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# It's Being Close that Makes it Possible to Accept Criticism!

Lotta Svensson

A central question for a researcher with interactive ambitions is to what extent the research concerned can support development at the same time as distance and a critical attitude are maintained. In this article I will show how the interactive research approach has made it possible to create new knowledge together with the participants, in a situation in which closeness itself was largely the factor that enabled the participants to accept reflections and criticism, and to exercise self-criticism when reviewing their activities. The learning of the participants enabled them to move beyond common sense, and to jointly acquire and develop knowledge in the research process. This article will show how the interactive research process made the situation of young people an item on the municipal agenda, and how the knowledge gained came to be expressed both in discussion and in political decisions.

**Key words:** Closeness, criticism, trustful relationships, regional development

In my dissertation (Svensson 2006), I investigate the driving forces behind the choice that young people make, to either stay in their home town or to move. The empirical foundation for the dissertation is the experiences and opinions of young people in the municipality of Söderhamn in Sweden. This article will show how the interactive research process made the situation of young people an item on the municipal agenda, and how the knowledge gained came to expression both in discussions and in political decisions.

The article begins with a brief description of FoU-Centrum Söderhamn<sup>1</sup> (R&D Centre Söderhamn) where I was stationed while working on my dissertation. I then briefly present the aims, methods and results of the dissertation, and relate this to the ambition of the interactive research approach to both form knowledge and support development. I conclude by discussing the possibilities of the interactive research method to provide concrete development support, but at the same time to be critical, as a direct result of the closeness to the participants that is established. I do this by showing how my research has been perceived by some of the participants involved.

This closeness means that both the researcher and the participants may be prepared to accept the criticism and reflections presented. It enables self-reflection and self-criticism on the part of the participants which can increase the sustainability of the development work. As far as the research is concerned, this closeness can provide knowledge from within which – in combination with periods in which distance is affirmed – may increase validity and facilitate the analysis.

### **My research project**

FoU-Centrum Söderhamn (R&D Centre Söderhamn) was founded in 2000 as a collaborative project, mainly between the NIWL (National Institute for Working Life) and the Municipality of Söderhamn. One of the fundamental ideas behind the Centre was that it would act as a link between the research world and local and regional working life. That research could stimulate, support and drive local and regional development work was not, by tradition, self-evident in this region. The municipal leadership in Söderhamn hoped that a research station with a local base would help to bridge the gap to academic education that is perceived to exist in the area. Practical problems experienced within the region formed the point of departure for the research pro-

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<sup>1</sup> Read more about FoU-Centrum Söderhamn on the Internet:  
[www.foucentrum.cfl.soderhamn.se](http://www.foucentrum.cfl.soderhamn.se)

jects initiated. Tutors for the dissertation projects have been stationed at various universities and at the NIWL.<sup>2</sup>

Research that aims to be close to practice, and that values practical knowledge and experience highly has a long tradition and is associated internationally with names like John Dewey, Kurt Lewin and Paulo Freire. Sweden and the other Nordic countries have had an impact internationally in the field of action research in working life (through researchers such as Åke Sandberg, Bjørn Gustavsen, Lennart Svensson and Kurt Aagard Nielsen). In Sweden, there are several practice-oriented research institutes that are more or less independent of the universities (Tydén 2006). This type of research is presented under different names, e.g. action research, praxis research, participant-oriented research and, recently, interactive research. Below, I relate my ambition to identify, make use of and interact with the experience-based knowledge of the participants in a variation of the interactive research approach.

In our work at FoU-Centrum Söderhamn, we have seen that the interplay between research and practice can take place at different levels. In the meeting between the university/the academic sphere and society, it can be said that collaboration takes place at an *organisational* level. Through our work at FoU-Centrum Söderhamn we have contributed to the meeting between research and practice at this level in various ways, for example by arranging seminars and network meetings, participating in debates and courses and publishing popular-science articles and reports.

My experience of interactive research is, however, that a large part of the exchange of knowledge takes place *in action*, in the direct meeting between those who are affected by the various research projects. As a researcher working closely with practice, it is not enough to view practice as something that can simply enrich theoretical development, you must also be able to apply this view in a research practice that enables the generation of knowledge. But how does one do this? In the first phase, it largely entails removing ob-

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<sup>2</sup> More information on the research conducted at FoU-Centrum Söderhamn can be found, for example, in Hammar and Svensson (2003), Nuur (2005), Svensson (2005, 2006).

stacles, both real and imagined, and building a foundation of trust that will stand up to the critical approach that is the task of the researcher in interactive research that supports development. In the meeting between them, the expectations and intentions of the researchers and the participants must be translated into action and roles, aims, problems and activities must be negotiated and clarified. The joint development of knowledge can take place if researchers and participants are able to see the value of each others' knowledge and expertise, but achieving this is not always simple.

Söderhamn is located near the east coast, approximately in the geographical centre of Sweden, around 270 kilometres north of Stockholm. It can be described as a rather traditional industrial town, based on the forestry industry, with a rather low level of education, a low percentage of small businesses and a high level of unemployment among young people.

One thing that makes Söderhamn particularly interesting to study is that the structure of possibilities has undergone big changes recently. For example, structural changes on the labour market have drastically reduced the possibility to get an industrial job in the municipality of Söderhamn. The town is at a breaking point as it attempts to move forward from its history as an industrial town, and starts to orient itself towards the "information society."

Apart from contributing to theory, it has also been my ambition that the research should be of concrete and practical relevance to the region. By making the opinions of young people visible and by reflecting on them, I have attempted to bring the issue to both the public and political agenda in the municipality/region – on the basis of a youth perspective – and my hope is that I have in this way been able to contribute to more well-informed and conscious decisions.

### **An interactive approach and combined methods**

That which differentiates interactive research from other approaches is not the data collection methods that are used, but rather the attempt to achieve joint knowledge development, in an equitable dialogue between the researcher and the participants. In my dissertation, I have investigated the driving forces that lead young people to move from small towns (see Svensson

2006), and I have used both qualitative and quantitative methods. My data collection methods have been rather traditional, but my efforts to engage the participants, both young people and adults, in a joint analysis have made this project an example of interactive research.

**Table 1: Different data collection methods used in the analysis and their contribution to the research.**

Data collection method	Analysis focus	Main contribution to my research
Interviews	Attitudes of individual young people	What do the young people themselves perceive to be important in the stay/move issue? What explanations are given/not given?
Project work in the upper-secondary school	Young peoples' group discussions	How do young people in groups discuss their own and others' attitudes to moving or staying? Is it more "correct" to think in a particular way?
Essays	Young peoples' individual reasoning/priorities	Are there differences between different school classes, between genders within and between the groups? What arguments do the young people use regarding their decisions to stay or move?
Joint analysis with the youth groups	Young peoples' group discussions	Is there peer pressure on this issue? If so, what form does it take? Is it different in different groups? Is there a hierarchy of "better" and "worse" points of view?
Survey	Survey of an entire year group in the upper-secondary school	Systematised knowledge on the young peoples' attitudes to the home town/big city and the move/stay issues are related to factors such as social background and gender.
Formalised meetings with adults	Adults' group discussion in more official contexts	Adults' official attitude to the various choices facing young people and their explanations of the different choices that young people make.
Informal discussions with adults (and young people)	Adults' views individually and in groups, in more informal contexts	Spontaneous, unconsidered, uncensored reactions and views have provided a range of insights into and knowledge on the everyday understanding of the move/stay problem
Youth conferences	Meeting between adults and young people	How are the wishes of young people and adults regarding the participation of young people met? Discrepancy between rhetoric and action provides clues to dilemmas and ambivalence. The researcher can fulfil a function by clarifying this.

The interactive approach and the various data collection methods I have used have in part addressed different questions and have varied in terms of the focus of the analysis. They have thus together contributed to the results of my research. In table 1, I relate different data collection methods to the primary analysis focus and to the method's main contribution to my research results.

### **Different methods highlight different aspects**

There is an interplay between the different factors that explain young peoples' attitudes to moving at the social, group and individual levels. The main sources of knowledge on what the most important *individual* factors are that affect the young peoples' decisions on the move/stay issue have been interviews, essays and the surveys. The interviews and essays have revealed the young people's reflected experience, and these methods have made it possible to discover differences in values, priorities, and possibility horizons. The surveys have made it possible to see that these differences are not randomly distributed, but to a large extent relate to class and gender.

My participation in, and joint analysis together with, various youth groups, have been important in learning about the influential factors at the *group level*. In these contexts, it has become apparent how different group processes help to convey different ideals to the different youth groups, but also how all young people are consciously or unconsciously forced to relate to norms concerning "youth" and "normality".

The fact that the actual conditions in the home town play an important role has been a fundamental assumption of this dissertation. In the course of my research (with the help of several different methods) it has become clear that similar regional conditions can have a different impact and be perceived differently by different groups of young people, and that the link between a perceived sense of belonging and the desire to stay is not entirely self evident.

The various meetings and joint analyses conducted with adults have made it clear that it is not only in the discussions of the young people that the move/stay issue is charged with values and norms. The dichotomy centre – periphery has been useful in explaining how different power aspects are ex-

pressed in discussions on the region versus the city, and also in notions of youth and normality. The power aspect is also central to the analysis of the right of interpretation. Participating in meetings where young people and adults have discussed and practiced collaboration has been of great value for seeing and understanding how these values and notions are expressed in the practical development work. The interactive research approach has made it possible to study how young people and adults talk about each other, how they say that they want to co-operate, and the results of the actual attempts at co-operation. The participants have, in different ways, contributed to the understanding and insight that has developed regarding the mechanisms behind the attitude to moving or staying.

A somewhat unexpected result of my research is the knowledge about how the interacting factors give rise to major differences in the actual and perceived influence and participation of the young people. The fact that the young people who wanted to stay felt that they were unwanted by the local powers highlighted the paradox surrounding those young people "that count".

Young working class people in Söderhamn face contradicting messages; on the one hand they must shoulder the future of the region, and on the other they are stigmatised and viewed as passive because it is their wish to do so (compare Elias/Scotson 1999). The norm and internal logic which states that those young people who "count for something" are going to want to move, result in the attitude that there is no point in trying to engage young people in local development work. In this way, the municipal civil servants and politicians contribute to an increased individualisation and stigmatisation, which in my study is mainly expressed in working class youth having an insufficient belief in the fact that those with regional power and influence really want them to stay in the region (Svensson 2005).

If young people who stay in the local community do not "count", they will not perceive themselves as interested in influencing society. In order for resources that are contained in social relationships to become assets to the individual or to the group, the individual must be aware of his or her resources. Even if the need for renewal is acknowledged in Söderhamn, the prevailing values reduce the value of young people who show interest in and wish to

stay in the region, and they are not seen as renewers of social capital (compare Lin et al 2001).

Young people who express an interest in “taking over” and shouldering the responsibility from previous generations are not seen at all, or are regarded with distrust by many of the surrounding adults, because they are considered to be passive and disengaged. In this way, these young individuals will not experience, or become aware of, the possibility that they could have something to contribute to regional development. Instead, their lack of self worth is confirmed, and they continue to see themselves as poor in resources and lacking in influence. To see and treat young people who want to stay and “take over” as passive and without initiative contributes to a paralysation of regional development. Young people who feel that there is no room for them *anywhere* can be assumed to be “the losers of the future scenario,” but this also makes the region where they wish to live a loser in that same future scenario.

### **Conclusions for regional development**

Also in the eyes of middle-class adults, young people prove their ambition and ability by deciding to “venture into the world”. They realize that young people are needed for the survival of the region, but – in line with middle-class values and traditions – they do not want to persuade their own children to stay since the “youthful” and “modern” are assumed to exist elsewhere. The local politicians and civil servants stand in the middle of a conflict between the local society’s need for youth to take over the tasks in the welfare state, and the modern individual’s duty to “make the most” of his or her own life. Middle-class values of what is “the good life” are reflected in the civil servants’ and the politicians’ opinions about what (“real”) young people want and do. To be an individual who quickly departs and acclimatizes into new surroundings is an ideal of our time, but this ideal is not realistic for working class youth, based upon the actual opportunities, norms, values and assumptions that form their horizon of possibilities. The life choices of working-class youth could be seen as a regional asset, but to leading adults, staying in the region is not an active choice but rather a proof of passivity and inability.

### **The importance of the interactive approach**

My role as an interactive researcher has made it possible for me to provide feedback to both young people and adults in Söderhamn, which has widened the discussion beyond everyday understanding and has sometimes been provocative. The opposition that has sometimes arisen to my analyses has also given me information about what frames of interpretation there are within the limits of what is generally acceptable and what is not. Both Dewey (2004) and Lewin (1948) have claimed that the best way to understand a phenomenon is to try to change it.

Achieving a balance between closeness, distance and constructive criticism requires openness, courage and trust on the part of both the researcher and the participants. After the conclusion of the research project I interviewed four of the more central participants, i.e. the municipal commissioner, the chairperson of the board for learning and labour, the chairperson of the board for child day-care services and education and the chairperson of the student representative council at the upper-secondary school at the time (who has now become politically active in the municipality). These people had and still have a lot of influence in the municipal spheres where issues relating to young people are addressed, and I was therefore curious to see what they had learned from my research project. They followed my project with interest, and I would of course have received different answers if I had questioned other, perhaps less-interested individuals. Obviously this is not an impartial evaluation. The discussion partly concerned common efforts and experience, and it is of course easy to exaggerate the positive results. Nevertheless, I feel that these discussions provide several clues as to why an interactive research approach, because it combines development support with a critical attitude, has the potential to lead to reflection and, consequently, change.

There was widespread agreement that my work has had an impact and the interviewees identified the important factors for this impact as being the fact that the research was carried out at the everyday level, that it was conducted in and related to present time, that I presented results and analyses that gave them new insights into their own everyday operations and that my research both posed a challenge and contributed to the local debate on the situation of young people in the region.

### **A challenge and an opportunity for interactive research**

Researchers have examined the problem of the ability of interactive research to maintain a critical distance (Aagard/Svensson 2006). These fears are justified, and I believe that they should be seen as difficulties that have to be overcome. At the organisational level, the fact that it is the task of the researcher to critically examine the activities concerned is usually regarded as self-evident, and this can be negotiated and confirmed in a written contract. In direct, personal meetings, however, it becomes part of the researcher's responsibility to negotiate a critical approach and thereby incorporate this into the relationship concerned.

It's probably the case that when you conduct close research you should be very careful to say "it may happen, (...) that the results are not to your liking," so that everyone understands that this is your job. "I cannot deliver results to order" (...) I think this thing about taking a professional approach is very important. No-one should be led to believe that research is somehow different just because it is conducted close to the subject. This should be discussed with those involved so that they really understand what's happening. (Municipal Commissioner)

In an ideal interaction, the researcher gains access to knowledge that would not otherwise be available, and the practitioners are given the opportunity, through dialogue, to see their operations examined and elucidated on a more general level. Getting interaction to work in an ideal way is thus in the interests of both the researcher and the practitioners (see for example Reason & Bradbury 2001).

In a local and close research context, a large part of the exchange of knowledge takes place in action – in the personal meeting between those affected by the individual research projects. In this meeting, the expectations and intentions of the researchers and the participants must be translated into action, and roles, aims, problem areas and activities must be negotiated and clarified. For a researcher with an ambition to support development it is therefore not enough to view practical knowledge as something that can enrich theoretical development, he or she must also be able to transform this view into a research praxis that makes the generation of knowledge possible (Westlander 1999; Aagard/Svensson 2006). In my research project, it has of-

ten been a case initially of overcoming scepticism, of creating trust, and of being seen as a reliable person who respects the experience of the participants.

Apart from the nature of the issues, the fact that you were present made things feel closer, both physically and mentally. Not so abstract, but more concrete. Somehow, a researcher becomes less of a threat if he or she is present all the time. This may be because you were so close – it felt more like an opportunity than a threat. (...) It's easier to dismiss someone who only turns up now and then. People who do that don't understand our special circumstances. In your case, the thought never even occurred to me. But if the perspective had been too much "from the outside looking in", and the comments just critical, then it's not certain that the reaction would have been the same. But now we saw the opportunities offered by a critical examination. (Chairperson of the board for child day-care services and education)

Researchers and participants need to create a joint reference framework by both acting and reflecting together (Aagaard/Svensson 2006). This facilitates mutual understanding, helps to develop trust and confidence, and makes it possible to overcome difficulties relating to the way the different parties think and express themselves. The researcher can broaden his or her view of the subject of the study, and the impenetrability of academic language can be overcome in a joint analysis.

Following the initial work, which often relates to developing trust and confidence, it is a challenge to see and act on the basis of the realisation that co-operation, confidence-building measures and flexibility do not constitute the *entire* task, even though they are vital for a good result. It is equally important for both the researcher and the participants to preserve their integrity, i.e. to not permit their own activities to be controlled by the aims and expectations of the other party. It is also important for effective interaction to recognise that the other party's aims are as important to them as mine are to me. A researcher must be able to retain his or her integrity in order to gain the productive scope required for a critical attitude.

I would like to exchange a serious word or two with anyone who says that you pussyfooted around because you were so close. That is the last thing you did. You really served up these unpalatable truths in a, what shall we

say, very professional way. You didn't try to smooth things over, or accuse or evaluate. You presented them in an entirely neutral way, as though they could have been a knitting pattern! "This is the way it is. This is what I have seen. That's it. Without blackening the picture or adding or taking away anything. And it was definitely not comfortable; sometimes it was very uncomfortable indeed! But still, this is how it was, and it seemed to be very serious. (Municipal Commissioner)

The discussion, and thus the negotiation, on the roles of the parties must start at an early stage and it must clarify the various motives and objectives (see Westlander 2006). Even if this is done, however, it is my experience that continued and *ongoing* negotiations on such matters are an inevitable part of the interactive research approach. An interactive researcher, in interaction with the participants, has many opportunities during the course of the process to put critical questions that result in joint reflection. If an agreement on a critical attitude on the part of the research is in place right from the start, and is highlighted in subsequent discussions, then no one will be surprised when criticism is made during the process. Instead, the participants' confidence in the researcher is based on the fact that critical views will be expressed in the course of the ongoing dialogue. In close interaction, there is a demand for honesty that paves the way for joint critical reflection and this increases the potential for the exchange and formation of knowledge. The closeness that is required in order to gain access to the experience of the participants also means that any criticism that is actually made has a chance of being perceived as constructive. At the centre in Söderhamn, we researchers are a part of the local community, and people's awareness that we will be a lasting presence has been very important in the creation of trusting and mutual relations.

I have often presented critical points of view in the course of my research work, and I have also on several occasions presented research results that have clashed with what has been generally accepted knowledge among managers and politicians in the municipality. My comments have often reflected structural patterns that indicate an inequitable distribution of power in terms, for example, of class or gender, and it has been clear that this approach to analysing reality has not been in line with the prevailing norm. At times, the participants and I have not always been in agreement and the discussions

have sometimes been rather heated, but the joint analysis has provided both parties with new knowledge that we have been able to digest before continuing the discussion at a later date.

I was very surprised by the first draft, as I have told you. But then you have to go away and think and read and make your own analyses in your own little world and suddenly you realise “damn it, she was right after all!” (Chairperson of the board for learning and labour)

First you focus on your own experience, but then you give it some thought and see the bigger picture and see that things are different beyond your own small circle. (Former chairperson of the student representative council)

As it has been possible to continue the discussions, it has also been possible in the longer term to affirm and demonstrate the value and usefulness of academic knowledge. As the relations are based on mutual respect for each others’ knowledge, it is both possible and desirable for the researcher to be highly critical of, for example, everyday assumptions and common sense, while the participants can see this criticism and questioning as stimulating, challenging and provocative without needing to feel misunderstood or discredited.

So it really created discussion, which helps you to develop: “Can this be true, in an ordinary place, in a big town, in my town?” You talk to the people affected and things begin to spread. And you learn from them. When I talked to you, I told you about things I had experienced myself and I felt later that what you reported and wrote – that’s right, that’s my reality. In a way I think the research is easier to understand now. I feel that this is *our* research, our development. I know that you have been all over the place and talked to a lot of different people and I have a lot of confidence in what you’ve done. If someone had just come and conducted a questionnaire and then said this is how things are, and just given us a piece of paper, it would have been difficult to accept. But I was involved myself and the people I have talked to also feel that they were involved. (Former chairperson of the student representative council)

It is easier to perceive criticism as constructive criticism if it is presented within the framework of a trusting relationship. If it is also presented by someone who is aware of all the relevant circumstances, then people will be

more ready to accept it. It is often when criticism is made and views are exchanged that important new pieces of knowledge fall into place. This applies to both researchers and the participants. Participants and researchers can together exceed and develop the “common sense” (see Bourdieu 1990) that acts as an obstacle to a deeper understanding and a critical analysis.

If someone I don't know at all just turns up, fires off a lot of questions, goes home and does I don't know what with the answers, involves others that I don't know and comes back with a report that may be very critical – well, that wouldn't feel good, I think I would feel very hard done-by in fact. When things are very close ... then it feels a bit like ... criticism – it may be negative criticism, but full of respect and love – for the area, and for the desire to drive development forwards. And I don't think you can do this unless you are very close. Someone can criticise as much as they like if the criticism is constructive, if I feel that I can really trust this person to present what she has seen and not something she has simply made up. (Municipal Commissioner)

To “be behind the stage” (Goffman 1959) can be an ethical dilemma when it comes to reporting findings. The interactive approach of dialogue throughout the whole process, and discussing the findings in direct contact with those who are involved, has been a way to avoid some ethical dilemmas. When those who are most involved are the first ones to know about my critical points of view, and they have been involved in discussing them, then my experience is that they do not feel let down when I speak about these views in public. In many cases, they have instead felt that it was important to contribute to the development of knowledge on an important problem.

Of course it hurts, but that's also what makes it necessary to make a new start and maybe do things in a different way. It doesn't make life easy to find a lot of things that show us how things are and how we behave towards our young people. It's not easy at all, it's very hard. (Municipal Commissioner)

I didn't feel that I was exposed. Actually, I felt proud when you quoted me – that I had contributed in some way. I had the feeling that this is ours; you were at the meetings and were there with us. (Former chairperson of the student representative council)

As the joint discussion and analysis took place over a long period of time, many of my results became a perception of reality that we shared. The ongoing dialogue with those involved throughout the entire process thus meant that the reflections presented came to play a role at a deeper level. Of course the different individuals have taken different things on board, but the situation of young people is definitely now an item on the municipal agenda and the knowledge gained has come to expression in several contexts according to the interviewees.

Yes, we have talked a lot – about how we were given a wake-up call! The Commissioner really took this on board, and she is a member of all the strategy groups. We have also taken up these issues in the labour market council. We haven't really said "Lotta said", it's more that given the knowledge we have now this is how we see things. It has become general knowledge. (Chairperson of the board for learning and labour)

I really *think* about it now almost all the time! I do! In all my contacts. I really react strongly now when someone says "it's only the losers that stay". I say "what do you mean by that?" and I start a discussion about it, which means that I get someone else to think about it – we here in Söderhamn, those of us who have chosen to stay here now – are we all losers? (Municipal Commissioner)

Your research was discussed and quoted in different contexts and connections ... People have asked: "Is this how things are in Söderhamn?" (...) It has been discussed in very powerful forums, in the municipal executive committee for example, and in informal groups where people sit and discuss things. (Former chairperson of the student representative council)

We got a kind of confirmation that something is really at stake now: we can lose an entire generation if we don't get our act together. And what is our future? We can't just invest in eldercare and see this as a right for those who built up our society, we also have to think about who it is who will make sure that we have a good and worthwhile society in the future. (...) This sets processes in motion! And because so many people were involved in what you did, these fires have been lit both here and there. I believe that this has provided fertile ground for discussion. (Municipal Commissioner)

However, I was not only interested in influencing the discussion; I also wanted to know whether my research had affected political decisions and the

everyday lives of young people. These participants said that it had, in several different contexts:

At a meeting where we discussed the problem of people moving away from the town, we began to see things from a different point of view – of course it's good to get people to come here – but it's also important, no matter how small the municipality is, that those who live here feel that they matter. There was a big difference between the first meeting with the group assigned to discuss the problem and the third meeting, where things had suddenly turned around. I think it was then that your report came out ... and I think this affected the "change in thinking". At the first meeting we talked about how we would advertise in newspapers throughout the country, but later on we talked instead about what we do *here*, how can people feel needed here, those who live here. So things suddenly turned around. (Former chairperson of the student representative council)

What to develop and who to develop for is a very important political question. When thinking about upper-secondary school education, now when we think about it, what to do and who to do it for – I carry this with me all the time! Your results have had a major impact on how I think and argue in the structure group that I'm a member of today when we talk about the future of the upper-secondary school in terms of which young people I think about. It has had an effect. I feel like I've now got two legs after being one-legged! I can see both sides. I see more groups of young people. (Municipal Commissioner)

We're now working with the idea that there should be upper-secondary programmes so that people can stay if they want to stay. The fact that we have introduced design into the technical programme may have an effect in that maybe more girls will want to follow this programme. It's the same thing with the arts programme, it attracts a lot of girls – so we have tried to introduce it too. It's difficult to measure the impact of the research, but it's been at the back of our minds and with us when we have considered different options. (Chairperson of the board for learning and labour)

Discussions are underway locally and in the region on something we call the technical college which could collaborate at the upper-secondary school level and with companies and where we could perhaps include production in the school activities. This would increase the status of the boys who want to stay. What you have shown us has acted as a kind of

motor for what we have done. That's how it feels. (Chairperson of the child day-care and education committee)

Above all when I talk to the student representative council about how important it is to include everybody – that's when your results really come in. Now we are trying to set up a new youth council, and we have talked about what we should focus on – those who are going to leave or those who stay – and then I have talked about this thing that people don't feel they are needed. We have thought about what we can do about this, so that we include those who want to stay. (...) I have tried to push for this in the youth council – to invest in those who are here. (Former chairperson of the student representative council)

This attempt to locate research in an environment without a direct connection to a university or college was unique, but several universities and the Institute for Working Life supported this “experiment”. Strong professional backing is required to give local and regional research legitimacy, and the possibility to maintain a critical distance. However, the local base also helps to overcome the problems that academia struggles with in the form of too great a distance. Here the integration and everyday base of the research praxis made it possible to make direct use of the research results in local and regional decision making. This is how the municipal commissioner answered the question of why my research has had such a big impact in the municipality:

“Why? Well, because the closeness and credibility is sky high. And why is it that? Certainly not because you've told us what we wanted to hear, that's for sure. It's more because it feels credible, the process has been close, we have been able to follow and see and “breathe” your research, and that's important. I believe that if there is anything that can save research in the long run then it is the local examples! Research must take its place in people's daily lives, in the living room, in their everyday reality. Otherwise it will be something abstract that people don't see the benefit of, and then not all areas will be regarded as appropriate for research. If you want to conduct research on people, on changes and what is happening in a community then you have to be close!”

This article presents a possible way of using interactive research to acquire more knowledge, and at the same time support the development of practical operations, in my case municipal/regional development work. Balancing be-

tween closeness, distance, and criticism in this way requires openness, courage and trust on the part of the researcher and the participants. The relationship with the participants requires a sufficient degree of closeness to enable access to their knowledge, experience and activities at the same time as scope must be created for reflection and a critical attitude. If, in addition, the ambition is that the research will really be used in practice, i.e. that it will support development in the practical operations of the participants, yet more closeness and trust is required so that the participants themselves dare to reflect and be critical. I believe that a critical attitude is necessary if a researcher is to be able to contribute to development, and that closeness is necessary if the criticism is to have any effect.

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