

Participation, Power and Democracy: Exploring the Tensional Field between Empowerment and Constraint in Action Research

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The question of how to understand and approach the relationship between participation and power in Action Research is widely contested. Drawing on data and experiences gathered while taking part in a value-creation pilot in Norway (2007-2010), this paper seeks to fill a general void in the literature in terms of exploring the relationship between participation, power and democracy in participatory Action Research. The findings suggest the necessity of overcoming traditional dichotomies between pragmatic-constructivist and power-knowledge approaches to Action Research. By acknowledging the co-existence of both consensus and dissent as natural parts of any development process, this paper argues that a more reflexive, democratic and actionable approach can be taken in navigating the unfolding tensional field between empowerment and constraint.

Key words: participation, dialogic Action Research, democratisation, power/knowledge, Scandinavian work-life tradition

1. Introduction

Recently, the under-explored relationship between participation and power in dialogic Action Research has been placed back on the agenda (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2011; Fricke, 2011). The overall perspective presented by Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen (2011) is to bring participation, as an ‘enact-