

In Memory of Stephen Toulmin

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With the death of Stephen Toulmin, one of the major discussants of research and science in the post World War II period is gone. With his treatise on the "Philosophy of Science" from 1953, Toulmin launched, like Kuhn, Feysabend and others of the same generation, a substantial critique of several of the basic notions of science, for instance that scientific language is an antithesis to, rather than a continuation of, everyday language, and that there exists a formal logic that allows science to perform unequivocal lines of reasoning. On this basis, Toulmin became, over the years, involved in a number of discourses on science and research, among these the discourse on action research.

The point of departure for this involvement was developments in Scandinavia. In the 1960s and 70s Scandinavia was the scene of a number of research-driven efforts to create new forms of work organization, to a large extent along the semi-experimental lines worked out by Kurt Lewin and his followers (Lewin 1943). During the 1970s these efforts successively died out, not so much because of lack of success, as because of numerous difficulties emerging in the relationships between research and work life actors in the course of conducting experiments.

When the labor market parties in Sweden, as well as in Norway made, in 1982, new agreements on workplace development, there emerged a new opening for action research. This new opening implied, however, that a new platform for co-operation between research and the labor market parties had to be worked out, and the research efforts on the local level designed in such a way that research could play a role more strongly adapted to variable local

conditions than the one inherent in the notion of doing experiments. This was to be done at the same time as research was to make contributions that could be identified also on the national level. How, then, could research make contributions to a range of different local development efforts and, at the same time, come up with perspectives and conclusions of a more general validity?

The strategy pursued in the first action research program to appear under the new agreements, the LOM-program (Gustavsen 1992; Naschold 1993), was to mobilize researchers from a number of different environments rather than one single centre, and link each research group to a group of user organizations, ideally four. There were three main points behind this approach. First, to develop action research projects in parallel but in different contexts. Second, make each research group work with several organizations simultaneously, to train the researchers in the use of comparative field approaches and in drawing conclusions across organizational boundaries. Third, to make the user organizations work with each other, to form platforms for future inter-organizational networks.

Although the program did not unfold exactly according to the initial ideas, an evaluation performed after its termination (Naschold 1993), demonstrated that about 150 organizations – public and private – had been in contact with the program, and that about half of them had developed specific projects. Of these, about two thirds had resulted in improved employee participation and better communication and co-operation between employees and management –the core practical purpose of the program. Support had been given by about 65 researchers, distributed on 15-20 different institutions. However, with a low profile role for research in the projects, the projects appeared, on the surface, as very different, not only between the different combinations of researchers and organizations, but even within each combination. How should this kind of empirical landscape be dealt with in research terms? It would always be possible to find a few “common denominators” in terms of some characteristics that could be said to pertain to all cases. Most such characteristics would, however, be rather trivial, such as success hanging on “the commitment of management as well as union representatives”, a kind of conclusion that begs the question rather than enhances further development.

This was the background for an initiative where a number of leading contributors to the debate on theory of science – among them Stephen Toulmin – was invited to comment on the LOM program from the point of view of the discourse on the role and potential of the social sciences.

Toulmin's first main contribution was to emphasize the need to reverse the relationship between theory and experience. Practical efforts should not be tailor-made to fit into the straight-jacket of a highly structured pre-given theory, but rather be formed to fit whatever practical problem is approached. Previous experience should not be overlooked, but should function as guidelines and reminders rather than as fixed and unquestionable reference points.

This, it can be argued, is all very well, but it does not bring action research closer to being *science*. On this point, Toulmin brought in two arguments: First, that it is highly questionable to what extent conventional analytical-descriptive social science actually answers to the notion of science. Contrary to the natural sciences, the social sciences have, after all, never succeeded in developing an internally consistent and continuously growing body of knowledge on any of the topics it has chosen to place under investigation. Second, that it is possible to bring the notion of social science on a new footing, departing from the experiences that we actually make in our efforts to solve practical problems. How to set about creating such a science?

When we assemble words to describe and discuss events in real life, our first priority is to see to it that the words bear a *relationship* to reality. Although we cannot create unequivocal links between any specific configuration of words and reality, there is a major difference between on the one hand a set of competing descriptions of reality and on the other a set of words that describe nothing because the words bear no identifiable relationship to *any* reality. On this background "the example" becomes of critical importance in Toulmin's line of reasoning. Only by providing examples, are we able to demonstrate what reality looks like if specific configurations of words are to be held as true. On paper, this is a simple requirement to state. In actual practice it is quite difficult to live up to, as demonstrated by, for instance, the vast texts produced by the Frankfurt school on social studies, with almost no reference to any empirical project that demonstrates "the right way" (nor for

that matter “the wrong way”) of performing such studies. For Toulmin, the example emerged as the prime building block of an alternative social science.

From this perspective, the 60-70 cases of improved participation in the LOM program, appeared as examples. In finding out what they exemplified, each case had, initially, to be looked at in its own right and the words most appropriate to the description of each particular case had to be assembled. In dealing with each case there is, however, a need to consider two perspectives:

In reflecting on a number of cases, there is a need to recognize the specific nature of the field to which the cases belong. Rather than seeking to bring all science on to one single formula, Toulmin stresses the differences between the different areas of scientific effort. Understanding the behavioral patterns of birds in flight is something different from understanding the behavioral patterns of participants in a therapy group, to mention but one example. Likewise, in dealing with cases of participation in work, we move within a specific field with characteristics shared with other fields, but with characteristics of its own as well.

A second point pertains to the potential of comparison. When giving expression to each case, we use words of a more or less general nature. They can be used with reference to other cases as well and, through this, it becomes possible to describe each case in the light of other cases. This does not necessarily mean to see them as identical: a comparison may equally well stress the differences – case A shows much of this, little of that, while case B shows the reverse. The point is that through comparisons, linguistic bridges are built between the cases. These bridges are, however, built from “down below” and not through efforts at bringing all the cases onto the same formula irrespective of their content.

When we are able to recognize the specific characteristics of the field in which we operate – for instance the 60-70 cases of workplace impact of the development program that formed the basis for the discussions – we will generally see that the different cases have more in common than if they were all to be judged according to some general theory or other. Bringing a number of cases in under one theoretical umbrella tends to drain them of content rather than enrich them.

When we have identified the specific nature of the field in which we operate, and the linking elements between the different cases within the field, we may see that the field resembles other fields, and that they can be seen in the light of each other.

Moving from the local to the general in this way, means that the general becomes identical to points of likeness, or paralellity, between cases. We can generalize only insofar as we can see likenesses between cases. This is radically different from constructing general theories on the basis of single cases, a kind of effort not unknown even in action research. However, the task of action research is not only to record cases but to *create* cases. In action research, the issue of generalization becomes identical to our ability to make new cases resemble previous cases. “The general” appears when new actors learn from existing cases and convert this learning into action in their own context. All other claims to generality are simply claims: words issued by an individual sitting at his or her writing table using the word “general”.

The kind of workplace development strategy to appear out of these reflections was in many ways a continuation of the thinking already implied in the LOM program. Now, however, we were armed with better arguments and reasons and were able to expand from the original platform, not only in terms of strategy for change but also in terms of making explicit the research contributions to this strategy.

With his contributions to the creation of a more solid platform for efforts at democratic change in working life, Toulmin played a critical role in a period of transition; from a perception of action research as expressed in experiments based on general theory, to a perception of action research based on building the general from comparison of cases ; from traditional perceptions of science to alternative ones (the traces of some of his contributions can be found in Toulmin and Gustavsen 1996). His ability to contribute was not only linked to his ideas, but to his personality as well. Stephen Toulmin was an exceptionally pleasant person who easily made friends wherever he came. He had an exceptional ability to not only listen to what other researchers had to say, but also to link it to the broader discourse on research and science. Although our contacts, for many reasons, became sparse during the more recent years, he leaves an empty space.

References

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