

Working with Organizational Learning and Leadership Development

with Inspiration from John Shotter

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John Shotter offers a radically new view of organization and leadership and I have found his thinking extremely inspiring and useful in my work with leadership and organizational learning. Not only in my work as a consultant but, as well, in my practice as a researcher. Often I work with facilitating and understanding dialogical processes from an action research inspired approach. For instance, I use this approach while working with leaders and employees on the development of reflexive, communicative and relational competences. Here I draw on social constructionist understandings and, among others, John Shotter's ideas about research, knowledge production and communication, which serve as great inspirational resources for me.

For many, reading or listening to one of John Shotter's lectures for the first time may be a surprising encounter. Surprising in the sense that he questions many of the categories that we are brought up to think of as given such as subject-object, true-false, internal-external, movement-stasis, cause-effect, reality-construction, subjectivity-objectivity, immanence-emergence, etc. Part of what fascinates me by Shotter is that he constantly questions not only how we perceive the world around us, but also the ways in which we describe it. For example, he argues against Cartesian dualism, rationality, the logic of causality and modernism. He adopts a critical approach to established scientific definitions and he challenges conventional approaches to academic thinking and writing. Shotter believes that we tend to repeat and sustain antiquated ideas in our use of language, our daily routines, organizational practise and academic research. As part of his criticism, and based on his belief in constant change, he deconstructs our customary notion of concepts, such as time and space, material patterns, movement and change, but also our ways of understanding knowledge production and research.

Shotter is inspired by Heraclitus (among many others). He is fascinated by the emergent, the situational, and our existence and communication in what he describes as a *fluid, flowing world in constant change*. Shotter quotes William James, who coined the phrase "an ongoing stream of experience" (James, 1890; Shotter, 2015) in which we are immersed and embedded. In this way Shotter's ideas are steeped in an approach to the world in constant movement, constant change. In other words, Shotter takes a *becoming*-perspective, in which the meaning emerges from the contact between us. When we communicate, we inadvertently take part in and affect each other's lives. It is through dialogue that we can open up for new opportunities and invite new ways of seeing things, new perspectives. Similarly, our way of communicating can also constrain this space of opportunities and close down new openings. It is not a matter of observing the partner in our conversation as if he or she was a distant object. According to Shotter, we are much more involved with each other than we realise because we continually affect and become affected by each other in amazing and unpredictable ways. This way of thinking requires

fellow human responsibility and mutual engagement and Shotter argues for an approach based on *'withness'-thinking* instead of *'aboutness'-thinking*. Shotter believes it is important to relate to the process or dialogue together *with* others and from within this *'withness'* to sense the openings and opportunities that may occur – rather than observing the process at the distance, from the outside. For the same reason, instead of, for example, allowing ourselves to be guided by abstract theories and models, he urges us to be curious and investigate things by establishing contact, using our senses and paying attention to our surroundings. He argues against the Cartesian world-view, which, he believes, expresses a distanced *'aboutness'-thinking*, which is more a matter of intellectually controlling and gaining mastery over nature and living beings from a distance than a matter of relating to them by actively participating in other living beings' *unique 'otherness'*. Instead of seeing human beings as isolated entities or objects, Shotter considers us active participants in social ecologies or social communities which are characterized by mutual interdependence and by being dynamic and extremely complex.

Shotter sees the relational and the community as conditions that are fundamental to human beings. As I see it, he is primarily interested in how we can enter fruitful relationships with each other, in meetings between people and how we use communication to navigate and find orientation in this, our fluid and constantly changing world. He is not interested in putting phenomena into formulas and he is critical of a tendency within the sciences to subdivide everything into entities and general categories, define general patterns or reduce complex phenomena to models. He addresses, rather, the dynamic, the processual and the movement in a stream of activities. Shotter challenges the concept of the representative-referential function of language and points out that language is constitutive and as well constructed and that it develops in relational-responsive meetings between people. Instead of analyzing and resolving problems in traditional “scientific” ways, Shotter is more interested in how we *find our way* and move *in relation* to others around us in this, our fluid and constantly changing world. He advocates for a before-the-fact approach where we try to grasp, create and formulate future possibilities rather than working from an approach which is primarily retrospectively oriented (after-the-fact).

Shotter has written many academic publications and I guess that reading his texts is something I will never cease to enjoy. Every time I read his work, I learn something new and I catch sight of new nuances in his way of thinking. Shotter is not a man you can pigeon-hole; his thinking is complex and inspired by many different sources, but first and foremost, he theorizes about communication and communication philosophy. I personally have been greatly inspired by his writings and lectures in order to achieve a better understanding of what goes on when we meet and communicate with each other, for example, in organizational contexts.

In connection with my own academic journey as a researcher and my practice as an educator and process consultant with a special interest in relational leading, process facilitation and communication, there are a number of Shotter's concepts that I find particularly inspirational, which have made a particularly strong impression on me.

The ideas by Shotter that have inspired me the most are his notions of *performative understanding*, *joint action*, *relational responsiveness*, *'withness'-thinking*, *thinking in duration*, *upstream* and *downstream-thinking*, *action guiding anticipations*, *otherness*, *phronesis*, *polyphony* and the idea of the leader as a *resourceful conversational partner*. In a specific

chapter for the book entitled *Bevægelige Verdener* (published in Danish), I have interpreted and explained Shotter's use of these ideas (as I understand them) and brought these into perspective in relation to communication, leading and organizational learning.

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