On the Diversity of Action Research

Øyvind Pålshaugen

I

When reading accounts of action research projects, we may now and then notice the use of the expression “as an action researcher I…” or, in plural “as action researchers we…” This expression is most often used as part of an explanation or justification of why some part of the project has been undertaken in a certain way, e.g. like this: “As action researchers, we have been careful to make everybody in the group [or organization, or community] have a voice in the change process”. However, we will hardly ever run into any similar kind of expression while reading reports from mainstream social research. Social researchers who undertake empirical studies of a descriptive kind, do not seem to need to refer to themselves as a “social researcher” in the texts they write from their research projects.

The main reason for this difference, I think, is this: Most social researchers simply find the methods and ways of proceeding in doing social research as well established part(s) of the social sciences, and the very application of these methods and procedures by inquiring into some social phenomena is just what makes their inquiry a scientific undertaking. If you happen to work in an institution that enables you to be called a “social researcher” or a “social scientist”, and you perform an empirical study in accordance with some particular selection or combination from the repertoire of the established methods and procedures, you are simply doing a piece of social research.

Of course, you will have to give reasons for your choice of methods, theoretical framework etc., but this reasoning is about whether the choice of methods and theory are in accordance with the phenomenon to be studied.
You cannot justify your choice of using one particular method or theory by claiming that “as a social researcher, I …”. If you are a social researcher, you are expected to behave as one: Social researchers are allowed to use a broad spectrum of methods to gather data about the field; they are, however, not expected to intervene into the field. That would be “deviant behaviour”, according to the etiquette of social research.

Here, I think, we also find the main part of the reason why so many action researchers tend to justify elements/aspects of their approach by referring to themselves as action researchers. As we know, the criteria for identifying approaches of social research as scientific have constantly been debated since the emergence of the social sciences, and there are to some extent competing sets of criteria between different “schools” or approaches of social research. Nevertheless, anyone who at any time has been educated to become a social scientist/social researcher has been taught how to proceed in accordance with what counts (at the time) as criteria for scientific approaches when undertaking social studies. Also all action researchers have once been taught what is to be regarded as scientific behaviour when undertaking a research process. If applying the criteria they have been taught, most action researchers would have no problem in identifying their intervention into the field of research (the collaboration with the actors in the field, etc.) as an example of “deviant behaviour”. However, as we know, most action researchers are not inclined to just passively being considered as “deviants”. Rather, they are quite more offensively inclined to identify themselves as representatives of a kind of social research in its own right, namely action research, and they also want the “social science establishment” to accept action research as such.

But, as we also know, such an acceptance of action research by the social science establishment still seems to be rather far ahead. Indeed, during recent decades we have witnessed a growth of interest in action research worldwide, an increased number of projects within an increasing number of fields of study, and an increased number of publications. This notwithstanding, the overall situation still is that courses for students or doctoral courses in action research, university positions and positions at research institutions dedicated to action research, etc. mostly are the exception that proves the rule. Action research is not really part of the social science establishment, nor is there
really something like an “action research establishment”. Today action research is indeed widespread, but that also means widely spread. The community of action research is perhaps most adequately to be described as a virtual community consisting of virtual networks, made up by larger or smaller groups of people, or even single persons, who each have their institutional basis within academic or professional institutions, whose main purpose is something else than doing action research.

Consequently, in contrast to those who belong to the “social science establishment”, it will most often not really be possible for action researchers to make their research practice be identified with the dominant, institutionalised apparatus of research practices of the academic or professional institution to which they belong. Thus, it appears more important to make one’s own action research practice become identified with what is considered as the community of action researchers. However, this community lacks the kind of institutional basis and institutionalised apparatus (educational systems, academic positions, publication channels etc.) that adheres to the established community of social science. Therefore, the most common denominator across the various research practices seems to be found by focussing on the virtual community of action researchers. Consequently, often used criteria for identifying one’s own research as action research have become those features that one imagines to pertain to the role of being an action researcher. My thesis is, that it is just the combination of a weak institutional basis for, and a strong personal engagement in, doing action research that is the reason why so many action researchers tend to identify themselves rather personally with their role as action researcher, and therefore make claims on behalf of this role, to legitimate or give reasons for the way they choose to perform their research (as in the phrase: as an action researcher, I …). The question is does this approach to legitimating some particular action research approach hold water?

II

I think the answer is no, because this way of legitimating or giving reasons for performing particular ways of action research, is exactly what begs the
question. If you try to legitimate your own approach by making reference to action researchers in general, you have to have an idea of what are the general or common characteristics of action researchers. But, what is really common for action researchers? If the role of action research is defined by its performance, what is common for the various ways of performing action research? We do not have to ask many of these kinds of questions before we find ourselves confronted with the both inevitable and impossible question: What really is action research? Inevitable, because for the concept of action research to make sense, it must be possible to identify some common features among the diversity of research activities, and impossible, because the diversity of action research in practice takes on so many forms, in so many respects, that it seems not to make sense trying to work out one set of general criteria, that should be forced upon each particular form of action research.

There is no “one best way” to handle this kind of dilemma. To contrast the way we have chosen to cope with this dilemma in this issue of IJAR with some other possibility, I will briefly recall an attempt to explain the diversity of action research that was presented in an article published about a year ago (Cassel/Johnson 2006). The authors argued that “we must be cautious about developing all-embracing standards to differentiate the ‘good’ from the ‘bad’” among action research approaches. Cassel and Johnson created a classification of what they found to be five main kinds of action research approaches. Their criteria of classification were based on what they considered to be the basic philosophical assumptions of the action research approaches. They present their (?) argument, that there are no criteria which may embrace all kinds of action research, quite convincingly.

However, their classification criteria are not that convincing. In particular, their view that “philosophical assumptions lead to the constitution of distinctive forms of action research” appears most problematic. What is the ‘leading part’ in constituting action research approaches may differ considerably: Not only are there a diversity of action research approaches; also the practical performance of any particular action research projects includes a diversity of activities, from ways of performing the field work, to ways of performing the writing of scientific publications. Thus, as will be demonstrated in this issue of IJAR, it may be more appropriate to state that there are certain different
constellations of both practical and theoretical aspects of the research process that constitute the different approaches.

Therefore, in this issue of IJAR we have chosen another strategy to present the diversity of action research. Our aim is not to explain the diversity of action research; rather our aim is to expose this diversity, by presenting some examples of different kinds of approaches. Of course, we do not claim that the examples of action research approaches presented in this issue present a representative picture of the diversity of action research. Some of the more practical reasons for this we have already touched upon: we do not really think it is possible to present – or construct – a representative picture of the diversity of action research within the limits of one issue of a journal (even when it is a double issue, as in this case). Another quite practical reason is the fact that not all authors we invited to contribute to this issue of IJAR had the opportunity to participate.

However, the main reason why we have rejected the intention of presenting a representative picture is that the purpose of our exposition of examples of action research is neither to search for common criteria to judge the quality of action research, nor to try to improve the criteria for classification of the diversity of action research approaches. Rather, our intention is to present a broad spectrum of important aspects of this diversity, in the form of specific examples.

This diversity of aspects comprise different societal/national contexts, from Australia (B. Dick) via Latin-America (D. Streck) to Scandinavia; different purposes of action research, from empowering disabled women (Vickers) to engaging in national/general strategies for work life reforms (B. Gustavsen); different ways of performing co-operation with the people in the field of research, different ways of performing the writing of scientific presentations of action research (Marianne Kristiansen, Coleman/Gearty); different ways of acting and reflecting on the kinds of challenges that may be are peculiar to action research projects (D. Greenwood, M. Kristiansen); and different ways of reasoning as regards the relationship to the social sciences (O. Eikeland, J. Shotter) – to mention some of the diversities of action research that are highlighted in the articles in this issue.
As will hopefully be experienced by reading these articles, the diversity of action research in fact pertains not only to the differences between approaches, but also to the diversity of ways to perform the different components of action research – both the theoretical parts as well as the practical parts – that each particular approach is made up by. In short: We have compiled this issue with the hope and desire that a critical reading of the articles may inspire and contribute to the improvement of all kinds of action research – though in different ways.

Reference