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Research Responses to Practical Challenges: What Can Action Research Contribute?

Bjørn Gustavsen

During the last decade a major practical turn in research in general has been identified and made subject to discussion. One consequence is a growing interest in what action research can offer in this context. It is a mistake to assume that action research can produce theories of the same kind as conventional research but which are, in some way or other, more practical. The core contributions of action research pertain to how practical challenges are identified, and to how knowledge is made actionable through dialogically structured processes of interplay between research and practical actors. This, however, is not enough. Only when each dialogic process is able to grow in quality and number of actors involved, is the process able to verify its own power as a democratic mechanism.

Key words: Practical turn, values, actionable knowledge, programs, theory and practice

Introduction

When research started to make itself felt as a force in society, largely in the nineteenth century, research was a small establishment. Appearing as an elitist community, research tended to see itself as representing reason and rationality against a society generally characterised by tradition, ignorance and even outright stupidity. The ability to represent reason was dependent on the ability of research to itself stay out of this society, to become involved would

be to lose the freedom and objectivity necessary to see the truth. As the years have rolled on and the research establishment has grown in size and complexity it has, however, become more and more strongly involved in practical issues. This is a long term trend, but entered the discourse on research in full force as late as the 1990s (Gibbons et al 1994; Latour 1998; Etzkowitz/Leydesdorff 2000). The vast majority of research projects going on at each and every time has practical goals and implies co-operation between research and practical actors. Naturalist and technological research paved the way, but even social research is following suit. The effects are so profound that Gibbons et al talk about a radical shift in the way in which knowledge is produced; from a mode characterised by linearity and self-sufficiency, to a mode characterised by co-operation and interactivity.

The new challenges

This “practical turn” brings certain issues and questions to the surface. The questions are not new but as long as the assumption was that good research is characterised by its ability to stay outside society rather than its ability to enter into society, they could be given a low priority, or be seen as part of the portfolio of issues associated with “applied research”, “development work” or “professional practices”. The practical turn forces these questions into the centre of attention.

First, how are practical causes chosen? Although there is a broad recognition of the fact that research is involved in numerous practical efforts, and with little possibility of actually withdrawing from these efforts, it is still agreement on the point that research should not engage in any kind of practical effort. How can we choose?

Often this is seen as a choice of “values”. If we declare ourselves in favour of democracy and against authoritarianism, in favour of freedom and against oppression, in favour of a sustainable world and against the arrival of doomsday, are we so to say in the green? The problem is that the choice between different practical courses of action is, in actual practice, not a choice between different values that can be expressed in slogan-like form. “The battle of values” in modern society is a far more complex issue. First, the

values that confront each other may all have good arguments in their favour, and may all be able to link up to broadly recognised points of departure like democracy and humanism. Second, the relationship between values and practical actions are, in many instances, not obvious. Third, the values inherent in a practical cause may change underway: even the causes that have turned out to have the worst possible consequences have generally started out by claiming to represent values that are seen as positive. Events, however, have pulled in other directions. For research to pursue certain values it is not sufficient to make a once and for all declaration. In fact, it can be argued that declarations are uninteresting; what count are practices and their consequences. Research involved in practical efforts must, consequently, make the practices subject to a continuous investigation. If it is discovered, under way, that the cause is turned in a new direction, most researchers would react by trying to regain the original perspective rather than automatically jumping off. Choice of value is not a simple choice, but a continuous investigation combined with a continuous dialogue.

Second, how are practical impulses brought into the research process? The practical turn means to relate to practical problems and challenges. Since most of the literature on the practical turn is still preoccupied with technology, the challenges implied in facing practical problems seem reasonably simple. The world needs an efficient medicine against AIDS, and that is it. Obviously, any researcher who wants to have a go at this challenge has to look into some related issues, such as the state of the art among other researchers working on the same topic, what kind of pharmaceutical firms would be interested, and similar. But what about the researcher who wants to face challenges like democracy and participation; how to create learning organizations or improve on the efficiency of third world aid programs? The practical challenges are major but they are not simple. One of the reasons is that many actors are involved and they do not necessarily have the same view on the challenges and what remedies are called for. Who should be listened to or, in general, how to identify those elements that are to constitute the definition of “the practical problem”?

Third, how to provide knowledge of relevance to practical development? Even if it is possible to form a reasonable understanding of the challenge and

perform a research process of some kind or other, how can we ensure that the knowledge produced actually achieves practical effects? Again, the problem may appear simple: When the knowledge is there, those concerned are simply told what they need to know and that is that. The one who is really able to come up with a new medicine against AIDS will, furthermore, hardly have to persuade anybody; the global pharmaceutical industries will in all likelihood queue up before the research laboratory, each with an offer more tempting than the previous one. But what about the one who may want to promote participation and democracy in the face of authoritarian leaders, the cause of women in traditionalist society, or development aid based on local mobilisation, rather than transfer of technological knowledge via experts, to mention but some examples?

Facing questions of this kind, the easiest reaction is to maintain the classical research position: this is not the responsibility of research. Research can study the forces that are blocking change but should not in itself become involved in the processes that have to be created to bypass the blockages. In earlier periods, this may have been a feasible position. With the scope and weight of “the practical turn” this is hardly possible any longer. In a situation where the great majority of research – of any kind - is working to improve on practices, it is no longer possible to leave questions like how to define the practical problem, or what knowledge is actionable, aside.

This is the point where action research enters the picture. From six decades of efforts at linking theory and practice this kind of research has accumulated a lot of experience in this area. The main contribution from action research is, however, not “alternative theories” with the same structural characteristics as descriptive-analytic ones, but with another and, say, more “actionable” content. This is actually not the point. What action research can offer are first and foremost approaches to the three challenges outlined above; how to pursue values; how to identify practical impulses and how to feed knowledge into processes of practical development. There is little point in action research setting out, or being asked to set out, on a process of making “new theory” within all the vast areas of knowledge and theorising that are already covered. Most existing social theory can be used in development contexts, but seldom directly in its original form. To this question we will return

later. First, however, we will take a look at one specific action research programme, to see how this programme handles the three challenges.

An action research program

After a series of action research projects were conducted in Norway in the 1960s, under the heading “The Industrial Democracy Program” (Emery/Thorsrud 1976), the notion of organizing action research in broader programmes withered away. In the early 1990s the idea was, however, revived and a program called “Enterprise Development 2000” saw daylight. In 2000 this program was replaced by “Value Creation 2010”, which is, at the moment, being incorporated into a larger programme package with a main emphasis on regional development. It is to some extent uncertain how the characteristics of Value Creation 2010 will mix with the characteristics of other ingredients in the new programme; in principle, however, the new programme is intended to strengthen the characteristics indicated below.

Up to now the main purpose of the programme has been to further learning oriented forms of work and organization through co-operation between management and workers in each enterprise, and through the active use of research as a support resource. Within the new programme, regional development and innovation is emphasised more strongly but the driving mechanism is to be the same. The programme is organised by the Research Council of Norway and is a part of the programme portfolio of the Council. It is developed in co-operation with the labour market parties but also other stakeholders like Innovation Norway and various organizations in research and development.

1. At the top is a general steering function, largely organized along the lines of a *partnership* between the stakeholders.
2. The research resources are made up of research groups *able and willing to enter into relationships of joint development with actors in working life*.
3. The main generative mechanism is *dialogue*, defined as a free and open conversation between equal partners for the purpose of reaching agreement. The choice of dialogue is to some extent trivial – what else? – but there are also a set of more specific reasons:

- Dialogue maximises the possibilities for each participant *to be heard* and *for making contributions*.
 - For this reason dialogue also maximises the possibilities for *reaching agreement*, and for *ensuring legitimacy* and *support* from all participants.
 - Participation in dialogically structured processes of communication improves on the *linguistic resources* and *communicative competence* of the participants.
 - When communicative competence increases, the ability of the participants to *discover*, *avoid*, *defuse* or *deal with conflicts* improve through:
 - early discovery
 - greater ability to reach agreement in spite of (initial) disagreement
 - improvement in the ability of the participants to avoid, or defuse, linguistic lock-ins.
4. The emphasis on dialogue seeks its reasons not only in the need to make existing arenas better able to handle development issues, but in the need to achieve *broad participation*, or *participation from all concerned*.
 5. The core area for dialogue is *the dialogue conference*, organised according to a set of design criteria. The main purpose of these criteria is to ensure participation from all concerned, and equality in the opportunities offered by the conference, without losing the ability to reach practical conclusions.
 6. When dialogic competence is increasing, there emerges a potential for spill-over into other arenas, such as the formal bodies for labour-management co-operation (co-operation councils, work environment committees and similar) or into arenas like project groups.
 7. From originally aiming at actors in single organizations, dialogic events are to an increasing degree applied *in parallel and sequence to reach continuously widening circles of actors* and construct network relationships between organizations.

8. Action research does not only provide knowledge and practical suggestions concerning how to structure dialogic events, but participates in the events on line with the other participants. *Dialogically structured encounters constitute the main framework for the contributions from research.* Research contributions have to be fed into the process as responses to specific configurations of topics, discussions and demands. Research responses are, however, not defined in terms of a passive reaction, but in terms of an active intervention.
9. When change is driven forth through dialogues with many actors involved, change becomes an *evolutionary process*, not a radical break.
10. Research is deployed in a *distributive pattern*.
11. Each project has a *local-regional anchoring*.
12. Each local-regional point of anchoring functions as a *node in a process of growth*.
13. There is a steering function for each local-regional process, answering to the notion of *development coalition*, or *partnership*.
14. Local-regional processes within the area of work organization merge with other local-regional processes to form *overall developments towards innovation and better welfare*.
15. The main channel for diffusion of experience out of each local-regional context is *learning across regional boundaries*.

Some main aspects

What is described above is not a specific theory identifying the challenges of working life and what remedial action to take, nor is it a collection of methodologies. It is an apparatus for linking research to actors in working life, in such a way that research can contribute to practical development.

The impulses that are to guide the efforts of research are picked up and organised in dialogically structured processes where the actors concerned are taking part. In this kind of event the actors concerned talk not only to research but to each other, and the point is to reach agreement between all who

are present on the arena. As a partner, research is one of the actors whose role and tasks are defined in this process. The practical impulses to which research is to react are mediated through a process leading up to a joint platform between research and those concerned.

The knowledge developed by research is fed dialogically into the development process. This means that the knowledge is played in according to how the process evolves at each and every time, and what needs emanate from the collective of actors. Knowledge is made actionable more through the way in which it is fed into the process than through being given a specific type of content. Obviously, the demands emanating from the dialogic form exerts an influence on what the knowledge “looks like” when it is fed into a process. It has to be expressed in ways that makes it a natural response to a situation and its demands, and it must generally be given a form consistent with a conversation where points and arguments are flowing back and forth between the actors; Shotter (1994) uses the term relational-responsive. As a point of departure, the process cannot be halted to provide space for one of the actors to “give a lecture”. This, however, is only a point of departure. As the process is unfolding and a shared framework established, research will be able to express itself through reports or other texts of the kind that research generally applies. The point is not that contributions always have to be short, but that they emerge as a response to an agreed-upon challenge, for instance to find out how things are going in the process, to suggest new ways of interpreting joint experience, etc..

To work in a dialogic context it is necessary to master the kind of process associated with the notion of dialogue. Dialogue is, in itself, a complex concept appearing in many different contexts. For the notion of dialogue to guide conversations between practical actors, the concept must be operationalized into a set of criteria. In the Norwegian workplace development programme, a fairly broad set of criteria is applied, encompassing norms like the basic equality between all actors on the arena, the need to let work experience be the point of departure for the conversations, and the need for all who want to influence the dialogue to be present on the arena (Gustavsen 1992, 2001; Shotter/Gustavsen 1999). Since people cannot be expected to live fully up to the criteria for a good – or democratic – dialogue from day one, the criteria

need to be flexible and allow for learning and dynamism in the practicing of dialogue. A specific kind of event – the dialogue conference – is given a key role as the standard arena in the development process.

In “being practical” research is generally facing a number of actors and these actors will often advance different views on what the practical challenges are. In this kind of situation it is necessary to apply a procedure built on three concerns: First, the procedure must be able to generate agreement between the bearers of different views. Research will have small possibilities for helping people meet challenges if they disagree on what the challenges are. Agreement is, however, not enough: It is necessary to see to it that all concerned are involved in the agreement-generating process. Third, agreement must be based on the ability to handle disagreement and not on the ability to hide disagreement in favour of a superficial consensus. The dialogic process should, to phrase it with Habermas, be able to handle a continuous radicalisation of the argument. How can we ensure that these conditions are present?

This is actually the main challenge facing any research that aims at being practical: How do we know that “all concerned” have been involved in the process? Actually, how do we *decide* who “those concerned” are? How do we know that an agreement is based on a free choice rather than successful manipulation?

Participation as the core value

This is the point where the first of the three challenges enter the picture: what values to pursue and how to pursue them. The action research tradition outlined above has its point of origin in a debate on industrial democracy which was, in turn, an offspring of a more general debate on democracy unfolding in Norway during the first decades after World War II. This debate was built on certain assumptions, in particular that there were already strong elements of democratic organization present in society but that there was a challenge associated with the continuous expansion of the democratic order. In the Industrial Democracy Program, it was the participation of the individual that was placed in focus. This was seen as the area most strongly in need of expansion. Since working life consists of many individuals the challenge of par-

ticipation became identical to the challenge of broad participation. The challenge of broad participation cannot be handled in one sweeping move; the challenge is, literally speaking, too broad. The challenge has to be met through a process where a growing number of people are successively involved. The merit of each step in the process has to be decided on the basis of the degree to which participation is extended, and not on the basis of the ability of one step to bridge the gap between zero and full participation. The democratic imperative is, in other words, to create a process that can encompass a continuously growing number of actors.

When the number of actors grows, the degree of pluralism in knowledge, experience and points of view increases. For agreement to be reached in a process with a growing number of actors, it is necessary for the process to handle a continuously greater span of views, opinions and arguments. Insofar as agreement can be reached with a growing number of actors it is, in itself, a strong indicator of a fruitful dialogue process. If the process of improving on the dialogue is not fruitful, a growth in number of participants will lead to stagnation and breakdown. The exception occurs when somebody can manipulate the process. The test is, however, the same: someone who wants to manipulate the process will have to be able to manipulate more and more participants with a continuous increase in the scope of the views that have to be outmaneuvered by the manipulator. The broader the participation, the less the likelihood of manipulation, or other behind-the-scenes forces, influencing the process.

The core guarantee of the democratic qualities of the process lies, in other words, in its *continuous expansion*. It does not necessarily lie in an ability to reach all actors in working life, an unrealistic aim even in a small society. Nor is it necessarily so that a process encompassing a small number of actors, even in a situation where it is quite clear that “those concerned” constitute a much larger set of actors, is not fruitful. Again, the issue is not how wide is the process but does it expand? If the process is able to reach out in scope to catch a growing number of actors the assumption that the quality of the dialogue is improving receives strong substantiation.

In any area of complexity there will be no unequivocal definition of who is concerned. A work group in an organization can be related to other actors in the same organization, to customers and suppliers and so on; in some cases

events in one single organization can have global consequences. There is in fact no single actor or body who can decide who are concerned by a specific set of practical acts. This has to be decided by the actors who exist in the field where the practices unfold and becomes identical to the question: do we want to join the process? The point is, consequently, not to have an ultimate definition of who are concerned but to have an open process allowing those who see themselves as concerned to join the process. A further reason for having this as an open choice is that people can experience many processes as something touching upon their fields of interest, without having the strength and resources to engage in all. The right to participate has its corollary in the right not to participate.

While the participative element in democracy is the core value in the programme, this is not a value to be expressed in an initial declaration and to be left at that. Rather, it is the core aim of the practical strivings and the chief yardstick against which to measure success. Its commitment to values is sometimes held against action research, on the argument that “values” cannot be given an unequivocal foundation. Activities that cannot be given an unequivocal foundation are still sometimes though to be “unscientific”. In the age of post-modernism, de-constructivism and radical linguistic critique in general, this kind of argument is becoming rare, since no research can be given an unequivocal foundation. The difference between action research and other forms of research is not that somewhere along the line of arguments values emerge, but that action research explicitly faces the challenges associated with a commitment to values, rather than keep on under the pretence that the challenges do not exist.

Patterns of development

The movement towards scope in research-supported development processes in Norwegian working life is a long and complex one. Even though the first projects took the form of four fairly concentrated field experiments, the issue of reaching out in scope was present even at this stage (Emery/Thorsrud 1976). When the experiments were supported by the labour market parties, the intention was not to make a few workplaces stand out as radically differ-

ent from the rest, but to provide a platform for a movement that could, in principle, be able to reach all workplaces. For this reason the experiments were located in major companies in the Norwegian economy on the assumption that others would take their clues from them. As demonstrated by later events things did not work out exactly like that and to some extent the experiments were locked into the social contexts where they occurred (Gustavsen/Hunnius 1981). An effort to make work organization part of a major national reform in workplace health and safety occurring in the 1970s increased the scope of the changes but generally at the expense of their depth and coherence (Gustavsen 1986). When the labour market parties made an agreement on development that went into operation from the early 1980s, about 450 enterprises made use of the agreement. Less than 10 % of these did, however, develop more substantial and deep-going changes (Gustavsen 1993). It seemed as if deep-going change could be created only in a small number of workplaces and with much uncertainty associated with the ensuing diffusion, while efforts to encompass a larger number of organizations were associated with a substantial weakening of the project effects.

It was not until the middle 1990s that patterns emerged where this dilemma seemed to be overcome. The context was the programme described above, in its first phase. When this programme was launched, in co-operation with the labour market parties, support to inter-enterprise co-operation was made into the core issue from the start. The idea of establishing star cases in single organisations and hope for later diffusion was abandoned. So was, however, the idea of relating to a large number of organisations in the hope that some kind of interaction effect would occur more or less by itself.

A network could very well start out with a few organizations only, the point was to make it able to attract further organizations. To have this power of attraction the network had to make advances, otherwise the initiative would wither away. Insofar as new organizations joined the network the degree of pluralism would grow. This could imply a growth in problems of coordination but it also implied that a broader range of impulses could be played into the network.

But is there much use in having networks for diffusion if there is nothing to diffuse? From where do the impulses for change appear? Even on this

point the notion of networking has proven fruitful. When organizations are developing new patterns and solutions they rarely do it purely on the basis of internal impulses. Impulses taken from outside generally play a role and again networking becomes important. What actually happens is that change and diffusion merge into one and the same process, characterised by streams of impulses within each organization joining streams of impulses that cross organizational boundaries, to form what Latour (1998) calls hybrids, or innovations where internal and external impulses blend to form new combinations.

This phase also saw the emergence of a distributive use of research resources. In previous efforts the action researchers involved came, on the whole, from two national institutions. With small networks as the starting point it was seen as more fruitful to involve researchers with a basis in the same environment as the networks. The network formations existing at the time all had a local-regional basis, and it was imagined that the same would pertain to whatever might be created in the form of new networks. The outcome was the establishment of altogether seven local-regional combinations of organizations and action researchers, each called a module. From, in most cases, a somewhat uncertain start with quite a lot of trial and error, all projects were eventually stabilised and when the programme came to an end the number of participating organizations was growing, at the same time as the depth of the impact in each organization was increasing. In spite of the number of more deeply influenced organizations being relatively modest – at an estimate about 40 – 50 (Bakke 2001) - this was a watershed in the sense that the overall pattern had been changed from one of star cases associated with later diffusion problems, or one of many but weak and weakly connected projects, to one of a continuous strengthening of each project, a continuous growth in number of projects and a growth in the strength of the relationships between enterprises.

When the first version of the programme was to be replaced with a second version – in 2000 – several new challenges had appeared. If network building from local-regional nodes is successful, each network will grow in size and/or new networks will appear. This increases the points of contact with other efforts and actors on the local-regional level, and efforts to change work organization will start to merge with other but related issues, like regional in-

frastructure, the role of the local political-administrative authorities and more. This development is enhanced by a tendency towards “the regions” being assigned new tasks in economic development (Gustavsen 2006).

Stepwise, the formation of networks and clusters of enterprises has moved into a phase where the task approaches regional development. In Gustavsen et al. (in prep.) one example is presented: The Grenland region is located about 200 kilometers south of Oslo and a fertilizer plant in the region was the seat of one of the first experiments with autonomous forms of work organization. Although the experiment can probably be classified as one of the most successful experiments ever conducted by action research, there was little diffusion to other workplaces during the 1970s and 80s. In the 1990s, however, as the global productivity pressure increased, ideas about participation-based organization development were revived, but this time in a network of process plants belonging to different industrial groups rather than in one single plant, but all located in the same area. Stepwise, this co-operation has expanded, to encompass more companies, the regional representatives of the labour market parties, the regional political-administrative authorities, and more. As the circle of actors has expanded, the co-operation agenda has changed, from an initial focus on development inside each of the participating plants to a focus on what can be gained through co-operation between the plants – within fields like joint maintenance services – and further on to broader initiatives for regional development, such as a pipe line for North Sea gas to the region. Reduction of emissions, in particular CO₂, has been added to the agenda and it is worth noting that in Norway the process industry is the only group of actors that has so far achieved a substantial reduction in emissions. Broad participation and close co-operation between management and workers may be particularly important in this area, not only to achieve practical effects in each plant but to avoid the process being hampered by conflicts, fear of job loss and associated union resistance. The shift in agenda does not mean that the original considerations are left but that new ones are added. The role of action research has primarily been to help construct the network, often even playing a leading role in this respect. Dialogue conferences encompassing successively broader circles of actors have been the main tool, but much

emphasis has been placed on making dialogic forms of work infuse other bodies and arenas as well.

Experiences from this and related cases indicate that this is a powerful strategy for the development of new practices. It is, however, no simple strategy. Having an open definition of “who is concerned” does, for instance, not mean that the process is overcrowded by actors who see themselves as concerned. In most cases the situation is the opposite: new actors have to be pulled in stepwise, and they often need to see the fruitfulness of each step they have taken towards co-operation with others documented before they are willing to move on.

The potential for reaching out in scope varies with a number of circumstances. In Norway, the process of constructing networks and regional development processes has proceeded most rapidly in regions characterised by relatively small places, or communities, where people can easily get to know each other, but that are large enough to harbour economic activity of some significance. These are the sites where the kind of social relationships out of which networks grow, exist (“social capital”). However, for networks to be substantial enough to matter under global competition they must often be able to grow beyond each specific site. For this to happen, it is an advantage if there is a number of similar places within the same socio-geographical area to which the process can spread. If the distances between places are large – like in the Northernmost parts of Norway – network development is more difficult. More resources are needed to overcome the barriers. At the other end of the urbanisation scale – in particular Oslo – there are major challenges as well. In the Oslo area the number and density of enterprises is the highest in the country but the enterprises are there because of the market, not because they want to relate to each other. “Sites of social capital” are difficult to establish with consequent difficulties in creating nodes from which processes can emanate.

Do developments within regional frameworks become subject to a new kind of lock-in, this time on the regional level? A development confined to a region obviously falls short of the ambitions of classical general theory where the aim is to represent universal reason. To compare a strategy for the structuring of practical action to a text with a claim to universality is, however, to compare two very different phenomena. Had all texts with a claim to univer-

sality been automatically converted into practice, there would have been no call for the practical turn, nor for interactive forms of knowledge production. It is just because these conversions are rare that the whole problem of relating theory to practice has emerged. The problem is, consequently, not how well the region compares to the universal but how well it compares to the text-producing individual. As a point of departure, the reason inherent in a text rests with the one who makes it and nobody else.

To this kind of argument there are a number of other ones that can be added. Studies of such topics as innovation, point strongly in the direction of regions as being core units in this context (Cooke in prep). They can combine social capital and density of transactions with a scope and scale sufficient to handle the major challenges of an innovation process, to mention but one example where “the region” is a fruitful framework. To this can be added that regions are not closed to each other. Impulses can travel across regional boundaries in the same way as they can travel across organizational boundaries. The point is that when impulses move between regions they follow a pattern of interactivity and mutual learning and not one of linear diffusion (Ennals/Gustavsen 1998; Gustavsen et al. in prep.).

Knowledge and interaction

The kind of programme indicated above constitutes a setting for the use of research-generated knowledge. The need for a dialogic form of presentation cannot avoid exerting an impact on the knowledge. This does, however, not mean that everything has to be researched anew. The vast oceans of knowledge accumulated by descriptive-analytic research can generally be used, but the knowledge needs to be cast in a new form. In a non-dialogic, textual form, knowledge appears as some kind of organised totality where a number of elements are linked to each other in textual space. For practical use this static-linear form needs to be converted into a dynamic-dialogical form. Without losing its coherence, the knowledge must be converted into elements that can be fed stepwise into a process of practical development. Hansen and Claussen (2001) report on how the issue of quality was dealt with in relation to a network of enterprises in the Enterprise Development 2000 program: The

initial assumption from research was that the enterprises would benefit from learning more about quality, and they were fed information about the aims and content of the global quality movement. This was received with interest from the enterprises, but they proved to generally be unable to translate the knowledge into practical steps to take in their own organizations. The process had to be reversed, to start with each enterprise analysing its own situation and quality improvement needs. Out of this effort there, stepwise, emerged a need to get information about, for instance, how specific problems could be approached. It was then up to the researchers to see if the quality movement had something to offer. If it had, it would be used and the local actors would move on until a new need for external impulses emerged. The end product was the development of well functioning quality systems in the enterprises, where knowledge from outside was stepwise pulled in and applied according to the needs of the local processes, and not adapted as a “total package” in one single move. Research had to be able to give the knowledge a form of presentation appropriate to the dynamics of the local process.

Although dialogic presentation is radically different from linear application, it does, on the other hand, not necessarily mean that the knowledge fed into the enterprises differs very much from the knowledge in its original form, in the sense that it provides radically different views on quality. For this reason, much of the knowledge existing in “the knowledge pools” of research can be useful, and there is no need to develop it all over again. When a practical process is in the drivers’ seat it means, however, as pointed out by Pålshaugen (2006), that no existing theory or body of knowledge has an automatic claim to be applicable. All knowledge must stand its test through an ability to help the local process forwards. In actual practice, most local development processes draw on knowledge from different theories and sources. Experiences from one and the same practical process can, in turn, be fed back into different theoretical discourses. In this sense, there is still a difference between theory and practice. The difference compared to a perception of the relationship where theory is the ordering force, is that now it is the practical process that is the moving force, and theories are something that are grouped around the practical process. This means to renounce the idea that the strivings of research are to ultimately be guided by one single theory that points

out the way to a better world, an idea to which few, after post-modernism and de-constructivism, will subscribe anyway. It means, however, a very strong focus on what values are inherent in the practices that research helps forth and a continuous attention to the relationships between these values and the actual outcomes of the strivings.

Many forms of research are at a crossroad: Largely being developed as descriptive-analytic activities there has been a piling up of knowledge that does not reach out in the practical world. The pressure on “actionability” is growing. Action research may not contain all answers to how this pressure is to be met, but under this heading there is sufficient experience to see that the challenges go far beyond those that used to be discussed under such headings as “applied research”, “development work” and “professional practices”. In principle, knowledge must be converted from a linear-monologic, and into an interactive-dialogic form, something that is not achieved overnight but has to be posed as a long-term goal.

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