Dilemmas of Action Research – an Introduction

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Today, the concept of action research covers a wide range/variety of approaches. Common for most of them is that the task of making new knowledge becoming useful in order to create new, better practices, is considered of equal importance as the creating of new knowledge as such. The theories and methods by which this task is performed vary a lot, but common to all of them is some kind of collaboration with actors in the field of study. Within the communities of social science the strategy of ‘collaborating with the field’ or ‘object of study’ has been subject to some methodological controversies. However, with the development of both the broad spectre of so-called qualitative methodology within the social sciences on the one hand and the philosophy/theory of science on the other hand, these kinds of controversies have culminated. Today we witness a growing interest in action research within academic institutions, particularly within those whose subject of study is organizations, institutions, professions, particular social groups, social movements etc. (Reason/Bradbury 2001).

Issues like organisational renewal, organisational change and development, continuous improvements, total quality etc. have been among the main research issues from the very beginning of action research until today, together with community development and regional development (Cooke/Cox 2005). In accordance with the variety of approaches, also the outcome of the research projects varies a lot, regarding both the theoretical and practical outcome. There is, however, a significant convergence in the research findings, namely that they underline the importance of participation from the organisation members in enterprise development, organisation development or community development, as a condition for successful results. These findings co-
incide with – and supplement – the findings from cross-national surveys that explore the relationship between representative and direct participation in enterprise development (Frölich/Pekruhl 1996; Markey/Monat 1997; Heller et al. 1998).

Even though today action research exists in a broad spectre of approaches, coexists in productive relations with other forms/approaches of social science, and is expanding into new fields of research, the institutional conditions of action research within the academic institutions around the globe are not really good and solidly anchored. Main evidence for this is to be found in the fact that action research is still not very high on the agenda of the national research policy in most countries, and action research still has a rather modest place and status in the curricula of universities/university colleges (Greenwood/Levin 2005). Thus, compared to the number of action research projects carried out today in an increasing number of academic milieus and research institutes the impact of action research at the national level still remains limited in most countries.

Dilemma: The single action research project and the common project of action research

Against this background the importance of action research conferences, action research journals and action research networks – both virtual and real – are acknowledged. These are necessary not only as a means of communication within the action research community. They are also necessary as a means of making action research become more strongly institutionalised within higher education, universities and research institutes. In short, the forums that today make up what we might call the (international) action research discourse also have to work as forums of action research policy-making. Indeed, the very existence of a number of journals particularly devoted to publishing articles on action research, like Educational Action Research, Systemic Practice and Action Research, Action Research and this journal, International Journal of Action Research, is – explicitly or implicitly – part of an effort to promote action research within the overall scientific community.
The need to profile one’s own contribution to the research community is not something particular for action research. In all branches of social science there is a need to make explicit in what way one’s own contribution represents something new to the scientific discourse in question: some new knowledge, some new theoretical perspectives, some new empirical material, some new practical results – one has to make a ‘score’ along one or more of these dimensions in order to justify one’s contribution as exactly a \textit{contribution} to the scientific community. In this sense there is a certain element of research policy inscribed in the very writing of articles/publications from research projects. This also goes for action research projects. Writing publications from action research projects also means somehow to profile the research approach applied in the particular project. But there is the problem that this kind of implicit promotion of a particular action research approach may turn out as sub-optimal as regards the need for promoting action research in a wider context. The reasons for this sub-optimalization are manifold. I will touch upon a few.

To the single action researcher, or the single team of action researchers, the ‘policy-aspect’ of publishing theoretical and practical results from action research may be more or less present during the process of writing each single publication/article. While writing an article on the basis of one’s own action research projects, the promotion of one’s own approach is naturally most close to one’s heart, not to say mind. Thereby also the local research context, the local academic and research policy surroundings within which one’s own action research projects take place, inevitably become the most immediate horizon against which one wants to profile one’s own approach. Since these contexts vary a lot between countries, between regions and even between particular universities and research milieus, the way of profiling one’s own approach will also vary a lot. Just to put a label on this kind of sub-optimal profiling of action research, we may say that such publications show too much sign of being written within a \textit{local research community}.

To point to another kind of reason, it is necessary first to remind of some of the general features that are attributed to action research (of which a few were mentioned above): Action research is regarded capable of making research become \textit{useful} in a far more effective way than descriptive social research is up to. Action research does not do research on people but \textit{with} peo-
ple, or, to phrase this otherwise, action research is somehow a participative approach. Action research is in a better position to understand organisations and social systems than most other approaches of social science research, since the researchers’ participation in the efforts of changing a system gives them a better understanding of this system than what is possible by just observing the system – however participative the methods of observation.

Although it is possible to question the extent to which these attributed features of action research are real features of action research, there is no question that these are among the main features that make researchers orient themselves towards action research. For, as we know, there are practically no research educations that educate action researchers (the Norwegian doctoral programme EDWOR may be the exception that confirms the rule). Lots of people doing action research have become action researchers after having finished their education, often even after having practiced more conventional descriptive research for years. Many have turned their interest towards action research because of what they consider some severe shortcomings of descriptive social research, shortcomings of a kind which may be overcome by action research approaches which emphasize the use of research for practical purposes, participation, non-objectivism etc.

As a consequence, we may notice some tendencies among action researchers to profile their action research against the research tradition they were educated in – or have been practicing. For example, researchers having been trained within a somewhat positivistic paradigm of research tend to emphasize the non-positivistic features of their action research approach. Researchers who are uneasy with what they experience as a bias of social science towards ‘grand theories’ tend to emphasize the practical effects of their action research, and so on. Different as they are, such ways of contextualising action research nevertheless tend to make the ‘horizons of the past’ become the background for profiling one’s own action research approach. To the extent that such horizons are due to images of the past rather than the real present, we might say that such publications show too much sign of being written within an imagined research community.

The third reason I would like to draw attention to is of a different kind. As we know, within the action research community there exist a lot of more or
less distinctive approaches, with their particular methods, concepts and perspectives – not to mention the acronyms. These various schools or traditions of action research may be more or less comprehensive and coherent approaches. Common to most of them is that the researchers that identify with and work within any such approach are very dedicated to and committed to this approach and accordingly also very eager to profile the distinctive features of this particular approach to other action researchers. To exaggerate a bit we may say that these researchers are less occupied with profiling their action research approach against the shortcomings and problematic aspects of conventional, descriptive research. Rather, they are occupied with sharing their enthusiasm for one particular approach with other action researchers. If we were to label the sub-optimal aspects of this kind of profiling action research, we might say that such publications bear too much sign of being written within an action research community.

This, of course, is just a very brief and schematic outline of three different kinds of a ‘limited horizon’ that make publications from action research work sub-optimally as regards their function as a means to profile action research in a wider research and research policy context. Nevertheless, I have made this point because there is a need to promote action research at the level of national research policy and the level of international research funding institutions, and the quality of action research publications is one very important factor in this respect. However, even though it is possible to point to this problem, it is not possible to point to one single solution or one single way to solve/handle this problem. It is possible to show various kinds of limitations of the horizon of authors of action research publications, but it is not possible to show one overall horizon that might be common and accessible to all alike. Any horizon is limited, in one way or another. My intention has been to point at some kinds of limitations, in order to make us more aware of this kind of problem, and to have them in mind both when we write and when we read publications of action research.

Our journal, which – as the name tells – is an International Journal of Action Research (IJAR), receives articles from many different countries, and the editors are quite aware that the journal shall serve the double purpose of being a forum for exchanging viewpoints within the action research community
and also a forum for promoting action research to a wider community. Thus, we will ask our readers to have the above-mentioned problematic in mind also when they read the articles in this issue of IJAR. With the exception of Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen’s excellent article on “involvement as a dilemma” these articles will be presented and discussed at the World Congress in Groningen, The Netherlands, August 21.-24.2006. The central theme of the congress is ‘Standards and Ethics in participatory research’.

In order to stimulate these discussions, we will give a brief presentation of all four articles in this introduction. Even though perhaps the organizers thought mainly of ethical dilemmas when they chose the theme for this World Congress, it has turned out that all the contributors to this issue have chosen to focus on a broader scope of dilemmas, and this is also the reason why we have chosen to sketch a somewhat broader context in this introductory article. The presentation of each article is therefore not primarily a general overview or summary. Instead, we have tried to highlight some of those aspects that seem especially worthwhile discussing, given that the general context is somewhat wider than the standards and ethics of participatory research, in accordance with the perspectives sketched above.

**On the articles in this issue**

*Participation* is a word which is frequently used in publications from action research. Usually, it is used with utterly positive connotations. Whether participating in organization or community development, participating in the research process, or both – the message is univocal: practical involvement is to the benefit for those involved. M. Kristiansen and J. Bloch-Poulsen however point out in their paper how complex and difficult it is to practice and ground participation in power based organizations. When trying to co-design a participative practice in dialogues with the employees, they encountered three dilemmas. This experience however does not make them give up the value of (democratic) participation, which is guiding their action research practice.

Their article is based on an ongoing action research project in a public administration department with seven teams, one manager and one senior
manager. Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen have conducted dialogue meetings with
the teams separately and with the teams and the managers. In these sessions
the participants undertake dialogues about specific issues and problems that
they experience at the work place. The authors define dialogue as “a collabora-
tive inquiry characterized by sharing, daring and caring. In dialogues you
share knowledge, you dare to speak about the hitherto unspoken, and you
care to be each other’s support” (see also Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2005).

In their definition of ‘dialogue’ we recognize the close (and positively
valued) relation between participation – or involvement – and dialogue,
which is one of the main vehicles of participation. Dialogue is not only an in-
strument of creating involvement; it is in itself a medium or a forum of in-
volvement. This positive evaluation of dialogue, and the intimate relation be-
tween dialogue and involvement/participation, is not peculiar to just Kristian-
sen/Bloch-Poulsen. Rather, it is a quite common perspective in action re-
search. In the course of their action research project, however, Kristiansen/
Bloch-Poulsen experienced the difficulties an action researcher is confronted
with, when trying to practice participation and dialogue in power based or-
ganizations.

The dilemmas they experience in the dialogues, organized as part of the
action research project, were not simply to be solved by means of dialogues.
One of their examples takes as its point of departure a dilemma that was
raised by the teams themselves: “Is it fair to say we are self-managing, when
we cannot say no to new tasks?” By and within the following dialogues about
the nature and the boundaries of self-management it turned out that this di-
lemma was actualized not only as a dilemma in the relation between the
teams and the managers, but also as regards the relation between the team
and the action researchers. The reason was as simple as it was complex: Con-
sidering the burden of the daily work, the involvement in the action research
project was in fact another ‘new task’ to the teams. Could they say ‘no’ to
this new task – that is, does involvement imply that you can say “no, thanks”
when you are offered to be involved in dialogues intended towards improving
your own work situation?

By thoroughly analysing the communication they themselves were a part
of, the authors point out that there is no simple solution to these kinds of di-
lemmas. On the other hand, they also show that such dilemmas do not necessarily turn the action research project into a stalemate situation. As a matter of fact, it seems that by making the dilemma explicit, by creating awareness of it and talking openly about it, the dilemma somehow becomes easier to ‘live with’ – even though no plain practical solution is offered. The same goes for a related kind of dilemma: practicing the value of openness. The team coordinator is expected to be open towards the team members and also open towards his/her manager, and vice versa. Obviously dilemmas in the form of ‘loyalty conflicts’ may arise here, and so they do. Again the authors do not suggest simple solutions. Instead, they show that awareness of this dilemma is to be preferred from unawareness of it. This is indeed one way to handle this kind of dilemma, without claiming it to be the one best way.

In this way, the authors do not simply tell what happened during their action research project and how they acted to solve the tasks, challenges and problems as they arose along the course. Rather, they spell out the subtleties of the dilemmas they partly observe, partly are confronted with, and thereby they create some new knowledge and insights into these kinds of dilemmas. As they put it themselves: “As action researchers, we have learned that hierarchy and power in team-based organizations are much more sophisticated and complex to see through compared with the more traditional organizations we have collaborated with.” And one of the many strengths of this article is that even though it focuses very narrowly on the particular exchange of words that took place in this particular project, the knowledge thereby created is nevertheless more widely relevant, namely to the extent that these kinds of dilemmas are reoccurring challenges in team-based organizations.

The question of a broader relevance is also addressed in the second article: “Participatory rural appraisal: lessons for countries in the North?” by Julia Preece. Participatory rural appraisal is an approach which stems from emancipatory action research philosophy. But its goal is not so much to improve existing practice, rather to transfer ownership of knowledge creation to communities. The aim of this approach is to obtain a detailed understanding and analysis of a specific local context; then for local people to prioritise their needs based on this enhanced understanding. The outcome of this process is a community action plan, devised with a view to helping local communities
solve their own problems through different local initiatives. In her article J. Preece tries to explore the main features of this approach, how inclusive it is in practice, and how effectively it contributes to sustainable development and poverty reduction. She also tries to explore what lessons can be learned from participatory rural appraisal regarding its applicability as a methodology for marginalised social groups in European contexts.

After having presented an example of a participatory rural appraisal process conducted in Southern Africa, the author turns to some of the critics that have been raised against this approach. Not surprisingly, also by this approach the researchers are confronted with certain dilemmas, and though community development in Africa is quite another kind of process than the development of teams in public departments in Denmark, there are some related kinds of dilemmas. Among the critics that have been raised towards participatory rural appraisal it has been pointed out that the processes are often conducted by non governmental organisations (NGOs) which are rarely locally owned, and that this results in a “subtle top-down intervention, controlled and managed by external forces so that participation actually becomes ‘covert manipulation’”. Another kind of critic has pointed towards the lack of any quality assurance over the process to ensure that discussions are coercion free or the facilitator is not abusing his or her power and authority1. Finally, from a research perspective there have been articulated worries that participatory appraisal literature is undertheorised (Kapoor 2002).

As the author states, these and related kinds of problems may generally be said to come “down to questions of ethics as to whose voices are taken seriously and to whom the data belong.” As such the way of coping with the kinds of dilemmas one is confronted with by applying a participatory rural appraisal approach in Southern Africa will also be of relevance for the application of other kinds of action research approaches in other countries, also in ‘the North’. To what extent, the reader may judge by reading the article. But as the author puts it: “Many of the above criticisms could apply to the misuse of any methodology, of course.” And reflecting upon to what

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1 In this respect the Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen paper is exemplary for any action researcher, as it demonstrates how sincerely and accurately action researchers may be aware of and handle this difficult question, if they are only sufficiently self-reflective.
of any methodology, of course.” And reflecting upon to what extent failures, weaknesses and dilemmas are to be considered as a kind of misuse of methodology or whether they are to be regarded as inherent aspects of the methodology, will probably always be a good exercise.

In this connection the author refers to Chambers and Mayoux, who in a paper suggest that we should look at the problem slightly differently. For instance we should ask how reliable is the alternative – that is: quantitative, top down collected data – in addressing these kinds of concerns, especially those of power relations and the inter-linkages between multi-dimensional aspects of poverty. This way of looking at the problem has implications that may go beyond those highlighted by the author – that’s why I’ll just point at them: What is suggested, namely to compare the methods applied by any approach not to the conceptual, theoretical standard – that is, the ideal standard – but instead compare them to the practical alternatives – that is, to the real standards – might (perhaps) bring the development of methods and theories of action research many steps further. The question ‘is it good enough?’ would then be oriented towards ‘do we have any better/could we develop some better?’ – and the renewal of and creation of new methods and theories would be prioritised at the expense of the not very fruitful discussions of which approach(es) are the best one(s).

The third article in this issue takes the reader to The Netherlands, where the author, Sandra G. L. Schruijer, for years has been deeply involved in “Research on collaboration in action”. In her article she explores a number of issues that make collaboration across organizational boundaries so difficult for participating organizations and their representatives. Schruijer is among those who argue that to participate in the efforts of changing a system gives researchers a better understanding of this system than what is possible by just observing it. In fact, she makes this kind of argument into a very strong case for action research, especially in the case of doing research on collaboration between organizations: “When complex collaboration is involved though, i.e. collaboration across multiple organizational boundaries, it is imperative that collaboration in action is researched (i.e. real, ongoing collaboration) and that the researcher adopts the role of consultant-facilitator while being reflective of what is going on. In other words, when an action research position is taken.”
In the introduction of her article she states that “It is easy to talk of collaboration but the practice seems more difficult.” Schruijer does not explicitly say that her sharp eye for the differences between words and deeds is due to her kind of action research approach, but from reading her article that conclusion is very likely to be drawn. She presents more than one example of how this discrepancy makes itself felt when the researcher is involved in working with changing the ‘client system’: “Interestingly, participants often think that they have collaborated successfully. When reviewing, however, the social psychological dynamics, expressed for example in win-lose behaviour or collusion, come to light and can be talked about, although it is a slow and possibly painful process.” ‘Reviewing’ refers to the joint reflection – between researchers and representatives of the client system – on the data from what really happened in the course of the collaboration process.

But the differences between peoples’ theoretical knowledge and how they behave in practice is only one side of the coin. On the other side also a lack of theoretical knowledge or theoretical perspectives appears to cause problems of collaboration. One example is the lack of systemic thinking: “In both the simulation as in the health care organization I encountered a lack of systemic awareness. This is confirmed by survey results that show that frustrations are easily attributed to persons – managers see representatives’ egos as one of the most important obstacles in interorganizational or intergroup collaboration.”

These two examples illustrate both how the researchers can obtain better knowledge of the organisations they try to understand and how they can transfer knowledge to the people in those organisations, by means of some kind of action research approach. Regarding both the need to create research-based knowledge and to make research-based knowledge come into use, the author demonstrates some of the strong features of action research. But she also demonstrates a kind of dilemma in this respect, both explicitly and implicitly, even though it is not obvious whether the author herself considers this a dilemma. When she outlines her action research approach in general terms, she presents the aim of action research like this: “Action research couples research with action. Purpose is to help the client system to change and develop; the action researcher is explicitly engaged with the client system and its problems. As a secondary aim learning experiences and generated insights
are made available to other organizations and researchers so that they may learn about these too. It is thus different from purely academic research in that publishing is not seen as the main goal and because implementation validity is deliberately strived for.”

By placing the generation of insights of relevance to other organizations and other researchers as a ‘secondary aim’ those features of action research that we have just underlined, i.e. the ability to both produce and consummate a rich amount of knowledge ‘on location’ so to speak, appear somewhat more problematic. If the action researchers by means of their approaches become rich of knowledge but do not consider the enrichment of knowledge of the (action) research community as one of the primary aims of action research, then some of the rationale of social research, be it action research or descriptive research, is undermined. This is probably not the intention of the author, but the question should be raised anyhow, since it indeed addresses another dilemma of action research.

The final contribution in this issue is entitled “Shaping communities of work, an organizational development approach.” In this article the author, M. Schoemaker, addresses the kind of dilemma just mentioned, from a slightly different angle. In his own formulation: “Dilemmas of organisational development, the change agents have to balance between science and good practice, are discussed. The central question addressed by this article is: How can organisational development function in the process of developing communities of work, and what is the role of the change agent?”

The background for this discussion is an analysis of the changes within the business sector over the last decades, which “implies that the modern organisation has to act as a flexible network, where production in space and time is often fragmented and displaced. As a result, we have experienced the rise of the networked organisation over the past ten years. The networked organisation acts as a “community of work”, but how does this kind of networked organisation evolve?” This is the background against which Schoemaker wants to present his particular approach to organisational development, and discuss the dilemmas one is thereby confronted with.

Schoemaker’s presentation of the role of the change agent, as he prefers to call it, is rich in detail and indeed shows the complexity of the field one is
confronted with when engaging in supporting the development of modern or flexible networks or as a community of work. However, also Schoemaker’s article demonstrates a certain kind of dilemma more profoundly than he himself has intended to do. Most of the kind of dilemmas discussed by the author are dilemmas that are related to the role of the ‘change agent’ in a very literal sense: They are dilemmas you have to handle when you shall contribute to practical change, that is, to processes of organisational development.

Among all the specific ones the author discusses, there are also more general dilemmas, like the dilemma of “whose interests am I serving as change agent, and: with all the complexity, dynamics and unpredictability involved, how do I make sure that I remain reliable and honourable towards all parties?”

But one of the perhaps most important dilemmas, which he usually points at indirectly, is addressed quite directly towards the end of his article: ”The work of the change agent consists of a great deal of “process time”, supervision and support, meetings, coaching and so on, and it seems to be difficult to plan. Using research (in order to analyse and reflect) in his/her work can help the change agent in “managing time”. But it can also help to build knowledge about such complex processes as organisational development and shaping communities of work.” In short, to turn the ‘change agent’ into some kind of ‘agent’ of research, of some research community – most probably the community of action research – may appear to be very difficult, almost impossible.

Schoemaker just states this dilemma, he does not enter into it. I would like to highlight just one, though quite important aspect: As we know, this turn from acting as a change agent into acting as a kind of action researcher, is not completed until a publication of a satisfying quality is completed, be it a book or more likely, an article in a scientific journal. Thus, we end up with a reminder that whatever the importance of the many dilemmas one is confronted with in doing what we intend to be some kind of action research, the importance of writing good publications, good articles, should never be underestimated. To deal with and solve this dilemma each of us should feel obliged and has to contribute to. And, let’s face it: to cope with this dilemma, no ‘best solution’ is necessary – but nevertheless, only the good contributions will become part of the solution.
References


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