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Action Research & Social Innovation

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

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Ontology 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 multidisciplinary, 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 critical 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 scenariobuilding (2) the FW is facilitated by specific rules of communication in order to eliminate the influence of powerrelations within the group (3) the FW is facilitated through specific rules of visualization and creativity. The FW is orgaized with plenum and groupsessions. 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
- develops 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 trade union. 1968 changes everything: Industrial democracy is a reformist illusion....**
- **The 1970's:**
- ***Projectgrupwork in the interest of the workingclass!! (RUC 76-78) – alliances with leftwing trade unions.***
- **Some long lasting outcomes e.g. AAA: The Action Committee for Academics and Workers (still exists!)**