

RWL 2009

Symposium abstracts

Action Research and Dialogue Driven Learning

## **Beyond a naturally occurring ethnography : the work-based research project**

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Van Manen claims that 'a 'good' ethnographer describes a cultural reality in such a way that a non-member of the culture could 'pass as an insider' if he or she had internalized the cultural features of the particular setting'(2006). In order to achieve this ethnographers spend considerable amounts of time embedded in the culture which they are studying - 'being there' is seen as fundamental to effective research. Since Work-Based Learning student/workers explore and research their own professional practice/context, the fact that they are already embedded in the area which is the focus for their research would appear to offer a natural advantage over the academic researchers who have to structure their access to the workplace. Work-based researchers are actively involved with the communities of practice which exist in the workplace, and have been socialised into the workplace culture. They are therefore in possession of the informal knowledge and nuanced insights which ethnographic researchers aim to achieve. However, in contrast to recognition that 'being there' permanently may be an advantage, concern is frequently expressed about the extent to which the status of 'insider researcher' adversely affects the research undertaken by work-based researchers.

The discipline-focused perspective of HE which considers the research student as novice problematises the work-based researcher, and calls into question the extent to which valid research can be undertaken by workplace researchers. However, the practice of research is changing. Jarvis (1999) points to the emergence of the practitioner-researcher, the professional who researches their practice and/or context, frequently with the intention of informing their own and others' practice. These researchers are not novices - they are usually senior practising professions with considerable expertise who wish to deepen their approach to practice through research. Although such researchers are very familiar with the organisational and occupational culture in their workplace, usually their intention is not to provide an ethnographic account of it. They are concerned to address issues and/or to achieve changes/developments in practice. Therefore an ethnographic approach does not address the practitioner's focus of interest. In such a situation practitioner researchers work with their academic advisors to build on the insights they already have, and to use these as a foundation for a range of research approaches.

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## **Bringing clients into the classroom: some academic considerations**

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Engineering programmes, like other professional or vocational fields of study, are expected to be relevant to the needs of their related industries. In a context like South Africa, professionals are also expected to contribute to the development needs of the country. In an effort to meet these needs, mechanical engineering programme organisers invited clients to set briefs for the final year (4th year) engineering students' projects. The clients represented small businesses and development organisations. The clients consulted with students during the process of project development, and were part of an assessment panel that awarded marks for students' work. The data for this study was obtained from engineering students' project reports and technical drawings, interviews with lecturers and coaches, observations of interactions with clients, students' presentations, and assessment panel meetings, as well as post-presentation interviews with lecturers, coaches, clients, and students. The findings show that there are many advantages related to bringing clients into the classroom: in particular the students' heightened awareness of 'audience', increased levels of motivation (linked to 'real' clients and meeting real needs), enhanced understanding of manufacture as a process, as well as the more creative aspects of mechanical engineering. There were, however, a number of problem areas, including mismatches between the scope of the problem and the academic level of the students, achieving a balance between creativity and practicality, and between engineering professionalism and salesmanship. The paper concludes with recommendations for including clients in the classroom in ways that will enhance positive effects and minimise the difficulties.

## Case study teaching: Teach the teachers

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Case studies are well established as learning resources. This paper does not dispute the value to the learner of case study work but provides a new take on case study teaching: how the accepted value to students in case study learning can be reframed into teaching skill relevance. This relevance is central to current thinking on the role of curricula and methodology in teaching management development (Mintzberg 2004).

The case study illustrates problem situations and their possible solutions (Schramm (1971, quoted in Yin 2003) Their learning value lies in the empirical inquiries they present in which contemporary phenomena in real-life contexts are examined (Yin 2003). This creates a process of knowledge acquisition. Those who teach cases thus operate as knowledge workers developing other knowledge workers.

Knowledge workers work primarily with information, or develop and use knowledge in the workplace. The ability to create 'intellectual capital' is now the primary requirement for the worker (Srinivasan, 2007 pp. 1-13). Teaching involves knowledge transfer and creation; the established paradigm is that effective teachers possess knowledge and have the ability to transfer their knowledge and to encourage knowledge development in their classes. Teachers can be thus considered knowledge workers. However the value of this learning process can benefit both teacher and learners' learning. Using Nickols' three types of knowledge (Nickols, 2000) and an example of case study teaching, this paper will discuss how teachers can use case study teaching to increase their own effectiveness as knowledge workers.

The hypotheses of this paper are that:

1. Adult learner development relies on relevant material and teaching methods
2. Teaching is a learning process
3. Effective teaching can be learnt and developed
4. Learning by teaching involves meta skills of listening, reflection and inquiry
5. Case study work can provide a means of teaching relevant teaching skills

Using the case study of Ernie Budding (Hansen, A and Christensen, CR, HBS Case No 9-381-038), this paper will knowledge development in class interaction from a teacher's learning perspective. The discussion will provide insights on teacher development and enhanced knowledge transfer process.

Although the references and context are business school teaching, the points made about teaching as a process of mutual knowledge development can be applied more generally.

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## **Dialogue as a Facilitator of Learning and Development in a National Workplace Development Programme**

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The Finnish Workplace Development Programme Tykes supports research-assisted development of Finnish companies and other work organizations with an eye to simultaneous enhancement of productivity and the quality of working life. In 2008, Tykes was incorporated in the Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation, and it continues as a permanent funding activity.

Collaboration and dialogue are the key principles of the Tykes programme. Tykes is based on the view that the most effective way of generating new innovative solutions for working life is close cooperation and interaction between workplaces, researchers, consultants, public authorities and the social partners. Development activities in the programme projects are based on cooperation between the management and the staff of the workplaces concerned.

The programme has an important role as a provider of communicative spheres where various actors can meet each other in dialogue. The nature and challenges of the dialogue can be analysed at four levels of the development programme. In our paper, we concentrate on the challenges at programme level and generative level.

1. Political level: The development programme can be seen as a result of the dialogue at the political and negotiation system level, which includes many differing interests. Recently, Finland has adopted a broad-based innovation policy, which emphasises the importance of organizational innovations side by side with technological, service and business innovations. This has helped to foreground the objectives of the Tykes programme.

2. Programme level: Tykes is based on the concept of interactive innovation and expanded triple helix model, which emphasizes collaboration between work organizations from different sectors, various R&D units of working life and policy makers. As a result of the new innovation strategy, the Tykes programme was incorporated in the Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation to facilitate the practical integration of organizational innovations with technological and business innovations. This organizational change will also provide new opportunities for mutual learning and dialogue, when planning development programmes for the future.

3. Generative level: Diffusion of generative ideas developed in the individual projects is one of the most difficult challenges of the programme. Tykes has started a new form of project, a learning network, to enforce dissemination of project results and learning between workplaces and R&D units of working life. We will introduce the dialogue based learning methods used in two learning networks, of which one concentrates on municipal organizations and the other on small companies.

4. Workplace level: Dialogue is one of the goals and also a method in Tykes development projects. A number of dialogue methods are used in the workplace development projects.

## **Dialogue as a learning method to create a boundary object**

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The goal of the paper is to examine the dialogue as a method to create a boundary object between different actors and practices in planning and development processes at the workplace. The concept 'boundary object' (Star, S.L. et al 1989, Boland et al 1995) refers to the practical goal of the dialogue: to the objects of the actions which can be shared in different contexts. The boundary objects could be e.g., a model, a map of concepts or a problem-solving methods which the actors can share and use in different contexts. By dialogue we mean face-to-face discussion in a large group supported by structures that foster collaboration (Gustavsen, B.1992, Emery, M. et al.1996, Miller, E.1990, Arnkil, T.2000). We study two kinds of relations in the dialogue: one side of the relations concerns the topic of discussion, and another side concerns group dynamics in the structural, social and cultural environment. They influence on each another: an actor is orientated to take a view of the matter of a common topic and directs her/his speech to all or specific addressees in order to get a response (Todorov, T. 1984, Engeström, R. 1999, Ljungberg van Beinum, I. 2000).

We analyze three examples of learning in the dialogue: (1) a dialogical discussion in a research and design of a robot, (2) a dialogical discussion in a research process 'The ecological design of an intelligent environment', (3) three dialogical discussions in a design of a new kind of the production control system in different production environments. The analysis of the cases shows the complicated nature of the boundary object as an artefact. As the structures of the discussions supported dialogical relations, the actors were not trying to compete to win in communication. Each speaker expressed his/her thoughts 'here and now', as they had come to his/her mind in the specific situation at hand and in the context of the topic being discussed. The participants used examples and stories to help explain and clarify the meanings of their message (comp. the Mode 2 by Nowotny, Gibbons, et al (1994)). We think that just the examples and stories served as links between different disciplines and thought worlds, opening up a rich picture of the boundary object. (comp. Bohm, D. 1980). E.g. in the research environment the participants were telling his/her experiences to each another besides formulations of academic disciplines. The creation of the boundary object in the face-to-face dialogue is thus a learning process on the cognitive, social and emotional levels. The dialogical process offers an environment for learning by searching or ecological learning (Emery, M. 1996).

## **Progressing conceptions of agency through work and learning practices**

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The agency of the learner is fundamental to any and all considerations of workplace learning. Agency can be said to stand as a central and unifying principle that integrates learning and activity as embodied in personal experience however mediated across all culturally identified activity, be it work, leisure, motive, institution or artifact. This paper argues that conceptions of agency are under theorised within the sociocultural constructivist paradigm that centralises activity and participative engagement within it as the basis of personal learning and knowledge construction. The paper proposes that conceptions of agency as simply a capacity to enact personal interests and aspirations are insufficient to the task of illuminating how workers' contributions to their learning are created and sustained through their engagement in activity. This is because such conceptions of agency are not able to account for the ways in which personal capacities are developed and transformed through active participation in work. This is especially true when such capacities are taken to include the ways in which individuals organize and interpret their context as meaningful experience, as something over which they have some control in how they conduct themselves.

The paper presents and discusses three bases of agency that have emerged from research investigating the participative practices of workers as they go about the usual routines of their work. The three bases are; the immediacy of agency, the measure of agency and the transaction of agency. They are presented as additional to and yet aspects of understandings of agency as the tension of personally accommodating competing subject positions that identify workers (Fenwick 2006) and personally managing the mediations of successful workplace performance (Smith 2006). In progressing these understandings, learning as social participative experience can be more fully understood from the personal perspective.

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## **Social exclusion – action learning in organisations and in society**

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In Scandinavia combinations of public initiated activation, Corporate social Responsibility (CSR) and diversity management are strategies which claim to fight against social exclusion on labour market. Research testify some effects in organisations working with public activation programs, CSR and diversity management (Mari Kira 2003); effects can for example be results of dialogical processes about strategies for maintaining workers with temporary or chronicle health problems or strategies for a soft retirement for elder workers.

In the Scandinavian models for development organisations and Triple Helix partnerships (Pålshaugen 1998, Brulin 2008) are strategies for innovation with a social profile often articulated as self proclaimed sustainable business orientations.

But if you change research perspective from organisational innovations to research in relation to social exclusion in the labour market you recognise a more sad story; in the Scandinavian countries you have not been very successful reducing the amount of workers (in age of active labour force) being more or less permanent disconnected to labour market. The article will present an action research project dealing with social learning and change of public discourse about being marginalised.

The analytical discussion deals with the discrepancy between discourses on social exclusions as they are expressed in work organisations/organisational public spheres and discourses as they come up in arenas of social learning processes in other forms of public spheres established by an action research process in which participants acts as citizens (Hannah Arendt 1958). In action research with self-organised groups of marginalised citizens and in action research workshops based on cross sector dialogues in which marginalised citizens are not individualised or minority we recognise a different understanding of the phenomena of social exclusion.

As action method or arena we focus on qualities of learning that has to do with the difference between social learning in organisations versus social learning in public sphere: How can we link discourses coming out of organisational reflexivity with discourses established in public arenas in which participants act as citizens more than as members of an organisation ?

The purpose of the article is to document the social learning in the action research arenas and to discuss possible new forms of public spheres (for example festivals) for dialogues about social exclusion on labour market. The perspectives of the project turn up to be new ways of institutionalising worklife participation in strategies of social inclusion beyond CSR and diversity management.

## **The Community of Workers as Assertion and Possibility- -how shop stewards of nurses collectivised and generalised their working experiences in a process of action research**

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The paper focuses on the difficulties and challenges in creating communities of workers and collective experiences of learning in work-place organisations in the Danish health sector. Access to collective ways of learning and access to sharing experiences of the "common" aspects of working life are today exceedingly influenced by neo-liberal forms of management and New Public management under conditions of marketization. The paper explores the collective processes of learning towards common and shared themes of experience in everyday work on the one hand, and in workshops of dialogue and reflection established through action-research, in a setting apart from the work-place, on the other hand.

The paper will present empirical findings and analysis from a research project "The Shop Steward in the field of Health undergoing Transformation", involving nurses. The investigation took place in 2006-2008 and was conducted by a team of researchers from two universities using both qualitative and quantitative methods. This paper bases its analysis on protocols from the action-research workshops, and on ethnographic workplace observations. The approach for the analysis is the theory of social learning of Regina Becker-Schmidt, and the theoretical frame developed by Birger Steen Nielsen, Kurt Ågaard and Peter Olsén on action research as space for common experiences.

A theme shaped in the work-shops of action research by nurses' shop stewards in the present project, deriving from a multitude of individual experiences, will be used as exemplary: The relation between the quality of nursing as care for the ill, and the quality of nursing as work and conditions of work for the nurses. This theme illustrates interdependency and relatedness in nursing work as well as nurses experience, between the patients and the carers, and between quality of work in "people work" and the quality in working life for the workers. However the shop stewards in the workshops only articulated this theme as common experience with great difficulty and recounted many individual experiences of feeling silenced. The weak articulation of a common theme about this in the work place is contrasted by the dialogue in the work-shop process of the research-project.

Still, collective experience and the community of the workshops lacked the potentials of change of the everyday communities of practice, and so it is a challenge how to understand the challenges for creating communities of nursing workers, and how to enhance collective processes of experience and learning. The paper will link the analysis of the process of learning and experience in the case to the findings on forms of management and economic structures of the nurses in the project. The paper will also discuss what constitutes aspects of and shortcomings in a "community of workers" of nurses in relation to the chosen theme of learning and experience, as described in the paper.

## The Dialectic of Dialogue

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The paper will argue that professional health care organizations have become subjects to a plurality of sources of knowledge, a plurality of forms of knowledge, a plurality of values and life forms among their clients. As such, professional health care organizations have become subjects to contested and competing views on what characterises "good practice". I.e. evidence-based practice is an expectation and fashion, often used to emphasize the grounding of practice in research knowledge that provides measurable evidence for best practice. At the same time, there is a growing distrust of the supremacy of scientific and technical knowledge. Traditional professional attitudes are perceived as unacceptably patronizing, and monopolies of knowledge are challenged, and the concept of "client rights" has increasingly gained acceptance. Hence, the identification of needs is beginning to become a joint endeavour.

Thus, professional health care practice can be viewed in terms of a web of several interconnected sets of power relations: with the patients and clients; with colleagues of the same and other professions, with managers, with government, with a range of interest groups, etc.. Thus, decisions concerning concrete actions and values in health care organizations take place in situations related to complicated interests and tensions.

In such ambiguous, complex and contextually variable settings of professional health care practice, learning takes the form of critical inquiry and reflection rather than the acquisition of previously specified performance behaviour, whether taught in schools or at the workplace. A key research task, then, is to seek a better understanding of how to facilitate critical reflection in professional health care organizations.

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in dialogue and team-reflection as ways of supporting and facilitating (life long) workplace learning and organizational development. Many professional health care organizations have sought to integrate a range of dialogical methods as tools for learning in the organizational development processes, e.g. reflective teams, supervision, coaching, etc.. And (action) research into dialogue and dialogical methods as tools for workplace learning and organizational development have been initiated.

The paper will discuss conceptual as well as practical aspects of dialogical methods related to workplace learning and organizational development.

On the basis of this, the paper will argue that "dialectic" dialog in action research is an important "tool" in workplace learning and organizational development processes in health care organizations.