Management of power in action research and participatory research

- Dealing with power from the point view of a dialogue democratic approach to action research

A comparative advantage of action and interactive research is its ability to dynamically access and mobilize distributed sources of knowledge and inquiry in social life. Frequently truth is assumed to emerge in places that are free from power and interests that distort or obstruct it, like, for example, in academic institutions or certain discursive conditions (see e.g. Habermas, 1984). As you engage yourself in social life in this type of approach, a core epistemological as well as methodological issue is how to deal with issues of power, your own as well as others. Power is involved in any activity and relations, and as Foucault (2001:52) say, scientific inquiry is a form of power management and exercise, a form of knowledge-power. The purpose of this paper is to clarify the way action research and participatory research can be seen as particular way of building and managing truth power in order to counteract coercive forms of power. It is a matter of politics which is relying on certain powers while minimizing other powers. Inquiry can be constructed as open dialogue and experimentation where people freely understand, judge, as well as accept and commit themselves to the most trustworthy construction as a basis for action and practice. It is a conceptualization and praxis of truth requiring participatory democratic infrastructures and active management in order to try to maintain “power-with” and avoid “power-over” (Follett, 1930).
A researcher is establishing contact and collaborative relation with management and union in a company in a collaborative project. In interviewing some of the employees about the conditions at the workplace, they express harsh views on the bad working conditions and the strong control by management. And the union does not do anything about it, they say. Should the researcher help to give voice to these views, although it may cause some sensitive discussions and also threaten the collaboration relation?

In a meeting, the researcher associate with a model common in the research literature that he/she thinks might be of use to deepen the understanding of the issue and finding way to deal with it. The personnel participating do not say much, although the researcher is trying to further dialogue.

I believe many researchers as well as practitioners with experience in collaboration with organizations and practice recognize this type of situation. The situations become disturbing and problematic because power in different forms are implicated in the relations. How can the action researcher deal with power issues? I will in the paper investigate this question, and particularly clarify the way a dialogue democratic (DD) approach to action research may deal with it. This approach can be traced back to the tripartite national programme on Leadership, Organization and Codetermination running in Sweden in the end of the 1980s, where ca 70 action researchers and 200 companies where involved in project aimed at furthering broad participation of employees in working life (Gustavsen, 1992). An important guiding concept for furthering participation and collaboration was “democratic dialogue” expressed particularly in meeting and conference designs. Particularly the arrangements of so called “dialogue conferences” was an important method for furthering dialogic participation. Discussion is seen both as a medium for broad participation, for interaction between organizational units, and for knowledge formation. The creation of fora in which democratic dialogues can emerge and be instrumental in furthering participatory innovation is crucial in the approach. Gustavsen has formulated a vision of the good communication, a standard that can be used to assess and shape actual communicative fora and practices. The following list of criteria for democratic dialogue is a point of departure and provides guidelines for communicative and assembly design in the dialogue-democratic approach (Gustavsen, 1992:3-4);

1. The dialogue is a process of exchange: ideas and arguments move to and fro between the participants.

2. It must be possible for all concerned to participate.

3. This possibility for participation is however, not enough. Everybody should also be active. Consequently each participant has an obligation not only to put forth his or her own ideas but also to help others to contribute their ideas.

4. All participants are equal.

5. Work experience is the basis for participation. This is the only type of experience that, by definition, all participants have.

6. At least some of the experience that each participant has when entering the dialogue must be considered legitimate.

7. It must be possible for everybody to develop an understanding of the issues at stake.

8. All arguments that pertain to the issues under discussion are legitimate. No argument should be rejected on the grounds that it emerges from an illegitimate source.
9. The points, arguments, etc. which are to enter the dialogue must be made by a participating actor. Nobody can participate "on paper" only.

10. Each participant should be able to tolerate an increasing degree of difference of opinion.

11. The work role, authority, etc. of all participants can be made subject to discussion - no participant is exempt in this respect.

12. The participants should be able to tolerate an increasing degree of difference of opinion.

13. The dialogue must continuously produce agreements that can provide platforms for practical action.

As action researcher in the LOM programme at the time, I will use some of the experience and reflection as basis for considering the issue of power. Different power issues can be identified. The issues is both related to the established power structure in the practical situation, where some have considerably more power than others, and to the power of the researchers from its institutionalized academic position.

The issue of power

How deal with power in collaborative relations with organizations? From the point of you of action research/interactive research, the primary task is how to manage the collaborative relations and the project activities that the parties is developing and implementing. Dealing with and management of power is part of this overall management task.

But should the research really go into issues of power? One first reaction is to try to avoid power altogether. Often the concept of power is based on the Weberian image of power - power as the ability to influence others against their will. Weber used the word Herrschaft, which can be translated as dominance, implying a “power over” type of understanding of the concept. From this coercive, and submissive, understanding of power, it show a rather ugly face that express something that action researchers and participatory researchers want to avoid.

But from the perspective of “Power to”, power is a productive force. It refers to ability and capacity to act and perform activities to accomplish valued ends. Without different forms of power we cannot do anything, we become impotent. Without it our freedom and autonomy is diminished, our sense of having some control over our destiny, even sense of identity. From this point of view mobilizing and developing power is crucial.

But we are not alone in collaboration. Thus social power, power exerted in relation to other people need to be considered. In a social context, power is closely connected to authority as the right to exert power in relation to others. Authority is sometimes linked to authoritarian relations, but this should be avoided. Authority is here understood as legitimated power and power exertion. So a crucial issue in social settings is how power is authorized, so that some actors achieve the right to particular powers and its use in a certain context. It is not primarily a matter of dominance over others, but legitimate and efficient distribution of authority to exert power in order to accomplish common ends.

Authorized agents of power are generally obliged to provide reasons for their use of power. Power has to be rational, e.g. based on evidence, knowledge and valid arguments, besides being able to validate the right to power and its exertion. If authorities cannot provide appropriate reasons, their authority may be put in question. When we speak of power, often the issue if its legitimation is
uncertain or questioned. That is, the right of the power holders to exert their powers is at stake. It is not, or not fully, authorized according to the understanding of norms among those concerned. Management of power is often a matter of dealing with power that has uncertain or questionable legitimacy to exert itself. Unlegitimated power is a matter of violence as Arendt express it. The issue is complicated as the understanding and experience of power, as well as understanding of legitimacy, varies considerably between individuals and groups. Different theories of power and its legitimation is in circulation in social life. Power is also dangerous it is often said. It seems to be like a drug, where some people want to keep it for the positive effect it can generate. “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely” is a common aphorism.

Furthermore, collaborative relations are severed when some actors are exerting power that others believe are illegitimate or insufficiently justified. Here dialogic relation based on democracy – democratic dialogue – can be seen as a way of dealing with issues of power and furthering collaboration. Power is also related to interests and values of involved parties. If illegitimate, particularly coercive, power is exerted in a relation, people often recognize it from the threat on their interests. So collaborative relations need to be able to interweave interests and building trust, in as way so that the interests are mutually recognized in a fair way. Otherwise the issue of illegitimate power will be lurking.

Sometimes the uneven distribution of power is seen as the core issue, where participative development is focused on power equalization. This may be important, but cannot be the full answer, because as situation of balance of power can easily be a situation of Machiavellian power struggle. Hobbes solution in the power struggles of the seventeenth century was that people should agree to giving over power to a Leviathan, a ruler, because he saw that the “natural state” of humans as one of war rather than peaceful collaboration. “War is the easy way: we take to war because we have not enough vitality for the far more difficult job of agreeing,” Follett (1998: 103).

But cannot action researcher avoid the tricky issues of power, by avoiding power. Researchers is the carrier of truth, so why not stick to speaking truth to power? But speaking truth is also a power as we will discuss later. So building a social space for a social space for collaboration must be something more than talking truth.

**Power-with – reconstructing the concept of power**

Where do we find a starting point and conceptual resources to deal with the issue of power and authority in an alternative way? A power that can be called “power-with” instead of “power-over” as Follett (1930) say.

Conceptually I first found a point of departure in Hannah Arendts unusual understanding of power, and the way she described power building. Hannah Arendt makes a reconceptualization of the concept of action and action capacity, that is, power, which to my mind is weakly represented in Western modernity;

"In distinction to strength, which is the gift and the possession of every man in isolation against all other men, power comes into being only if and when men join themselves together for the purpose of action, and it will disappear when, for whatever reason, they disperse and desert one another. Hence, binding and promising, combining and convenanting are the means by which power is kept in existence...power is the only human attribute which applies solely to the worldly in-between space by which men are mutually related, combine in the act of foundation by virtue of the making and keeping of promises" Arendt (1965: 174ff)
In Arendt’s conceptualization, power is not only added together but generated when people come together and bind and mutually commit themselves by covenants. Individual wills must be validated and transformed into mutual commitments to reasonable agreements among those concerned based on shared or co-ordinated understanding. This is the basis for building power through commitment rather than through command. Through a procedural and pluralistic understanding of "the sovereignty of the people", commitment building can be seen as a continuous task of action in a social, and particularly organizational, context, whenever there is a need to deal with an issue in which a number of individuals is concerned. This has been conceptualized as dialogue oriented management. From this point of view, democratic dialogue is fundamentally an instrument for the building of power of commitment. Dialogue oriented management is focused on mobilizing the "strength of the people" in a sense of a free commitment among all concerned in a common ground.

Another theoretical source, related to the perspective of Arendt, is Habermas theory of communicative rationality and action, where power and authority can be seen as generated communicatively (Habermas, 1986).

Empowerment and strong actorship is necessary in collaborative relations. It creates capacity and variety as potentials for powers in organized innovation enterprises. But these potentials can often be more easily employed in Machiavellian power struggle or coercive power dominance. There is a need for collaboration as well as integration in the Follettian sense of creative and progressive interweaving (Follett, 1930) of the available varieties and differences into co-ordinations or combined wholes as a platform of common undertakings and improved praxis. Here democratic dialogue as management praxis becomes a core medium for dealing with power and rationality. The crucial organizing issues here are focused on power building and pooling rational and knowledge capacities. Follett’s conceptualization of power as power-with, crucial for the understanding and viability of a Rousseauian approach, instead of power-over, the core concept of a Machiavellian approach, is here an important (Follett, 1930:186ff). The focus is on power as something built when people are able to join forces through integration, and thus co-ordinate praxises and form collaborative undertakings. The glimpses of this conceptualization of power can be found in other thinkers in the tradition (Arendt, Rousseau, Habermas), but the conceptualization is often unclear, undeveloped and infiltrated with aspects of coercive power.

Frequently truth is assumed to emerge in places that are free from power and interests that distort or obstruct it, like, for example, ideally academic institutions. Foucault argues instead that knowledge is produced through particular “social practices” driven by historically situated power struggles related to their emergence and maintenance, and that inquiry is thus knowledge-power and a form of power management and exercise.

“The inquiry is precisely a political form – a form of power management and exercise that, through the judicial institution, became, in Western culture, a way of authenticating truth, of acquiring and transmitting things that would be regarded as true. The inquiry is a form of knowledge-power.” Foucault (1994: 52)

As Foucault says, giving authority to a certain form of inquiry praxis is an element of a form of power building, and the inquiry is a form of power in itself. Social praxis is inherently related to knowledge, power, human values and interests. There is thus a need for a political praxis guided by organizational freedom, i.e., participatory democracy in order for Rousseauian inquiry praxis to be workable and forceful. Thus, not only liberal freedom as non-interference and otherwise laissez-faire, but active management is needed in order to minimize the operations of coercive power, and instead further other forms of power building. In focusing on Nietzschean inspired power struggles as drivers in the emergence of certain social practices that produce truth, Foucault tends to be caught in Machiavellian power conceptualizations not able to recognize more Rousseauian, non-coercive alternatives. To take truth as trustworthiness as the basis for action and praxis, “validity-
actionability” as Lewin says, will increase power in the sense of securing consequences as valued outcomes and serving interests that the praxis of inquiry is generated from. Social praxises produce knowledge and simultaneously power. By performing certain praxis the practitioners generate knowledge through experiential learning and through it at the same time improve their capacity for performing the praxis and thus their power of securing valued human ends and interests. Human praxises also generate new objects of knowledge and inquiry as well as new praxises, and new powers. The dynamics of human praxis also produces and maintains particular cultural-institutional-political patterns where certain truths are maintained while other possible truths are marginalized, made utopian and even non-intelligible as too far removed from and contradicting available experience.

Inquiry can instead be constructed as open dialogue and experimentation where people freely understand, judge, as well as accept and commit themselves to the most trustworthy construction, or claims are argumentatively sifted out, creatively integrated from the co-operative inquiry in so far as agreements and co-ordination are required in the specific situation. This is a form of non-coercive power and power building, “power-with” instead of “power-over” as Follett (1930) says. It is as well a conceptualization and praxis of truth from the point of view of a pragmatic-constructive orientation to inquiry; a truth praxis requiring participatory democratic infrastructures and active management as “management by freedom” in order to try to maintain “power-with” and avoid “power-over”. The comparative advantage of inclusive, dominance free and democratic inquiry praxis is important for its forcefulness in praxis. But history clearly shows that more Machiavellian inquiry praxis is quite workable. So, there is a need for a common faith (Dewey) and commitment to more Rousseauian forms of innovation and inquiry praxises. In the wording of Dewey, to the flourishing of social intelligence, which for him is identical with democracy. In this section, we will investigate further the rational basis for such a faith in using participatory democracy as a theory of science point of departure.

Also, power and authority is generated when organizational members efficiently can join forces in a smoothly running organizational practice and life; "authority, genuine authority, is the outcome of our common life. It does not come from separating people, from dividing them into two classes, those who command and those who obey. It comes from the intermingling of all, of my work fitting into yours and yours into mine, and from that intermingling of forces a power being created which controls those forces. Authority is a self-generating process...the process of control" Follett (1941, cited from Rowan, 1976: 76). Mary Parker Follett stressed "the law of the situation" as the key to non-coercive management as well as the only approach that actually works, even in hierarchical organizations. "One person should not give orders to another person, but both should agree to take their orders from the situation. If orders are simply part of the situation, the question of someone giving and someone receiving does not come up. Both accept the orders given by the situation (Follett, cited from Rowan, 1976: 185). It is a formulation of the influential Saint-Simonian motto "from the government of men to the administration of things" (Saint-Simon, 1975: 157ff). On the other hand, the understanding as well as construction of "the situation" and what it "demands" have to be co-ordinated and agreed on by the parties involved, something which lead us back to democratic dialogue as a basic medium of management. If the participants should accept the situational demands as "law", then no relevant experience and opinion can be unduly suppressed.

How connect the power discussion to the context of action research? We will achieve this by looking at the emergence of the dialogue democratic approach to action research in the context of the LOM programme.
**Low profiled dialogic action research role – the emergence of a dialogue democratic approach to action research in the LOM programme**

“LOM has implied that we really got things started which otherwise had been very difficult. It easily come about that we end up arguing with each other. We did not have anyone who could step in and say that now we shall start to discuss the problems and try to find a reasonable solution. Thus LOM has worked as a discussion leader” (Blue-collar union leader in a project).

Action research has a history going back to Kurt Lewin and his research group in the 1940s. Action research for Lewin was research on and for action, research to help practitioners. Participation was a focus of research but research was not fully participatory in itself. In the revival of action research in the end of the 1960s, the privileged position of the research in knowledge production was put in question. In the later part of 1970s, participatory action research was formulated, e.g. based on research by Orlando Fals Borda, in order to emphasize research as a collaborative task on equal basis between researchers and practitioners.

Apart from its strong participatory orientation, a peculiar feature of the Scandinavian tradition of organizational reform is the use of meta-organizational, often nationally anchored, public as well as corporatist reform programmes with the use of research as a reform resource. Action research in Swedish organizational and working life development was given a renaissance in the end of the 1980s, particularly in the launching of the LOM programme. We will consider some experience from one such programme, the LOM programme, and how the focus on “democratic dialogue” can be seen as a way of managing power.

The articulation and understanding of the action-research role was rather open and weakly developed in the LOM programme. The role should be "low profiled" with a particular focus on the participatory reform "process" and its organization leaving the generation of "content" more to the local actors. This role specification was mainly made to avoid the interference with content so as to avoid the danger of falling into a dominating expert consultant role of being one who ought to provide the "scientific" solutions to organizational problems.

What did "low profile" really mean? What does it take to avoid being a dominant expert? To be able to get the message across that the researcher is not an expert but just a "catalyst" or "facilitator" of the process is not sufficient. It only raises the polar issue of the dominant expert; what is the utility of the scientist in practical reform if he is not an expert in anything of relevance for the reform efforts? Furthermore, a workable researcher-practitioner dialogue must contain both good communication and good content, reform strategies must be both process- and design-oriented.

The vaguely defined "project co-ordinator" role, e.g. helping to arrange network conferences, seemed more like an administrator or consultancy role. The limited attention to the role may have been conditioned by the fact that participatory reform processes should not depend on individual persons, particularly not external researchers who should take a more back-stage role to those directly concerned. The hidden role of the action researcher may also be conditioned by positivist remnants; the view that knowledge is only something external, out there wholly independent of persons rather than inherent in masterful performance of human practices (e.g. Polanyi, 1964). This implies that research influences and distorts the picture and should be avoided. The researcher should be an observing fly on the wall not interfering with the research object so as not to endanger scientific objectivity, instead of a participant talking with research subjects and arriving at an
intersubjective understanding together with them. Scientific descriptions should be made in a passive tense as if it is “Objective Science” itself that is speaking, not the expression of a researcher’s informed, personal judgement and aphoristic knowledge significantly based on experience from practice.

Role knowledge is also closely intertwined with personal experience as well as is "soft" knowledge that may be difficult to articulate and sensitive to express, e.g. the atmosphere and role-playing in particular situations. Because of the rich learning in an action-research project, your initial practice may in hindsight seem rather naive. If you had only known what you know in hindsight, you could have avoided mistakes and acted more efficiently and forcefully in the action-research role. On the other hand, such experience shows that the researcher is a co-learner (Elden, 1979) indicating that significant insights, that is, concept and theory development, have been made which is well worth reflecting upon in order to make it explicit and clear (e.g. why did this meeting work very well but not the earlier one? Did I do something that helped to make the difference? How to conceptualize this experience? What does it say concerning the conditions of workability, the assumptions on which a workable practice is founded?) Furthermore, far from all welcome and embrace the researcher into their organizational life, due to a negative reaction to the presence (intrusion?) of the researcher. There is often hesitancy concerning what this stranger’s designs are, the point and utility of his presence, and uncertainty whose side he really is on. One of the first questions to the industrial democracy-oriented action researchers coming from employees in the Norwegian projects in the 1960s was; “are you the new axemen of management?” (Emery&Thorsrud, 1976: 37). Of course it is not sufficient to answer "no" to such a question. It requires the development of open, trustful relations often during a longer period of time. The nearly inevitable cultural clash between the academic culture and local work culture with quite different behaviour and standards of achievements often increases this difficulty. It also leads to difficulties developing a clear and stable role and role understanding, instead it tends to be schizophrenic.¹

This calls for efforts of clarification. To avoid confusion it is important to distinguish between the organization and management of the interaction, exchange and collaborative relations between researchers and organizational members, on the one hand, and the organization and management of innovation activities, processes and projects, on the other. In practice, they are in many cases intertwined, but for the clarity of roles and responsibilities it is appropriate to distinguish between them. Like other participants, the researcher has a share in the responsibility for the co-management and normative regulation of the relationship between researchers and practitioners and can take the lead in the discussion in areas where the researcher has particular knowledge or concern. As the relation is one of collaborating equals, not a serving consultant or a "traditional" scientist only focused on getting a chance to apply and test theories from research or collect data, democratic dialogue is an appropriate specification of the ground rules of the exchange (van Beinum, 1993). As nearly all practitioners have no experience of research collaboration and easily impute the role of the researcher as one of consultancy or as superior scientific expertise to obey and be researched on (or sometimes ivory-tower intellectuals with little sense for the practical), the researcher has a special responsibility for the management of the relationship and taking the lead in establishing and communicating an appropriate role relationship and role expectations.

¹For example, in one reform project in the LOM programme there were reactions to honoured academic behaviour.; the writing of a scientific article about the project and presenting it at an international conference. The practical utility of incomprehensible articles about everyday changes in the workplace presented at fine conference in exotic places is of course hard to see from the perspective of workshop workers who would never afford such luxury. On the other hand, the most severe and general critique of action-research is that it too much cared about the reform action and neglected the research task. Often the academic contribution is rather uninteresting case studies with limited reflective and theoretical significance.
At the outset, the researchers and the organizational members have somewhat different interests and involvement as well as quite different types of practices (Schmid, 1982). The researchers want to generate experience and learning in relation to research issues, while the organizational members want primarily to achieve reform effects in relation to company goals, policies and strategies. There is a need to find a common ground for the collaborative relationship as a relation of complementarity and mutual enrichment, a dialogic relation where both parties have something to contribute and something to learn, which is the precondition for action research as "the mutual enrichment of social science and the practical affairs of man" (Emery, 1976). The basis of the complementary relationship in the LOM programme was that the researchers wanted to gather and develop knowledge concerning conditions, strategies and methods of participatory innovation, while organizational members wanted to pursue change and innovation in an efficient and effective way. The organizational members could be informed by the strategic and methodological suggestions of the researchers, while the latter could generate experience on the workability of practices and procedures as a basis for conceptual and theoretical reflection. There was also a sharing in one another’s interests. The learning about workability conditions was also of interest for organizational members. The reform results were an indication of workability for the researchers, reform results which for research with any practical intent, especially action research which its originator Lewin conceived as "research to help practitioners" (Lewin, 1946), is also a value in itself. The research aspects of action research are furthered by the assumption that the researcher through helping the practitioners also helps himself (as well as the other way around). The relation and collaboration can be fruitfully perceived as between different professions that can mutually enrich, help and complement each other.

Although the researcher has a responsibility for the co-management of the research-organization interaction and collaboration, and even has a special responsibility in this area, he/she should not co-manage the reform activities and projects in the organization. The overall management and leadership of the organizational reform processes and projects must be in the hands of the local actors with the researcher in a more "supportive" role. The supportive role of the researcher is as a baseline as an equal discussion partner as well as resource person (among all other resourceful persons) with complementary knowledge to draw on when appropriate in the reform discussions. A primary discussion partner for research is the central project group, where the researcher can be seen as an additional associated participant at the strategy forum discussions. But the researcher can participate in the same way in basically any forum where the reform issues and activities are discussed in the company.

In this discussion the researcher, like any other participant, can (and should!) make suggestions, express experiences and opinions on innovation issues and activities that he judges as fitting and useful based on his competence (which is not detrimental for but instead also furthering the dialogic relationship. This implies that it may be best in some discussions that the researcher keeps quiet and just listens in or does not participate at all), inputs which in the dialogic process are reviewed and integrated with other inputs in the understandings and agreements generated. In his general role of discussion partner and resource person, he can assume many particular roles as called for in different

2This may in practice be a precarious balancing act between doing too much and doing too little, to avoid the sins of commission as well as omission as Hans van Beinum (1993) say. By doing too little the researcher withholds his knowledge, implying that he is not fully authentic as well as may decrease the potential reform efficiency. By doing too much he may shortcut the learning processes by falling into the role of a dominant expert or to take too much of the managing responsibility detrimental for local ownership, energy, understanding and commitment (alternatively a know-it-all or demoralizing truth sayer and critic destructive of the political processes of reconciling interests). The unclarity concerning the action-research role in the LOM programme, the limited experience of it, the uncertain meaning of keeping a "low profile" and the focus on process instead of content in order to avoid expert dominance implied that the action-research activity had a leaning towards too little support of the generation of content. It is both a matter of not being trapped by the role imputations of others as well as to construct and communicate a clear research role.
situations, e.g. interested listener, gatekeeper, advocate (including the devil’s), evaluator and critic, creative thinker, mediator, umpire or, agent. If appropriate, useful and needed, the researcher can, on the commission of involved organization members and researchers, in some cases assume certain temporary management tasks and roles in the discussions, e.g. as secretary, chairman, invitation, forum arrangement, follow up.

In the discussion (or in his particular management role), the researcher has a special leadership responsibility to assume. As a carrier of competence in the form of theory and practice of organizational reform, a crucial researcher task is to communicate this reform competence in appropriate and efficient ways. This is also constitutive for the collaborative relationship and the legitimization of the intrusion of the researcher in the life of the organization in order to learn from their reform experiences. A background for the concept of action research is that talks and writings are insufficient for communication of learning in the area of human knowledge. It is a matter of practical not only positive knowledge. It has similarities to the balancing act of bike riding rather than perceiving a stable, positive pattern or structure. No amount of positive knowledge about biking can result in mastering biking. Theories are at best reminders, pedagogical devices that help to point out what to think about and to focus attention on in the practicing (Wittgenstein, Rorty, Janik). Thus communication of learning must involve inspiring and encouraging people to try out new ways of thinking and doing. To “dare to be wise” as the Enlightenment motto says which also involves the risk of falling off the bike; to decide, in consideration of the risks as well as the potential achievements, for oneself as well as in collaboration with peers to daringly pursue the search and trial into the unknown. To experience its preliminary workability (the wobbly bike ride, or the unsteady walk without leading-strings which was Kant’s metaphor), and through sufficient courage and determination (and maybe some leading-strings in the form of guiding rules, catchwords, the example of others, training grounds, mutual inspiration and support of colleagues, a guiding hand) successively learn skills, insights and mastery through the balancing act of practicing it.

The researcher through his actions and practice (verbal as well as others) communicates his organizational reform knowledge as well as encouraging others to pick it up. Already by being a participant in the dialogues, research cannot avoid communicating role cues and tempering different role understandings and role takings, e.g. by asking for the views of the silent (maybe shopfloor workers who are less talkative and intimated by more authoritative voices) and trying to integrate their experience and opinion in the discussion. Communication is also a matter of finding settings and creating situations where organizational members can learn for themselves through practice. One element of the new settings which organizational members are confronted with is the researchers themselves and their curious behaviour (e.g. using strange words like “democratic dialogue” and “network”, talking with everyone in in the same way seemingly unbothered by ranks and status, treating bickering from shop floor workers as worthy of consideration, having the guts to question whether if the ways things always have been done here cannot be done in other ways), something which they have to learn to deal with and in the process maybe learn something about organizational reform (or kick out the researcher!). A particular setting is the dialogue conference, which from this perspective is conceived as a training ground for dialogue-democratic organizational reform practices and work forms. Often participants take with them not only their project ideas and action plans but also the practical experience of interaction and dialogue on equal terms transcending different boundaries and rehearsing the balancing act back home.

A manager saw this clearly as well as the hesitance to abandon organizational practices where one has achieved mastery; “A routine, a way of working or a behaviour maybe practiced during many years, is not so easily abandoned. We all also have difficulties to see how a change may come to work before it is applied. The LOM project has here its great significance in giving us impulses to dare to try out new ways of working.” (The regional manager)
At the same time, the LOM programme functioned as a training ground for a new generation of action researchers, which implied that there was often an uncertainty what a democratic-dialogue approach meant in terms of the concrete actions and practice of the action researchers. One important aspect is that the research action does not take a point of departure in analysis of organizational conditions and develops specified plans generated from the researchers theoretical understanding, but listens to the organizational members, how they formulate their concern, helps them clarify their experiences as to how things work (or do not work) in the organization, and sees where something from scientific theory and research on the emerging organizational map could be added, its formulation as well as transformation into project ideas and plans. That is, the research role is not in the first instance focused on management and leadership but on the aid of articulation and reconstruction of local organizational knowledge. This is what Elden&Levin (1991) call a co-generative and co-learning dialogue.

As well as other commentators on the idea of democratic dialogue, Elden&Levin tend to see the concept primarily as an ideal of dialogue, which is in opposition to and removed from the realities of communicative practices in today’s organizations with their power inequalities. Is it not naive utopianism to believe that something worth the name "democratic dialogue" can really be achieved? Furthermore, the researchers have a "model power" based on their scientific competence. The acknowledgement of the inequality of power among parties in a dialogue and its influence on its processes and outcome is of course important. But if this is perceived as a generally more preferable, realistic model than the "idealistic" dialogue-democratic model that seems to neglect the issue of power differences it is confusing the issue. It tends to miss the point of the concept of democratic dialogue, as well as the normative basis of social praxis. Instead of seeing democratic dialogue only as a possible formulation of an ideal to be striven for, it is also a necessary normative regulation of the dialogue in order that the participant can conceive it as impartial and fair (Habermas, 1992). This regulative ideal must be sufficiently operative for participants to judge it as not unduly favouring particular interests instead of being oriented towards common organizational interests and an “objective” inquiry into the truth. The basic point is then not the unequal powers of the participants but how it is legitimately used. Although the researcher has superior model power, he cannot use this model power without the consent of the other parties involved without also risking the dialogic relation. On the other hand, if it is authorized in the dialogue, it is quite possible to put the different powers of the participants to use and thus in unequal degrees determine the outcome. Power is also in an important respect generated through the dialogue in the joining of powers concerning common goals. This also points to the problem of defining participation in a Machiavellian sense with regards to degree of influence as it tends to (positivistically, I tend to say) veil the normative character of practice, also participatory and dialogic versions.

The low-profiled research support role in the LOM programme particularly focused on communication and interaction support, that is, to further the reform dialogue through creating good fora of discussion which allow broad participation of those concerned and the opening up and broadening of the discussion on alternatives (the freedom of improvement) through network exchange. From this perspective, the action-research specification in the LOM programme as a "project co-ordinator" is in the first instance focused on communicative co-ordination of reform discussions, processes and activities in order to further interaction and scope, and avoid fragmentation and contraction.

This action-research practice can be articulated on an epistemological level in terms of the relation between local theory, general theory and generative theory. Organizational design was originally perceived as a matter of application of general theory in specific cases. The concept of local theory originally introduced to describe the translated and specified local variant of general theory (Engelstad, 1980), later achieved a more independent status as an articulation of the considerable
knowledge inherent in workable organizational practices that no general theory could fully grasp. This caused a successive shift towards the reconstruction of local theory with inputs of pieces from general theory (pieces of knowledge with a wider use). The reconstruction of local theory involves both processes of learning to master new organizational practices as well as political processes for their legitimization. An example is a project in a storage department in the LOM programme, where group organization was on the agenda. It could have triggered the use of sociotechnical theory for designing autonomous work groups as was a focus in the first phase of research supported working life development projects in Norway and Sweden. If the researchers in the Järnia project had pushed for reorganization of the storage area as regards autonomous work groups, based on an expert and scientific authority of assumed superior knowledge, it would have been a case of neglecting and/or shortcutting both the political processes of harmonizing interests and reaching agreements on organizational designs and the learning processes through which to gain mastery in terms of skills and insight of new organizational practices. Instead, the point of departure was the local theory of how things worked or did not work in the storage area, and the efforts to improve on its workability based on concerns and ideas anchored in the local context. That is, the reconstruction of local theory. The local actors were not ready for the introduction of autonomous work groups in the storage area but the project helped to pave the way for it through the processes of discussion and reform.

The scientific work is particularly focusing on generative theory, generative ability and mechanisms, i.e., strategies, methods and work forms for achieving good processes of reform through which solutions to organizational problems can be generated. In the unfolding of the Scandinavian organizational reform efforts, it has successively been recognized that the communication and discussion among those concerned and involved is a critical parameter in reform both in terms of learning and legitimization (Björk, 1976, Engelstad, 1980, Gustavsen, 1985). A basic assumption of the approach in the LOM programme (as part of the generative theory) was that dialogue-democratic practices are conducive for a good reform process, both in a political sense and one of learning. Through his actions trying to further dialogue democratic practices, the action researcher (as well as other actors) both applies, tests and develops this assumption, as well as related ones in the approach, successively leading to a more refined, skilled and insightful reform practice in terms of conceptualizations and work forms.

**Conclusions**

The paper has focused on the role of power in action research and the way action researcher can understand and deal with the issue of power in collaborative relations and projects. One important issue is that truth and knowledge is not only opposite to power, but powers themselves, that have to be dealt with in an appropriate way. The strategy of avoiding issues of power risks constructing a research role which is too much laissez-faire in managing relations or hiding the issue of the power of the researcher. The paper tries to show the way a dialogue democratic approach to action research can fruitfully deal with issues of power and its management in action research and participatory research oriented collaborations and projects.

**References**


