Innovation and action research

Bjørn Gustavsen

In the Western economies there is a growing focus on innovation as the key to economic growth. In spite of its orientation towards transcending the given, and creating something new, action research has so far played a limited role as a resource in innovation. Departing from practice-driven innovation and the need for collaboration between many actors, a key role for action research as promoter of joint inquiries in dialogical form and associated action is described and discussed, drawing on experiences from action research programmes in Scandinavia. The core challenge for action research is not only to promote certain forms of collaborative inquiry and action, but to reach a level of scale, or mass, that makes innovation possible.

Keywords: Action research, innovation, dialogue, social constructivism

Introduction

As more and more mass production is moved out of the Western economies, these economies need to create products and services with a complexity and knowledge content that cannot easily be copied. This has brought the issue of innovation to the forefront, as the probably most important challenge these economies are facing.

While innovation in the nineteenth century was largely done by practical people facing practical problems, the post World War II period came to see science as the most important driver in innovation processes. Science is supposed to perform the basic leaps forwards in knowledge; innovation is a question of applying, exploring or exploiting these leaps.