practices, and may be ideologically bound (Hemetsberger and Reinhardt, 2006; Musson et al., 2007).

Scholars taking the view of intersubjective social realities believe that our sense of our social world emerges continually as we interact with others. From this perspective, there is no ‘I’ without ‘you’ (Shotter, 1989) because we are always in relation to others whether they are present or not. Dialogue, whether face-to-face or in our head, always incorporates other people, other conversations, other times and spaces (see Cunliffe et al., 2004, for further explanation). So researchers focus on the micro-processes of co-constructing and maintaining our understanding of social realities in everyday conversations (Hatch, 1997). The focus is not on what that social reality is—because there is no fixed, universally shared understanding of reality—but how people shape meaning between themselves in responsive dialogue. Some suggest that power interweaves all social relationships (Beech and Brockbank, 1999; Deetz, 1992, 1995; MacAlpine and Marsh, 2005; Phillips and Hardy, 1997), while others see the process as more benign (Watson, 2001). From the perspective of intersubjectively created emerging social realities, both research and learning aims to offer insights into how we negotiate meanings about our experiences, and in doing so, shape those experiences between us in our conversations, with the aim of becoming more thoughtful, careful and reflexive about how we do so.

In summary, under the broad umbrella of *social constructionism* lies a number of different approaches to research, knowledge and theorizing—which will ultimately have an impact on what and how we teach. At one end of the continuum, researchers take a subjective cognitive approach, focusing on how reality is objectified through interactive and/or discursive and/or processes of construction and sense-making. Weick’s comments that ‘reality is selectively perceived, rearranged cognitively and negotiated interpersonally’ (1979: 164) and that sense-making ‘occurs in a social context in which norms and expectations affect the rationalizations developed for behavior’ (2001: 12) are typical of this orientation. Critical theorists and poststructuralist theorists focus on social construction at a macro-level—how power-infused discursive practices are objectified in social structures, relations and subjectivities. Relational social constructionists focus on the micro-level—how people within a particular setting creating meanings intersubjectively through their embodied dialogical activities (Cunliffe, 2002b; Gergen et al., 2001; Katz et al., 2000). As a means of exploring the implications of social constructionism for knowledge and learning in more depth, I would like to offer a particular example based on my own orientation, which lies within relational social constructionism.

## A Relationally Responsive Orientation to Social Constructionism

When I speak or understand, I experience that presence of others in myself or of myself in others . . . To the extent that what I say has meaning, I am a different 'other' for myself when I am speaking; and to the extent that I understand, I no longer know who is speaking and who is listening. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 97)

Central to my exploration of social constructionism and management learning is the premise that we create our sense of, and meanings about, our social surroundings and ourselves in our conversations and interactions with those around us. In doing so, we see our surroundings as having some sort of substantiality. In other words, they do not become real; they have a quality of seeming real to us, which plays back into our conversation as we talk about 'organizations', 'systems', 'leaders', etc. Also, we are social, embodied beings always already embedded in an intricate flow of complexly intertwined relationally responsive and implicitly knowledgeable activities. My orientation therefore broadly coincides with the right-hand side of Table 1. In the remainder of the article, I would like to explain this orientation in more depth as a means of examining its impact on knowledge about organizations and management, and on management learning. In exploring these questions, I turn to the work of Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur, Bakhtin and Shotter. I suggest that knowledge from a relationally responsive perspective is an embodied and intersubjective knowing that may be understood through radically reflexive practice (Cunliffe, 2003). I begin by outlining the suppositions of this approach, move on to assess the implications for how we conceptualize and understand organizational life, and finally explore the implications for learning.

### *Intersubjectivity*

Berger and Luckmann (1966) draw on phenomenology to claim that everyday life is intersubjectively constructed because we live in a web of relationships. Their notion of intersubjectivity is really based on the premise that two or more subjectivities become intersubjective as we coordinate our responses with others, because 'only here is the other's subjectivity emphatically "close"' (p. 29). I suggest that a relationally responsive orientation draws on more nuanced interpretations, namely through the work of Bakhtin, Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur, who see intersubjectivity as 'the presence of others in myself or of myself in others' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 97). In other words, we are not two individuals coordinating activity and coming to an understanding of what each other thinks, but we are always selves-in-relation-to-others—inseparable because whole parts of our life are part of the life history of others. We are who we are because everything we say, think and do is interwoven with particular and generalized others: generalized groups, categories, language systems, culturally and historically situated discursive and non-discursive practices.

This work causes us to radically rethink our notions of reality and consequently traditional models of communication, language, knowledge and learning because it suggests that the origin of our experience is social and relational rather than individual and cognitive. Bakhtin (1981, 1986), for example, argues we are all speaking subjects and that the *other* is always active because we act in a complex

web of current and previous relationships, conversations, utterances and language communities embracing speech genres (relatively stable ways of talking in particular situations and contexts), historical and cultural ways of speaking. As argued elsewhere (Shotter and Cunliffe, 2002), our understanding of our surroundings continually emerges in relationally responsive interaction, in which everything we do is a complex mixture of our own and others' actions and talk: we are inherently responsive to each other—to our own and others' words, gestures and feelings. These are so interwoven that in the moment by moment, back-and-forth of our dialogue, no one person is in control. Which brings us to the second aspect of relationally responsive social constructionism—dialogue.

### *Dialogical*

I have explored a dialogical approach to research in some depth previously, as an expression of the notion of *language-as-ontology* (Cunliffe, 2002a). Here, I would like to summarize its main aspects as a backdrop to a relationally responsive orientation. Bakhtin is most associated with the notion of the dialogic nature of our experience. He was particularly concerned with the oppressive effect of monologic (one voice, ideologically bound) forms of talk, in contrast to dialogic, or more plural forms. For Bakhtin (1981), meaning lies in *living conversation*, in dialogue and utterances where everything that is said is in relationship to others: other people, other ideas, other conversations (past, present and anticipated). Language is characterized by heteroglossia (*raznorecie*), intersecting ideologies, times, ways of speaking and so on, in which 'the word . . . enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others . . . and all this may crucially shape discourse' (p. 276).

Bakhtin's focus on dialogic and responsive interaction also emphasizes polyphony (multiple voices with no one voice in control) and creativity, 'an utterance is never just an expression of something already existing outside it that is given and final. It always creates something that never existed before, something absolutely new and unrepeatable' (1986: 119–20). Thus, in our situated, moment-to-moment dialogue with many others we shape our understanding of possible worlds, of ways of orienting ourselves in these possible worlds and of new ways of being and acting. For example, I'm sitting at my computer writing this article, which an observer would see as an ostensibly solitary and individual activity, but there's a whole history of conversations with colleagues, students, friends, myself, reviewers, authors and texts that play into my writing. My daughter comes to ask me what I'm writing; our conversation helps me see I need to include this example . . . and she might see or think about something differently after our conversation . . . This is the relational and mundane nature of intersubjectivity and of dialogue, not purely reflective but also intuitive and taken-for-granted.

### *Embodied*

A relationally responsive orientation to social constructionism is not just about language and speech (as might be implied here), but also about ourselves as

speaking embodied beings. Merleau-Ponty (1962/2004) emphasizes that not only are we embodied in moments of our experience, but that we are our bodies: 'I become involved in things with my body, they co-exist with me as an incarnate subject' (p. 215). We therefore do not understand other people, or even objects, solely through acts of intellectual interpretation, but through sense impressions, gestures, emotional expressions and responses. For example, a friend smiles in a certain way and we know instinctively that they are happy, we might feel pleasure ourselves and respond with a smile, a word, a gesture. This knowing is immanent not intellectual. If we accept the notion that we perceive the world with our body, then 'we shall need to reawaken our experience of the world as it appears to us in so far as we are in the world through our body' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/2004: 239). As we will see, this has implications for what we commonly think of as 'knowledge'.

### *Dialectical*

The dialectical nature of experience and understanding runs throughout both Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty's work: but not in a dualistic sense. Rather, they see dialectics as a continuous interplay of two opposing terms, such that both maintain their difference yet pass into each other: they are inseparable in practical circumstances. The dialectic of intersubjectivity (sameness and difference) runs through much of Ricoeur's later work—that we are who we are because of others, 'the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other' (1992: 3). Similarly, Merleau-Ponty (1964) talks about the dialectic of existence in that we experience our world as already constituted—while constituting a sense of our world as we speak and interact. A dialectical understanding emphasizes the emergent and contested nature of experience by exploring the tensions and continual movement between opposites. It focuses our attention on the pluralistic and fragile nature of our social realities and identities: on what is and is not.

To summarize, relationally responsive social constructionism emphasizes the intersubjective and dialogical nature of experience: we are always in relation and responsive to others, and meaning emerges within the dialectical interrelationship of speakers/listeners, body/language, speech/silence, etc. The implications of these suppositions for conceptualizing and understanding organizations and management are:

1. Organizations can be conceived as emerging relational and dialogic language communities. A sense of organizational life, of selves and of what needs to be done, is contested, negotiated and created intersubjectively by people in their relationally responsive dialogical activities. 'Features' of the organization are not 'objects', but shared ways of talking, shared meanings and metaphors.
2. Managing is a relational and dialogic process: we are always a self-in-relation-to-others, and we do not live and act in isolation. Thus, it is important for managers to consider *how* they relate with others; what assumptions they hold about people; to understand how others may view the world; and to create opportunities for open dialogue.

So what are the implications of a relationally responsive orientation for knowledge and practice? This question is not just about epistemological priorities, but also about ontological commitments (Chia, 1996); that is, it is not just about the way we study our world, but also about our assumptions regarding the nature of reality and our ways of being in the world (Shotter, 1993). This way of thinking brings a moral responsibility—because we are always speaking and acting in relation to others, their lives interweave with ours, just as ours interweave with theirs. If we believe we are constantly creating meaning, sense and selves as we relate with others, then we need to reflexively surface and articulate how we create these meanings, so that we can act and interact in more responsive and ethical ways. For me, Ricoeur (albeit from the perspective of phenomenological hermeneutics rather than social constructionism) captures the essence of a relationally responsive social constructionist orientation when he defines our existential intention as, ‘*aiming at the “good life” with and for others, in just institutions*’ (1992: 172). Ricoeur emphasizes the inherence of the ethicomoral nature of intersubjectivity by quoting Lévinas, there is ‘no self without another who summons it to responsibility’ (p. 187)—if we really believe our lives are so interwoven then this brings a moral responsibility to speak and act with integrity. I now explore what this might mean for management learning.

### The Relational Nature of ‘Knowing’

I suggest that knowledge based on the assumptions relating to subjectively constructed social realities (the left-hand side of Table 1) still leads to the idea that knowledge is *something* that can be *applied to* practice—that there are generalized linguistic and discursive practices that can be applied to enable organizational members to become more effective. My point of departure is that if we accept that people create meaning, understanding and social realities between themselves in their everyday responsive interaction, then knowing lies within action, and action also lies within knowing. In other words, our actions and interactions are both implicitly knowledgeable (a kind of knowing that is not typically theoretical) and a means of creating knowledge. If we accept that this is so, then a critical question emerges: how do we surface the implicit knowing lying within action and articulate it in such a way that our actions can be more knowledgeable? This has further implications in terms of what form this knowledge might take, and how it might impact learning. In the remainder of the article, I address how a relationally responsive orientation to social constructionism might impact our understanding of the nature of knowledge, and ultimately of management learning.

Relationally responsive social constructionism emphasizes the importance of thinking about our ways of being and relating to others. As Merleau-Ponty (1964) states, in recognizing that ‘I am grafted onto every action and all knowledge which can have a meaning for me . . . Our situation is for us the source of our curiosity, our investigations . . . our situation is what links us to the whole of human experience, no less than what separates us from it’ (pp. 109–10). He says that we can never be ‘absolute spectators’ because we are embodied within

our world: our knowing is in situ. Consequently, we need to understand our relationship with our world: an understanding not based on rational theoretical knowledge but on knowing how to live in practical situations. This is not just, as Czarniawska (2001) suggests in her article on constructionist consulting, an explicit formulation of the *logic of practice*, i.e. context-based, tacit, often narrative knowledge, legitimized by its use. Nor is it a form of experiential knowledge viewed as an individual cognitive and information-processing activity geared towards generating knowledge about the socially constructed objectified world. I suggest that relationally responsive ‘knowing’ is more than this, it is a relational and dialogic *implicit knowing from within*, situated in embedded and contextualized understandings (Cunliffe, 1997; Cunliffe and Shotter, 2006). I summarize the characteristics of this form of knowing in Table 2.

Both Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty explore the nature of embedded and embodied knowing. For Ricoeur (1992) self-constancy, fidelity and solicitude for others are inherent to intersubjectivity and require *practical wisdom*—‘inventing just behavior suited to the singular nature of the case’ (p. 269). Central to this is a respect for others and other ways of talking. So, practical wisdom is based on knowing who we are and how to relate to others with mutual respect. Merleau-Ponty (1962/2004) suggests that knowing and learning are irrefutably embodied, linked with attuning ourselves to situations requiring skilful and embodied responses. These responses are not based on representation, thinking, then reconstruction, but on an understanding in which we ‘experience the harmony between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the performance’ (p. 167), which becomes habitual in the sense that it is intuitive—an embodied intelligence. He gives as an example musicians, who ‘feel’, not measure, where the keys and pedals are, and who use them to achieve musical and emotional

**Table 2** Relationally responsive knowing

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- Knowing is entwined within implicitly knowledgeable activities: informal, unbounded, and often intuitive ways of making sense. ‘Practical wisdom’ (Ricoeur, 1992)
  - Knowing is both embedded in social situations, in interaction, and embodied in our experience of our world: it relates to how we live our lives and make meaning with others (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).
  - Knowing is sustained and created in multiple interactions and social practices.
  - Knowing as intersubjectively and ongoingly created shared (or shareable) sense, which participants see at that moment as providing acceptable orientations and ways of moving on.
  - Learning is a dialogical process, exploring different ways of seeing and interpreting issues and situations; sharing some sense of situations; and creating possibilities for change (Cunliffe, 2002a).
  - Learning is a dialectical process: exploring the interplay of tensions, contradictions, othernesses as a means of opening possibilities for critical- and self-reflexivity.
  - Learning based in being reflexively aware of how we construct meanings with others in our everyday conversations.

Based on Cunliffe (1997).

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responses. How do these embedded and embodied forms of knowing relate to our lives as friends, spouses, managers and colleagues?

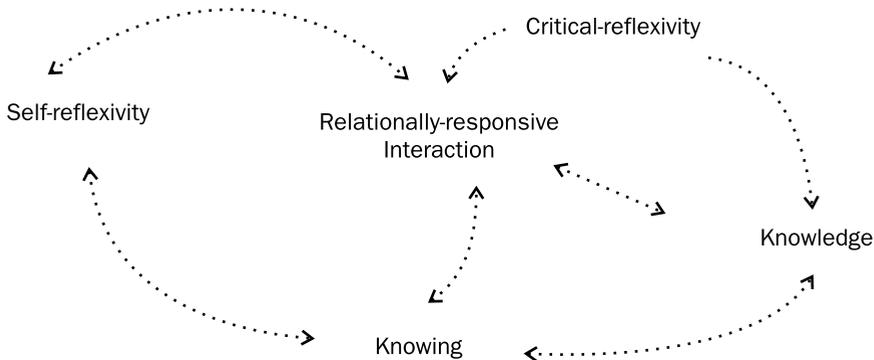
Much of our everyday interaction can be seen in this way. We ‘feel’ our way around our relationships and interactions with others in a reflex, often pre-lingual way (Cunliffe, 2002a): what to say, how to act, how to respond, is often intuitive and spontaneous to the moment of interaction. We are so at home in our surroundings, and our actions, ways of relating and speaking are so much a part of who we are, that not only do we often fail to notice what we are saying/doing in the moment—we also do not consider its impact. Our behaviour is reflex—habitual and instinctive. A relationally responsive orientation to knowing and learning draws attention to this taken-for-grantedness and explores the nature of practical wisdom and skilful embodied responses as a means of relating with others in more responsive, reflexive and moral ways. As I explain later, knowing is about knowing who we are/want to be, and how to relate with others in particular situations. Learning is about understanding how we intersubjectively shape our lives, and the crucial place of dialogue in this process. I suggest that reflexive dialogical practice—surfacing the tacit assumptions embedded in our ways of talking and exploring how our own conversational practices create and sustain particular ways of relating—is central to relationally responsive learning.

### **Relationally Responsive Learning: Reflexive Engagement**

The basic practical–moral problem in life is not what *to do*, but *what kind of person* to be. (Shotter and Cunliffe, 2002: 20)

Our approach to management learning will be influenced by our orientation to social constructionism. Working from the subjective reality–cognitive–objectivation perspective usually leads to a focus on developing the student’s awareness of how organizations, actions and identities are socially constructed through language; how they can become better managers by understanding the role of language and by becoming more effective analysers and users of stories, narratives, metaphors, framing devices and so on (Deetz et al., 2000; Morgan and Dennehy, 2004). Reflection is often held as a key skill, as exemplified by Schön’s (1983) process of *reflecting-in-action*, where professionals construct understanding by drawing upon cumulative personal and organizational knowledge and engage in a reflective conversation with the situation. Or, at a macro-level, more critically oriented social constructionists are interested in helping students expose subtle and not-so-subtle power relations prevalent in organizational and management practices (Garrick and Clegg, 2001; Hardy and Palmer, 1999).

A number of authors move towards a relational orientation to learning, (Orr, 1996; Ramsey, 2005; Van der Haar and Hosking, 2004; Watson, 2001). But what might a relationally responsive approach to learning encompass? How can we develop skilled and knowledgeable practices relevant to the particular circumstances of our own experience? I suggest that if we wish to engage with a relationally responsive approach in our teaching, then it encompasses an understanding of self- and critical-reflexivity (Figure 1).

**Figure 1** Relationally responsive learning: an overview

Relationally responsive knowing and learning means thinking more reflexively about how we construct multiple and emerging ‘realities’ and selves with others, through our dialogue. I suggest that it involves both self- and critical-reflexivity. Self-reflexivity goes deeper than reflecting on an event or a situation; it involves recognizing we are in-relation-to-others, that we ‘summon each other in responsibility’ (Levinas, cited by Ricoeur, 1992) and thus need to examine our fundamental assumptions, values, ways of interacting and how these affect other people. It means thinking more critically about ourselves, our actions, the types of conversations we engage in, the language we use and how to carry out conversations in which (to some degree) shared understandings of organizational experience allow possibilities for action to emerge. Such self-reflexive practices may involve noticing certain ways of talking and how particular words, phrases and gestures we use might shape responses and understandings of our surroundings. Of course we *talk about* this in the classroom—but students also begin to notice their own ways of talking in the moment (both in the classroom and in their daily lives), and think about the potential implications.

Critically reflexive engagement means unsettling assumptions, actions and their impact, but at a broader cultural, social, ideological and institutional level. Much critically based management education focuses on this level: examining what passes as good management practice; critiquing ideologies, normalized practices and their consequences; and highlighting systemic control structures that reproduce themselves in our discourse and practices. This is often with the aim of exploring how we can create more morally and socially responsible organizational practices by engaging in critical and open dialogue. Thus, both self- and critical-reflexivity draw attention to how we relate with each other ethically.

## Conclusion

Relationally responsive social constructionism highlights the intersubjective, dialogical and dialectical nature of experience, and consequently has implications for the type of knowledge we seek. I suggest this orientation emphasizes an embedded form of knowing, which is often intuitive, but can be explored through reflexive

engagement with ourselves and our surroundings. In terms of teaching, this involves drawing attention to a social constructionist orientation, exploring what this might mean for managing and leading organizations, and encouraging students to become more reflexive. At a basic level, this means understanding how our assumptions and use of words impact organizational practices and therefore the social realities and identities of others. At a more fundamental level it highlights our responsibility for creating ethical dialogue, respecting the rights of those around us to speak, and becoming aware of how we might avoid 'the suppression of alternative conceptions and possibilities' (Deetz, 1995: 223).

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