

# Artistic knowledge and its application in organizational change: Reflections on using my artistic knowledge in the KIA-project

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## Abstract

This paper discusses how my artistic knowledge as a director and actor were used within a leadership and diversity project of a Swedish municipal authority. My work was part of *Kreativ Interaktion i Arbetslivet* (KIA, “Creative Interaction in Worklife”) —an interregional European Union project that used artists and their creativity as an innovative force for organizational change. My initial goal was to aid in the process of developing a platform for diversity work. Formulating the specific aim and strategies was part of the project itself. This paper uses reflexive methods to describe the ways that my artistic perspective and competences were used. Reflecting my artistic practice, some of the reflections are formulated as dramatic scenes.

**KEYWORDS:** acting, art, artistic competence, directing ,organizational change, management.

## Introduction

Several studies in the past decade have focused on the artist's role in organizational change (Styhre and Eriksson 2008, Areblad 2010, Johansson 2012a,b). They have mostly examined the use of the artists' knowledge in developing creativity within the organizations. There have been few studies examining the artists' own reflections upon artistic knowledge and its use within organizational change.

KIA is a European interregional project in Denmark, Sweden and Norway where artists use their specialized knowledge to help the organizations reformulate their problems and achieve new perspectives. There have been 24 organizations involved in the KIA project, six of which were Swedish, and 25 artists, six of whom were Swedish. The six Swedish KIA projects were evaluated by an independent research team in 2012 (Johansson 2012a,b, Jahnke 2012).

The Swedish partner in KIA was Tilt, an organization that has worked with similar projects for many years (Areblad 2010). Tilt joined the KIA project in order to try an alternative way of working in cooperation with companies (Johansson 2012a).

In the midsized town of Skövde, the municipality wanted to find ways to support managers in their work with diversity, in all its forms. The 18-month-long project had the goal of training managers in diversity issues. This paper builds upon a hermeneutic tradition (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2009) with self reflection as a base and a narrative as the form. It begins with a description of two central competences of my artistic practice, it is followed by a short description of the Skövde diversity project and my research question, a description of the application of my artistic methods in the project, and concludes with reflections on the project.

## Two central competences of my artistic practice

This section discusses two key competences used in my intervention project and their function in my artistic practice. This method of acting and directing is based on the methodology practiced at the School of Music and Drama at the University of Gothenburg. It forms my knowledge base and is part of the academic tradition I studied, and is what I currently teach to acting students.

## “Given circumstances” - a foundational concept

The concept of “given circumstances” as dictated by the playscript and as indicated by the interpretation of the playscript ( Stanislavski 1967 ) is central in my work as a director and actor. Given circumstances include all the factors that affect the actors' performance on stage and can be roughly divided into physical circumstances and imagined circumstances.

An example of a physical given circumstance that affects an actor's theatrical life might be a large or small stage, or a window placed high or low in the set construction.

The imagined given circumstances are dependent on the actor's capacity to use his or her imagination, ie to engage the Stanislavski "*magic if*".

As an example:

Character A, sits in a café.

Suppose the actor portraying character A receives the following given circumstance:

The next person entering the café looks just like a murderer A saw in the newspaper several days earlier.

This given circumstance is likely to affect A's behaviour at the café. Now change the given circumstance to:

The next person who enters the room is someone that you have secretly been in love with for a long time.

With this given circumstance A is likely to behave quite differently.

If the actor is also given a more acute circumstance then the influence of the two previous given circumstances will probably be significantly weakened since they are overruled by the stronger given circumstance. For example:

A is on the phone with his grandmother who informs A that his apartment is on fire and would like to know what he wants her to save from the flames.

Of course, the example of character A in the café is simplistic and is only intended to give an understanding of the term. Given circumstances have a wide range of types and categories. For a deeper understanding of this concept see Uta Hagen's *A Challenge for the Actor*.

As a director I work with finding and modifying given circumstances to construct a specific theatrical expression on stage. If we think of the café example: How do we want the audience to perceive character A? The rehearsal process can be described as when the given circumstances dictated by the play script and the given circumstances indicated by the interpretation of the play script meet the actor's own life experiences through a process of trial and error on the stage floor. The resulting response to the given circumstance will be influenced and even determined by the actor's own memories and experiences since it could be said that the actor "lends his body" to the character. The meeting of the actor's own experiences and the given circumstances creates an expression that is both unique to the actor and at the same time recognizable to the audience as a human condition.

The director is responsible for the artistic result, that is, the sum of expressions that meet the audience from the stage. It is the director's responsibility to ensure that the theatrical expression collectively supports the vision or interpretation that the director has for the play.

The performance of the actor, as I see it, is partially a result of two key competences. We can call them (1) "the actors ability to make him/herself receptive to the given circumstances", and (2) "the art of finding and modulating performable given circumstances".

## 1. The actor's ability to make him/herself receptive to the given circumstances

The actor works with strategies and training to make him/herself physically and mentally receptive to the given circumstances, so that the audience can experience a universal human condition. The director could also use this ability while preparing a play, or during rehearsal

when trying to decide if the performance is reaching his or her artistic vision.

## 2. The art of finding and modulating performable given circumstances

Finding and modulating performable given circumstances means that the actor works with the director to effectively find the given circumstances that enable the actor's body to communicate. This can be thought of as the actor getting to know his instrument. A director should be skilled at successfully find and communicate the given circumstances in such a way that the actor is able to produce a result that supports the interpretation and vision of the play.

The director's role and the practice of these two competences is, in my interpretation, beautifully described by Peter Brook:

Chaos is only useful when it leads to order. This is where the director's role becomes clear /.../ The director must have from the start what I've called a "formless hunch", that is to say, a certain powerful yet shadowy intuition. That indicates the basic shape, the source from which the play is calling to him. /.../ What he [the director] needs most to develop in his work is a sense of listening. /.../ It is in the name of this listening that he will be constantly dissatisfied, will continue to accept and reject until suddenly his ear hears the secret sound it is expecting and his eyes sees the inner form that has been waiting to appear.

Brook 1993:119

## The Skövde Diversity Project

The project's task was to raise awareness of diversity issues and to strengthen and develop the service managers in diversity work within the municipality. There was also a list of the municipality's needs. For example: "To extend the individual's comfort zone to make them more available to a municipality with greater social diversity." Our objective was not originally defined as a specific task or product. It was an 18-month-long project that had four stages: launch, research, implementation and refinement. The participating group consisted of 10 managers in charge of diverse departments within the municipality ranging from education to technical services. A process group of four participants was formed to work with me as a task group and was the main motor for making progress in the project. There was a steering group consisting of myself, the municipal director, a process manager from Tilt—the consulting company that managed this project and a representative from the group of participants.

Activities were in the form of workshops with the group of participants and myself. Guests were occasionally invited to the workshop to participate or lead the workshops. I also visited participants' places of work where I conducted interviews, research and discussions. When

preparing for the final exhibition, which was both an artistic expression and a presentation of the project results, the group met more frequently and formed special task teams. The exhibition included two documentary films with material from the process work, a photo artwork of photos from one of the workshops and the participants' own photos, and other works. These were combined with a compilation of documents of the municipality's diversity policies and conclusions made by the group about obstacles and opportunities in the municipality's future work with diversity. The exhibition was designed to be a resource for further diversity work in the community.

## The research question and methodology

What have I done in the project? What kinds of knowledge have I contributed? What were the artistic perspectives used and how could my intuitive knowledge be formulated and formalized? Can I consider myself a "director" in this kind of project? Can I call myself an artist when the result does not look like it usually does in my artistic practice?

The aim of this paper is to reflect upon how my artistic knowledge was used in the KIA project and explicitly formulate the knowledge that I used intuitively.

Some parts of the KIA project were similar to my work as a director. For example, I created documentary films of the process. What is more interesting is to investigate areas of the project where the need for my artistic knowledge was not obvious.

The term "competence" used here can be thought of as "knowledge in action" (Sandberg 1994). My actions in the project should be seen as a manifestation of my competences. I have chosen to describe these actions in terms of the complex thought processes and reflections that motivated them. Howard Gardner (2007) writes in his book *Five Minds for the Future* of a "disciplinary mind", that a person trained in a particular discipline will naturally perceive and act according to the basic principles of the discipline. In my case the discipline of performing arts would lead me to act accordingly.

In the scenario that follows I will describe a situation where I as an artist was presented with a dilemma that I was forced to solve so that the project could progress. I will describe how my application of acting and directing tools from my artistic practice led to an insight that resulted in a turning point for the project.

This text uses form and terminology from the performing arts: I will describe the story as a screenplay in three scenes. The screenplay follows the form of a film manuscript, which will allow me to use my artistic competence in this paper. My own reflection on how I used the acting tools will be conveyed as a voiceover in the manuscript. As the screenplay is read, one can imagine the text as a narration, a voice heard while we see the pictures. By using the format of a screenplay, my reflections themselves are given a form. This is important to my practice and process

## The Dilemma - a film script

*Scene 1:*

*In which the group of participants questions the project as a whole, and the artist takes notes for later analysis.*

*Location: Interior. A conference room in Skövde. 11 chairs arranged in a ring, no tables.*  
*Time: Daytime, December 2010.*  
*Cast: KIA artist, the group of participants (10 managers from Skövde Municipality).*

*Today's scheduled workshop is about to begin. The group will work with the project's focus, diversity, as it usually does. The group is sitting on chairs in a circle, an arrangement they are becoming accustomed to. There are no tables. The artist goes through the plan for the day.*

*Artist voiceover:*

The first thing I think of when I reflect on the scene is the ring of chairs. I consciously use this formation, without tables. The distance to the centre of the ring is the same for everyone and we all see each other's bodies and can best capture the body language signals. This is a good way to sit during a creative process. My experience working with scenic space has led me to choose form. As a director I must master the art of managing scenic space. It involves managing the actors' movements and positions on the stage with respect to the form of the stage space, the audience and the other actors. Believe it or not, two centimetres of movement on stage can create a significant change in the meaning conveyed. Putting the chairs in a circle on the floor is not the main point, these forms for basic dramatic exercises can be found in a book at the library. What is critical is the director's and actors' experience managing and evaluating the physical information that this formation releases into the room.

*Scene 1 (cont'd.):*

*Everyone sits down and the artist opens with:*

*Artist:*

- Is there anything of importance to the project that you wish to say and feel is relevant before we get started?

*Artist voiceover:*

... I ask this question, as I usually do as a director, to my actors before each rehearsal. I recall that it was H who spoke first...

*H:*

- What are we actually doing? What will all this lead to? That is what I have been wondering.

*B (cuts in):*

- Yes! Is this really an issue that is important for the City anyway? Does the Municipality really want a change or are they just doing this in order to be able to say that they are addressing the issue?

*T:*

- Exactly! And how can we succeed when we this group isn't even diverse?

*Artist Voiceover:*

Good! Here we're in the process. Finally. We are already in

what I call "The crisis that deepens the artistic result". I instinctively reach for a pen and paper. The director needs to capture this situation as accurately as possible so that she can juggle it with the entire vision of the process.

I begin to write in my notebook just like I do in the rehearsal room. With the same concentration and insight. Working as a director I try to capture what's happening in the room and write down the essence of movements and lines the actor presents. I do so in order to be able to later analyze their composition and structure. I am focused on finding what is being said between the lines. What are the origin and motives for each verbal response and movement? I am looking for motives and goals, internal and external obstacles. Searching for the change in structures, the choice of small words and the structure of each sentence. This, together with the physical movements—such as the person's posture, hand movements, dilation of the pupils, etc.—is what creates the content in the room. That is what is really meaningful, that is where the message is. Of course, I can't perceive and capture everything—here or on stage—but my training as an artist helps me to capture more, and to organize my notes into a script. A script I can use for analysis later.

One must pay extra attention in the moment, as it happens. It happens only once. There are no retakes. You have to immediately record it with your internal camera as accurately as possible. I give myself the task, just as I do as a director, of trying to find out what this scene really contains. What does this scene mean for the entire project's story and to our vision of the project?

*The artist writes feverishly in her notebook. She occasionally asks a question but otherwise lets the "improvisation" continue. It is E who drives the scene now. She has taken over from H. The artist writes in her notebook that she feels "a heavy pressure throughout the room". She draws a picture representing a pressure pushing the group down, and that the statements they are making springs from this pressure. H's opening line makes it clear that feelings that have been dammed up are now released. There is a flow. The participants express frustration and continue to question the project in various ways. The artist also notes that the team now seems to say things to each other that have been impossible to say earlier. They are dropping their guard. It is a signal that they are actually achieving a degree of trust in the group through this process. The artist now writes in her notebook these two questions that the group has asked:*

C:

- And how do we actually use your artistic competence in this project anyway?

A:

- Yes! Since you are a director maybe we should work with theatrical scenes about diversity? Act out a scene about diversity for the Municipality's Directors?

*The artist says that it is possible to change the strategy, but she is not sure that that would be the best choice. She*

*suggests that they don't make a decision right now but keep the idea on the back burner. She makes note of it as a proposal and says that they will revisit it.*

*Artist voiceover (cont'd.):*

*In a rehearsal situation with actors I am constantly faced with a continuous flow of new decisions. Each decision means juggling the vision of the final performance with what I see in the rehearsal in front of me. I must ask myself, Will this decision bring us closer to or further away from the vision? If I cannot foresee whether a proposal will bring us closer to or further away from the vision I have learned to postpone the decision and put it on the back burner. That means we can continue the rehearsal and I can at the same time let my subconscious work on the decision.*

*Quite often, when I'm in a flow, I intuitively know the answer but still cannot verbally formulate a motivation for it. In these situations I have learned to trust this intuition. If the actors and I have created a trusting environment, the actor can accept to act on my instructions without needing a verbal motivation. This requires a large degree of trust. It also saves time in the rehearsal process and may therefore have a crucial role in the results. Sometimes it is even easier for the actor to understand the motivation after he or she has had a physical experience of the action.*

*I remember having the intuitive answer to the question in Scene 1 as soon as he asked the question. Intuition said: That's not what we should do. It's not the best way to use my artistic skills but I could not immediately verbalize why. So, I chose to postpone the decision. Later I reflected, "It is clear that one can change strategies but the methods we have chosen have greater potential to take us to the desired result". I also experienced that I was using my skill as a director the entire time that I was working with the group even though we were not creating a theatrical performance. It was a far greater challenge to apply traditional acting and directing methods to a new arena.*

*The artist takes the decision to let the discussion continue and puts aside the planned workshop activities temporarily.*

*Scene 2a:*

*In which the artist tries to understanding what motivates the action in Scene 1 by going through her notes.*

*Time: The same day, four hours later.*

*Location: On the train between Skövde and Göteborg.*

*Cast: The artist.*

*The artist sits heavily on the train seat. She looks tired and pulls out her notes from Scene 1. Concentrated, she reads the notes. Sometimes she looks out the window. If you look closely you can see her lips moving like she is quietly talking to herself. She seems lost in the landscape outside the train.*

*Artist voiceover:*



I go through Scene 1 over and over again. Reading notes. My script. Recalling. What are they really saying? What motivates this or that statement? I sort out my memories of each person and try to see the scene from their perspectives. Try their words as if they were my own. Switching perspectives. Putting myself in different places in the room. Identifying keywords and themes that keep bubbling up to the surface. I write them into my "director's notes". What keeps coming back is the pressure in the room. What is it? It makes me curious. Associations are emerging as they do when I am working on a manuscript. They take the form of a parallel scene—a flashback.

*Scene 3 / Flashback:*

*In which the artist recognizes the same sensation of pressure that she had noticed in Scene 1*

*Location: The train between Skövde and Göteborg.*

*Time: Approximately one month before Scenes 1 and 2.*

*Cast: Artist and T (A representative for the Municipality Directors Management Team, KDLG).*

*The stage begins with a full frame. We see two people standing and talking intensely in a crowded train carriage. This particular day, the KIA group had a workshop with KDLG. The aim was to communicate project process to the KDLG.*

*Cut to close-up from the artist's point of view;*

*We now see T's face, a little obliquely from below, because both are standing and T is slightly taller than the artist. T has a sympathetic, open face. The artist thinks T is sharp and witty. T is fast and analytical in a humorous way that appeals to the artist. Because of their jobs they are often travelling on the same train. Sometimes they talk about the KIA project and its similarities to their professional experiences.*

*Artist voiceover:*

*I go through the scene in my head and suddenly the key sentence appears, the sentence that draws me to this memory.*

*We see head shot of T. He says:*

*- Well, diversity is a large and complex issue to resolve, but you have the opportunity to achieve big changes ...*

*Artist voiceover:*

*In my memory I am still seeing the situation from a first person perspective. That is to say that I have my own character and I am peeking out from inside it. Freeze frame. Camera turns and my attention is focused on my own physical experience of the situation. What am I feeling? How are his words affecting me? When an actor achieves the correct interpretation during rehearsal I often ask them the question, "How do you feel in your body?"*

*This technique creates a picture that the actor can go back to when they recreate the scene in the future. The picture opens the desired emotional response when the scene is to be repeated.*

In Scene 3 I know that T's intention is to support and encourage me. But what he says makes me feel anxious. I feel pressure. It is this feeling that suddenly builds a bridge back to the pressure I noticed over the KIA group in Scene 1.

*Scene 3 (cont'd.):*

*Cut back from the artist's perspective of T's face in the train compartment to the artist's perspective in Scene 1 where we see the KIA group and their faces as they are sitting in the circle questioning the project process.*

*Scene 2 B:*

*In which the artist comes to an insight and begins to take action.*

*Time, Place, cast the same as Scene 2a.*

*We recognize the image of the artist sitting in the train compartment. Her face is turned toward the window, daydreaming. Suddenly the artist wakes up from her daydream and looks sleepily around the train. We recognize the notes from Scene 1 in her lap as she puts them aside. She bends down and picks up her computer, opens the screen, turns it on and begins to eagerly write her thoughts. The tiredness we previously noted in her face is now gone. Zoom out as she types excitedly.*

**The END**

## My actions from insights

Seeing the groups actions as dramatic scenes highlighted the need to define and clarify the group's task. We were hindered by an idea of what we were expected to do based on incorrect the group. This pressure inhibited the process. If the goal of the KIA project would have been to create a traditional action plan to increase diversity in the community, and to deliver a document following the template that is expected by the Municipality, then the concern of the group expressed in Scene 1 would have been warranted. We would have been a badly formed group who used our time inadequately, but that was not the task. The municipality had decided to invest in this project because they hoped to use unconventional methods to get results that would not otherwise have been possible.

As a result, we redefined our objectives to "the documentation of the experiences of the group during the project". The task of the group was, "as representatives of the municipality's managers", to make themselves available to the process of dealing with obstacles and opportunities when working with diversity; and also to document this process." The pressure on the group disappeared when we redefined our task and expectations both internally and externally within the Municipality. This blew new wind into our sails and we could complete our work with renewed energy. By reflecting on our own process and goals we were able to better understand the Municipality's value structures concerning diversity.

## Concluding reflections

First, I asked myself whether I can call myself an artist in a project where the results do not resemble the results in my artistic practice. Our project did not produce a theatrical play. Still, I would say that I acted as an artist. Even when the form of the work differed from my usual artistic practice I was able to use the skills and knowledge I have gained in my artistic work and education. My approach and actions were guided by the disciplined thinking (Gardner 2007) of my training in performing arts.

I also asked how the use of my artistic skills in this project could be described and formalized. I described my artistic perspective in a screenplay form narrating my internal processes at a turning point in the project. When following my inner dialogue I understood that I not only used a general artistic creativity, but more specifically the knowledge and practice of acting tools from a director's perspective.

As I reflected upon my practice in the field of art and organization I see that I approach a project in three main steps:

First, I use the actor's trained ability to make them self available so that I can assess the situation. When I have a picture in my mind, I create an image of the situation against a map of the actor's tools and find synergy between the two. I search for expressions or concepts that work in both the actor's environment and the environment of the workplace. The third step is the "performed situation" where I use the actor's knowledge and skills to create a base for reflection in the working environment.

The reflections in this paper are done upon a first hand coupling of theories and intuitive practice. I hope to be able more systematically elaborate my reflections about how to use my artistic knowledge for organizational development in future interpretations – as well as future projects.

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