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Action Research & Social Innovation

Notes on knowledge and social change. Action-, Participative- and Interactive Research

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John Andersen (johna@ruc.dk). Department of Environment, Social and Spatial Change. ENSPAC. Roskilde University Center. Denmark.
Onthology of Action Research

The Greeks... roots to the Aristotelian Phronesis (rediscovered by Bent Flyvbjerg,: Rationality and Power)

• Society is created by human action and can be changed by human action but not under conditions they themselves have chosen... (Marx, 1867)

• The best way to understand things is to change them.... (Kurt Lewin, 1946)

• (Part of ) reality is to be seen as ”unfinished”. Reification is never absolute: the ”existentialist dimension of society (Skervheim, 1957, Dag Oesterberg, 1971)
Epistemology

- The *paradox* in Critical Theory (CT): Intellectuals should deconstruct reification and outline utopian horizons, but CT avoided practical commitments in movements working for alternatives.
- In Critical Utopian Action Research (CUAR) CT is supplemented by advocating the active facilitation of democratic knowledge creation sketching "alternative futures" or "utopian sketches".
• Action researchers see themselves as co-producers of knowledge with social actors based on trust and free agreement to participate. At the same time researchers must demonstrate that they can cope with high standards in the academic community (Nielsen and Svensson, 2006 p.5)
What is AR?

- Action research is not a collection of principles, theories and methods but rather a perspective: research should support collective action and change (social innovation) while at the same time producing new knowledge. (Reason and Bradbury, 1998, Svensson and Nielsen, 2006)

- Action research underlines the connection between understanding and change, between theory and practice and an active co-operation between researchers and participant in the production of new knowledge (www.aktionsforskning.net)
Former traumas...

- *The Scandinavian trauma*: Aage Boettger Soerensen (US-professor from DK) in 1992 attacked Norwegian Action Researchers for bad scientific performance, low productivity in terms of international scientific articles... Three mainbases in Scandinavia: Roskilde and Ålborg University, DK, Tromsø University Norway: ”Reform Universities” based on multidisciplinarity, and contextual, problembased learning.
Methodologies

• Ernst Bloch: history is also about "utopian flows" which are essential to overcome "reality power (Marcuse 1941)

• Overcoming the CT paradox:
  
  • First try: Oscar Negt: "Sociological Imagination and exemplary learning" (1969) with IG-Metall...the creation of a "proletarian public sphere" (Negt und Kluge, 1972) did influence the discourse and practice in leftist unions over Workers Power in (life long) learning

  • Second try: Robert Jungk: *Future Creating Workshops* (1981). Solution to the "unpractical bias of crititical theory"
The future workshop (FW)

- FW is (1) a methodology where local stakeholders/citizens/workers are driving forces in the production of future visions, actions and scenario building (2) the FW is facilitated by specific rules of communication in order to eliminate the influence of power relations within the group (3) the FW is facilitated through specific rules of visualization and creativity. The FW is organized with plenum and group sessions. Statements are presented and commented upon by using posters. The FW has 3 phases:
Future workshops

• The Critique Phase: *What’s wrong*. We are consequently negative. Brainstorming session, where critical statements are listed. The participants vote about the negative statements. The facilitator finally summarizes prioritised themes.

• The Utopian Phase: *Where would we like to go*: We are situated in a perfect world. Everything is possible. Same procedures as phase 1.

• The Realization Phase: We keep our dreams - *how can they become reality*. First: the utopia groups develop the ideas to concrete proposals, which are commented upon in plenum. Second: the groups makes agreements about plans of action for the future.
FUTURE WORKSHOP

• The outcome of FW is a typed protocol with concrete ”utopian schetches” and a plan of action, which participants have committed themselves to work on – facilitated by the team of Actions Researchers.

• In the following steps more ambitius plans for social experimentation can be developed and implemented e.g the Industry and Happiness project, where the creation of a selvmanaged Ecological Social Enterprice became the concrete objective of a cooperation with workers in the fishing industry.(Olsen, Nielsen and Nielsen, 2003: Democracy and Sustainability, Social Imagination and societal wealth. Roskile University.
From failed industrial democracy to radical action research...68.....
and the challenge of Modus 2

- Kurt Lewin’s point of departure: criticism of the positivist tradition of “the controlled experiment” (eg. the Hawthorne experiments) The socio-technical school at the Tavistock institute, UK. Critique of dominating tayloristic, scientific management
- The socio-technical school develops in Norway in the 1960’s with a broader scope: Industrial democracy (Thorsrud and Emery) Action research as advanced innovative practical negotiated consensus/”left corporatism”. Some good experiences: the problem was diffusion inside and outside the workplaces.
- The movement is split between (1) a consensus and system oriented trends - the forerunner of modus 2 and (2) Action Researchers working directly with workers and tradeunion. 1968 changes everything: Industrial democracy is a reformist illusion....
- The 1970’es:
  - Project grup work in the interest of the workingclass!! (RUC 76-78) – alliances with leftwing tredeunions.
  - Some long lasting outcomes e.g. AAA: The Action Committe for Academics and Workers (still excists!)