

Organisational Boundary Work and AR inside and outside Higher Education

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In 2008, an assistant head of preschool in a municipality in Sweden approached my university to enquire about courses in AR. She intended to introduce AR as a means of organisational learning in preschools throughout her municipality. There were no courses on offer but I was about to wrap up my doctoral thesis, which was rooted in (feminist) action research as a methodology. An emphatic dialogue on course design ensued, and in September 2009, a one- year part-time AR course started with initially thirty participants. Many challenges needed addressing. For one, the limiting context of higher education with its traditional stance on course work and modes of examination posed problems that called for pragmatic solutions that would still honour the participatory spirit of AR. Furthermore, I wanted to pay close attention to ethical and epistemological issues by incorporating these in the course syllabus and subject matter for AR. Also, my role as a teacher in HE needed continuous de- dramatising so that the participants would be able to trust me. Prior to the AR course, most of the participants had been made project leaders by said assistant head, in order to implement systematic quality control in their respective organisations. There were considerable expectations of what this course could do to enhance organisational development in their respective organisational settings. Some otherwise questionable aspects could be successfully handled, such as granting an academic outsider partial power over a course in HE, stretching academic boundaries and thereby trying the patience of my superiors, as well as emphasising learning processes rather than learning outcomes for a certain course module. I will illustrate sometimes controversial aspects of a course in AR in HE, give examples of participants' well-documented learning experiences, and their concrete organisational AR projects outside the AR course, and how such projects and learning experiences can feed back into an AR course. In conclusion, the necessity of organisational boundary work, both inside and outside HE, will be addressed, and some theoretical perspectives, such as feminist pragmatism, will be suggested for further discussion of an AR course in an HE setting.

Keywords: AR, Higher Education, Organisational Development, Learning Processes, Feminist Pragmatism

I. INTRODUCTION: ORGANISATIONAL BOUNDARY WORK AND AR INSIDE AND OUTSIDE HIGHER EDUCATION

The purpose of this article is to present some of the organisational boundary work, and learning, that has taken place in connection with a course in Action Research at my university. The action research that took place addresses issues of knowledge processes in organisations and collaboration between HE and other organisation., which is analysed in light of some theories of organisational learning and development as well as from a feminist pragmatist perspective in knowledge and higher education.

It is important to view me/HE and the mature students' backgrounds in light of the different organisations we belong to. The difficulties that can arise in connection with aspirations of knowledge sharing across organisational boundaries are empirically presented and subsequently discussed and to some extent analysed in the light of theories of learning (in organisations). I will discuss higher education's

possible new roles in today's information society, which I deliberately choose not to term knowledge society (cf Delanty, 2001). Knowledge, as I will argue, is not to be confused with information sound bites, quick-fix solutions, and traditional assumptions as to what counts for knowledge within or outside HE (cf. Barnett, 2003; Couturier, Newman, and Scurry, 2004; Griffiths, 1998). In conclusion, I will elaborate on the necessity of organisational boundary work as a means of reconstructing teaching and research HE in general, and educational as well as professional practices, regardless of their location, in particular. I will also share my thoughts on where the action is (Elliott, 2007) and, lastly, what research may be in the context of action research (Gillberg, 2009).

A. Organisational Setting 1: Higher Education

Universities have no easy time identifying what their mission and task is today (Barnett, 1990, 2003; Delanty, 2001; Morley & Walsh, 1995).

At a first superficial glance the purpose of HE and universities appears to be straightforward enough: (1) Research, (2) Education at undergraduate and postgraduate level, and (3) Collaboration with the so-called surrounding society (Percy, Zimpher, Burkardt, 2006).

As a researcher in education, specialising in the fields of adult learning, and organisational and professional development, I have a profound interest in understanding my own organisational setting (HE), the organisational settings of adult learners (who will often have full-time or part-time jobs while attending HE courses), as well as the organisational boundary work that is required in order to contribute to a better understanding of collaborative projects as is briefly described under point (3). This type of ollaboration is sometimes referred to as community learning, community development, professional development, or any other number of things, depending on the country and more specific contexts of any given university (cf. Percy, Zimpher, and Brukardt 2006). Moreover, there is the significant issue of academic discipline, which determines the missions and tasks relevant to that specific discipline and in relation to the overall mission and tasks of "the University" (Barnett, 2003; Becher & Trowler, 2001; Lindberg, 2004; Schuller, 1991). This is also the point where higher education and universities become complicated issues to grapple as the complexity and the ever-shifting identity of universities. It seems there are too many purposes, political agendas and personal as well as departmental views, encompassing colliding ideas and notions. This need not necessarily be negative, as it could also be seen as proof of the diversity in perspectives and activities at universities.

In this paper, HE is discussed in connection with the social sciences (Nowotny, Scott, and Gibbons, 2004), and in particular the subject of education in the context of the Swedish Higher Education System (Lindberg, 2004). Action Research is regarded as the methodological tool with which to aspire to organisational change (McNiff and Whitehead, 2000) inside and outside HR. It is a way of doing research on professional settings, while being in these settings and engaging in certain teaching practices. It is also a tool for intentional change, and ongoing knowledge building. This article's theoretical and philosophical underpinning is pragmatism, and feminist pragmatism, in particular, where knowledge building is considered essential to democratic societies (Addams, 2009; Dewey, 1927).

B. Organisational setting(s) 2: preschools and municipalities

Swedish municipalities offer their inhabitants services such as childcare, education, homes and professional care for the elderly, medical care, rubbish disposal, clean water supply etc. Preschools and schools operate on municipal budgets that are determined by the government's budgetary distribution system to all municipalities. Preschools and schools are subject to government educational policies as well as local syllabi and policy. In 1998, Swedish preschools received their own national curriculum, where a number of pedagogical goals are laid down, such as the extent of the reading and writing skills that are expected from preschool children (Gillberg, 2009). If preschool teachers are driven by a professional ambition to be up to scratch on such points, they will invariably need time and other resources in order to develop preschool towards the desired goals, and in line with educational policy. The issue is, of course,

that preschools teachers shall act in concordance with Swedish school law, and specifically, the Swedish national curriculum for preschools. Now, municipal bureaucrats and administrators are mainly concerned with the allocation of budgets to the many different professional organisations within a municipality. They usually do not interfere with the various organisations' inner-organisational structures and content, unless there are government quality audits. In the case of preschools and schools, quality audits will be conducted in relation to how well municipal preschools and schools succeed in following national curriculum. If the government-sent quality auditors discover shortcomings in how preschools translate policy into their professional practice, there will be reprimands and follow-up quality audits. If a certain preschool or school still fails to show compliance with government policy and curriculum serious consequences will ensue for the municipality. Among other things, these may include serious budget cuts. For obvious reasons, municipalities wish to avoid performing poorly in quality audits. However, it is also clear that preschool teachers' agendas in many ways differ from the concerns of the overarching municipal organisation, because the two operate on fundamentally different rationalities. The municipality will usually respect the professional preschool teachers' autonomy in determining how preschool's "inner" practices should be designed, as long as this does not entail overspending. The issue here is, however, that's preschool teacher is a women- dominated profession (Witz, 1992), and studies have shown that this profession is underprivileged in relation to other more gender neutral or male-coded professions in one and the same municipality (Gillberg, 2009). Their budget on which they have to offer adequate childcare and early child education is in some cases limiting to the extreme. Some preschools' budgets are sometimes used up as early as April, which is a serious problem.

II. THEORIES OF LEARNING IN ORGANISATIONS WITH A FOCUS ON HE

One point of departure in this text is my contention that the "mass of bureaucratic details involved in quality procedures threatens to submerge critical thinking." (Morley, 2003, p.115). While Morley aims her critique towards higher education, one could reasonably claim that this is true of all organisational and professional settings today. Theories of learning that explicitly point towards critical thinking as both a prerequisite and reason for, characteristic of, and an outcome of learning are the focal point of my interest here. Critical thinking, then, is embedded in the theories of learning and democracies posited by Addams (2009), Dewey (1927), Gherardi (2006), and McNiff & Whitehead (2000), whose theories and research studies form the theoretical and analytical underpinning of this article.

Addams (2009) and Dewey (1927) posit learning theories that are inherently advocating no less than the continuous building of democratic communities, regardless of specific organisational contexts. Benson, Harkavy, and Pucket (2007) highlight the role of universities in terms of community engagement and collaboration. Collaboration is not to be confused with mere knowledge transferral or the spreading of research results in popular science magazines. Communities are understood here in terms of professional, educational, and social practices in which there exist shared concerns that require solving. Most importantly, however, this is to be understood as a challenge for universities to consider and identify the modes of learning on offer in relation to those who wish to engage in academic studies for other reasons than becoming marketable and employable (Delanty, 2003; Levin and Greenwood, 2008). There are students with sometimes years of work experience who aspire not only to a better grasp of their professional organisation, but whose driving force is to initiate organisational change (cf. McNiff and Whitehead, 2000). This calls for modes of learning and indeed collaborating on the university's part, that can be described as facilitating and is highly critical of notions of knowledge as a ready-made consumer good (Levin & Greenwood, 2008). Learning theories in higher education emerge on the basis of the underlying understanding of what knowledge is and will be needed for. Educational research may be regarded as a stakeholder here, if the academic discipline of "Pedagogik" (cf. Lindberg, 2002) is more than just a fleeting phenomenon of the 20th century, as discussed by Lindberg. Biesta and Burbules (2007) hold that the discipline cannot determine how things should be taught, and educational research should not be regarded as prescriptive but rather descriptive of specific learning and teaching situations in particular

settings. This requires process-oriented modes for teaching and learning, and a willingness to practice transactional knowledge building, which ultimately will transform practices. Dewey holds that ongoing knowledge building processes are nothing but practiced democracy, where multi-perspective, approaches and problem solving were key to the very reason for knowledge building (cf. Benson, Harkavy, and Pucket, 2007).

Gherardi (2006) follows a line of argument that ultimately dismisses notions of knowledge as a product to be consumed or made to fit all, but dictated by a few (see also Minnich, 2005), which is essentially a pragmatist understanding of knowledge. Moreover, it is an understanding that is critical of hegemonic approaches to knowledge, which systematically advocate knowledge production that is considered useful by those who already are in positions of power. This will put other forms of knowledge at a disadvantage, which in its turn may have implications for how funding and money is distributed to organisations and professional settings by those in power. A yet more serious issue is that it will systematically devalue those organisations that are not part of the preconceived "important knowledge production", and that traditionally speaking have not had a say in how funding ought to be distributed (cf. Griffiths, 1998).

McNiff and Whitehead (2000) discuss learning and knowledge as an ongoing process that facilitates critical thinking on the basis of the methodology of action research. Their interest focuses on management and leadership issues in order for an entire organisation to be a dynamic place for learning. Radical methodologies are presented that

focus on which kind of teaching methodologies encourage learners to reframe questions in a way that will make what is learnt meaningful and relevant to their own experience. This work focuses on radical or critical pedagogies, and in adult education the development of critical thinking."

(McNiff and Whitehead, 2000, p. 49¹).

McNiff & Whithead caution, however, that critical thinking cannot simply be done by challenging learners to question everything they have known so far, or have acquired in terms of knowledge as they know it. Instead, they maintain that there are "significant dilemmas in their implementation in organisational contexts. Teaching for critical understanding raises issues of democracy, social justice, entitlement and rational thinking" (McNiff and Whithead, 2000, p. 49). The issue of questioning givens is all very well, but what happens when students question their teachers, or the same students, who are practitioners in various organisations beside their studies, start questioning their organisation on the basis of the teachings on organisational change? McNiff and Whitehead maintain, "It takes real courage on the part of teachers and managers to invite critique of their own practice." (p. 49 ff). It also takes courage to turn this critique into a meaningful tool for not only academic change but change in organisations in general (Gherardi, 2006; Morley and Walsh, 1995). Often, academics do not have secure positions from which to promote organisational change. If a dean decides that a certain course is not worth offering, there is only this much even the most committed lecturer can do. If the position of the academic is junior, or not recognised by older colleagues, there is not a lot of room for change at staff meetings, steering committees, etc. So, lecturers and researchers do not necessarily have a lot of pull when it comes to changing their own workplaces, which poses problems as the starting point for offering an action research course, where there is an agenda of a) facilitating learning for students who want organizational change in their respective professional settings, b) doing research on teaching, learning and organisational development, with the course as the focal "action" taken by the teacher/researcher, and c) collaborative, process-oriented knowledge building processes that critically question organisational practices *both within and outside HE*.

At this point, I would like to share my thoughts on feminist pragmatism, a school of thought that goes back to the late 19th century, when Jane Addams (2009) and other socially engaged women (cf. Fischer et

¹ McNiff & Whitehead refer to a number of other authors in this quotation, all of whom can be found on p. 49.

al, 2009) made their inroads into the academy and public sphere in general. Universities and other higher education institutions traditionally bestowed professional rights and privileges to professions such as the law and medicine, thereby effectively barring persons who were said to distract the entitled student body from rigorous study. This is now fast changing, in part owing to the formerly excluded and undesired students' rather successful struggle for access and rights (Morley 2003). It took years, however, before their contributions would be acknowledged, or be anywhere near what Smith (2005) refers to as "dominant forms of knowledge." In the gendered, intellectual void of about one hundred years ago, two principles are said to have been particularly attractive to women who were not used to public and intellectual participation in society (Seigfried 2002, Whipps 2004).

1. The principle that theory is generated from experience and is accountable to practice
2. The principle that "the purpose of inquiry into experience was not to replicate it, but to interrogate problematic situations in order to satisfactorily resolve them." (Seigfried 2002, p. 51)

Many women, who wanted to make their mark in academia and other areas of the public sphere, identified this not only as an endorsement of their own experience but as a necessary starting point for reflection and action (Whipps 2004).

Recognised knowledge and professional autonomy in fields such as nursing and childcare (Dahle 2008) are still issues that feminists grapple with today. The gendered knowledge dimension in women-dominated professions, and the organisations in which they exist (Acker 2006) are quite visible: the younger the children or the older the persons at the receiving end of specific professional practices, the lower the status of those professions, e.g. preschool teacher. The three most important points of what I have just discussed here are

1. Higher education and its history is partially responsible for the historical gendering of knowledge, and for hindering women for the longest time to contribute to any recognised, dominant forms of knowledge
2. Social activism was one way of engaging with society one hundred years ago, and women made considerable contributions to social progress and change, in spite the fact that universities were closed to them initially
3. A gendered knowledge hierarchy is in evidence, which feminist pragmatists and feminist action researchers alike seek to overcome in various ways, e.g. by acknowledging the knowledge in nursing, childcare and other areas that historically are coded female and therefore regarded as inferior

In light of the gendering of knowledge, finding new ways of doing research and knowledge building in organisations for social and organisational development seems to be a reasonable project. Again, this is now extremely difficult in an age of "radical transformation" of the university as Levin and Greenwood (2008) illustrate.

Quality procedures and the bureaucracy to support them are discernible in every single organisation, not least educational settings from preschool to higher education (Morley, 2003). According to rhetoric this somehow implies that if only policy were followed, predetermined outcomes are guaranteed (Benson, Harkavy, and Pucket, 2007; Percy, Zimpher, and Brukardt, 2007). As learning is not something comparable to ingesting food (cf. Gherardi, 2006, p. 2 ff), neither policy nor research can guarantee certain outcomes, especially not as an indicator of quality in organisations, as also Biesta and Burbules (2007) point out in their interpretation of Dewey's transactional learning theory.

Prior to the course in action research, my own hypothesis was that where there is radical transformation, there are likely to be openings for alternative ways of teaching and doing research. Transformation usually does not take only one direction, and there should scope for action to

counterbalance narrow discourses of quality, excellence and the separation of teaching and knowledge (cf. Levin and Greenwood, 2008).

III. AR AS METHODOLOGY AND CATALYST FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND SOME EMPIRICAL EXAMPLES

Under this heading, I will interweave empirical examples and my approach to AR both as taught by me at university, and on the basis of my earlier AR experience in various organisational settings (Gillberg, 2009). I will first present some background facts on the emergence of the course, which was mainly owing to the initiative of one assistant principal for preschool in one of the municipalities, the design of the course, teaching and ways of complying both with academic credit standards as well as respecting AR's principles of participation and process-oriented learning.

4. The course

When I was first asked to design a course in action research, mainly for project leaders in preschools from one specific municipality in Southern Sweden, I thought that teaching action research within an academic system would basically be undoable if the ambition was to teach more or less in action research as opposed to on action research. Furthermore, if there are aspirations for learning processes both inside and outside HE during such a course, there were only vague ideas on how to achieve this.

In addition to my concerns regarding the academic setting of the course, there was the explicit ambition to achieve some "improved quality" in various preschool settings in the aforementioned municipality, as was explained to me by the assistant principal at several meetings prior to developing the course in Action Research in preschool. To complicate things further, the course was originally planned as a project in only one municipality with its own specific ideas of quality and organisational learning and development. In the end, the course became open for anyone eligible to enrol, which meant that participants from altogether five different municipal settings met in class, with greatly varying starting points, expectations, and, more importantly, huge differences in terms of support on the part of their respective municipal employers. For some participants it was difficult to make time for the course, which was given at 25% of a full-time course, i.e. only a few hours per semester (5 months) where physical attendance was obligatory. Other participants received extra payment for their efforts and were openly encouraged by their employers. Paradoxically enough, the difference in attitude towards course participation on part of the employer was manifest in one and the same municipality, which was confusing and sometimes downright upsetting for the participants.

The course was placed at undergraduate level with an introductory whole day in early September 2009 and a last meeting in May 2010. In between, there were two further whole- day meetings (January and April 2010). The latter took place in the municipality who had initially intended to assign me a collaborative "tailor-made" development project within the municipality.

In addition to this, the preschool teachers were assisted by the assistant principal who herself was in charge of a development project with other superiors and some politicians in her municipality.

The digital distance-learning platform FirstClass proved to be an indispensable part of the course for most of the participants, although there were some who could never quite overcome their unease for digital learning. For those who did engage, it did open up a lot of learning space that they admitted they had no idea existed. There were many exchanges both in the open forum of the course, as well as one-on-one communication and group meetings. Also, there was a digital map in which we put recommendations as to literature and articles that we found of interest.

In November 2009, I also started a facebook group called Research by (F)AR, encouraging my students to sign up if they wanted to meet other action researchers, both from Sweden, Norway, the UK, Australia

etc. It is not a large group, but I thought it may serve as yet another offer for participation, collaboration, knowledge sharing, and working across organisational borders.

B. Organisational contexts and situations

When speaking of organisational boundary work, it is important to understand the organisational settings in which change projects are located to be able to grasp the scope of action participants feel they have for change projects (cf. Acker, 2006; Dahle, 2008). In this case, an undergraduate university course in and on action research that originally was intended to be carried out as a collaborative project, i.e. within the framework of universities' "third mission" or "collaboration with society" task (cf. Percy, Zimpher, Burkardt, 2006). As a "tailor made" collaborative project for exclusively one municipality was not feasible owing to the municipalities' lacking resources, the assistant principal and I together thought up the action research course in order to circumnavigate the problem of the low municipal budget. Now every participant in the municipality's quality development project was asked to apply for the course on an individual basis, which meant that some of the prospective students were not eligible for university studies. They received notifications saying that they could not enrol for this course as their merits were lacking. As I knew who these prospective students were, I had inserted exemption rules in the course syllabus, stating that eligibility would be granted if there was proof of a minimum of two years of work experience, ideally in school or preschool, alternately, enrolment in the teacher education programme and near graduation.

I was not entirely comfortable about this, as this meant that all responsibility was placed on the prospective participants and myself in terms of negotiating bureaucratic restrictions, and, in fact, entirely justified eligibility rules, while the municipality who would be at the receiving end, did not make any effort to contribute to any of this (and they could not have, once they had refrained from paying for collaboration within the provision of the collaborative task between university and other organisations; yet they would still benefit from the course being held and attended by some of their employees).

As the context for "formal" learning was now entirely limited to the university, and with expectations from the municipality still high as to what this learning could achieve, I had put myself into a difficult position, which I was aware of from the very outset. An experienced action research colleague and I did discuss the framework for the course and some of the ethical implications that could arise in the tension between all the widely differing expectations and bureaucratic requirements, and felt some reassurance as to my own thoughts, plans for the course and approach to the enterprise.

C. Catalytic confusion

When the course started in early September, a whole day was scheduled for introductory lectures on action research, and an array of action-research projects, mainly in preschool. The latter was done to enable the preschool teachers to relate to their own professional settings and to give them an idea of what other preschool teachers had found interesting to think about, discuss, and eventually change (cf. Gillberg, 2009). There was, however, considerable confusion, when explaining in greater detail about action research, its history, and its collaborative take on learning and knowledge (cf. Reason and Bradbury et al, 2008).

Although the preschool teachers had been asked to do some basic reading up on action research (this was done by way of the customary welcome letter all students at Swedish universities will receive along with the notification of acceptance to a university course or programme), there was confusion as to the nature of the course work. "So, you will not give us assignments, and there are no deadlines when to submit papers?" participants would ask. Despite my being very clear on that point – no predetermined assignments by me, and no prefixed dates for submissions of any kind of course work – this question would be asked over and over again. I realised rather quickly that the distance-learning platform FirstClass – it could really have been any platform – was indispensable in terms of communicating the same message time and again. The sheer fact of there were no predetermined tasks was unsettling for most participants. So I made the confusion around this part of my teaching in the distance-learning platform. I used the chat function, group conversations, and one-on-one communication with some of the participants (not everyone

would log in during the initial weeks). Postings in FirstClass from participants were very important for the course's development and the overall dynamics. FirstClass was regarded as extremely important by all the participants as my continuous evaluations showed.

Regarding expectations and the confusion that followed when they were not met, one participant wrote in the week following our first one-day seminar on action research

This course is not at all what I had expected. I can't say I really understand what is going on there. No assignments? Gosh, my expectations of this course certainly went down the toilet.

When I asked the participant if she was disappointed about our whole-day seminar, or if she found any of the information on action research lacking or in any other way difficult to understand, she replied that while she was not the least bit disappointed but rather looking forward to where this would be going, she could not say she understood any of it "just now". It was just too much "out there", especially with regard to her previous experience of university courses.

Other participants wanted to embrace the course's intention from the outset, but then their situation was different from others owing to previous experience of change projects and action research classes at another university.

I think it is marvellous to integrate what I'm doing at work with the course's intention to focus processes of change. This suits my colleagues and me perfectly. We have plenty of ideas about what we should concentrate on.

Yet another one wrote in one of her logs that

It takes time to find one's feet but I cannot even begin to describe how relieved I am to be able to deal with what I should be doing. I don't really know where everything fits in yet, but I'll find out.

I myself was not all too clear about where this course would be going, and so I tried to regard it as the ongoing process that is so well described by pragmatists (Addams, 2009; Biesta and Burbules, 2007; Dewey, 1927; Minnich, 2005; Seigfried, 2002). It had never been done before and I had no previous experience other than my action research study that resulted in a doctoral thesis. Yet, I was very aware of some principles, based on the methodology of action research (Griffiths, 1998; Herr and Anderson, 2005; McNiff and Whitehead, 2000). My key ambition was to offer and facilitate process-based participation. My earlier experience had taught me not to expect too much too fast, and especially, not the same, from each and every course participant. It takes time and considerable commitment to acknowledge 29 participants, and their sometimes very different work situations, tasks and possibilities to participate.

For this reason, I had to be careful with what I said to whom in the distance-learning platform. There was access for all participants to general information, where I would sometimes recommend additional reading and web links, not least to ALARA and Bob Dick's online classes and thoughts on participation (www.alara.au). Also, I would give more general advice on the principles inherent in action research. Furthermore, I would issue reassurances to participants when they expressed feelings of insecurity and frustration. The latter was often the case when they thought that their colleagues did not engage properly in their respective change projects.

There was one incident, however, when I came to realise that my choice of seemingly harmless words could spark a flood of confused comments and trigger reactions that indicated levels of distress I would not have thought possible. Months into the course, when I had explained many times over what the course work would be, namely to document one's own ongoing projects, something which had to be done in any case, I happened to mention the term "report" in connection with the course work that we all had thoroughly discussed and agreed on some time in early November 2009. Reactions included

Now I feel horrible. You said we don't need to do an assignment in the traditional sense, but now there's a report we're supposed to write!!! I don't see how I'd manage that on top of the workload I'm already having in my action research group at work. What do you mean????

Another participant said that

I don't know what a report is. I'll do my best if you explain but I really have no idea. Can anyone explain, please?

I was certain I had used the term report from the very outset. I was also convinced that I had been adamant that the course would be an integral part to the preschool teachers' ongoing projects of which they were project managers and leaders, who would have to write up some sort of report to their municipal employers anyway. I had, e.g. pointed out that

As you will need to write up some kind of report for your municipal employers anyway, you may as well use it for the course work too. All you'd have to do is to explicate on some details that are more course-related and would add to our shared knowledge about action research as such. Use your own thoughts on action research, now that you've had some experience. It is always nice to have a bit of background knowledge, and your employers may be interested in learning more about this. So, really, it could be one and the same report for both the course and your employers.

Long before this upset outcry by quite a few participants, on 6th November 2009, the second whole-day seminar held by me at my university, the participants presented rich, comprehensive material on their projects. Most of them had prepared detailed and sophisticated power point presentations that had built-in little films and other more advanced means of documentation, interwoven with thoughts on action research, processes, actions, reflection, evaluation. Some chose models of circles, others spirals (cf. Herr & Anderson, 2005). Others modelled their understanding of the action research process on several researchers (cf. Bradbury & Reason, 2008). Each preschool teacher stood in front of the entire group, dismissing feelings of stage fright and other misgivings there may have been (and that had been frequently discussed in First Class), and gave talks on work processes, pedagogic documentation, concrete change projects, actions, and reflections. This was only two months into the course, and yet there was all this activity, participation, and meticulous documentation. Not having expected this, in fact, being rather confused by this impressive material and the participatory spirit on the part of the preschool teachers, I shoved all my teaching material in preparation of the course aside. There was simply no need for it, and I told the preschool teachers as much. Within a couple of hours of the whole-day seminar, I adjusted my role of university lecturer giving a class to a mentor, project manager/coordinator, and learning facilitator, sometimes summarising presentations, and commenting on shared problems and concerns. The preschool teachers were doing extremely well without me lecturing on action research. Empowerment, I thought, was visibly practiced that day.

So, when the preschool teachers several months later were confused about the term "report", I was taken aback and needed to reflect on what could have caused such a reaction. They had accomplished so much more already than a "report", but could somehow not reconcile with the slightest hint at a formal demand by a representative of the university (me), although I had – and managed to have again – the trusted role of facilitator rather than "examiner".

D. Thinking about Higher Education: some presumptions about knowledge, academia and collaboration

The participants' confusion about some seemingly straightforward demands such as writing up a process-based report for their course work and despite managing this task very well in connection with our second whole-day seminar, is possibly indicative of their presumptions about knowledge and academia, but also of their perception of their respective municipal employers' expectations and demands on them. No

amount of assurances on my part would convince all of the preschool teachers easily of my "good" intentions. As late as seven months into the course I would still receive questions such as

Will we really not have to sit an exam?

Say what I might, it was obvious that the preschool teachers found it difficult to reconsider their preconceived notions about knowledge and academia. One of the empirical examples in the preceding section also shows how difficult it was for them to accept to submit "reports" (or papers, essays, texts, etc) which the preschool teachers also could use for quality audits within their respective municipalities. As the preschool teachers still regarded the academic setting as essentially apart from the municipal setting, the thought of these two being mutually beneficiary did not occur to most of the participants. If it did, it did not make any immediate sense to them. The notion of being at university, acquiring knowledge by way of attending a course or programme, then taking that knowledge to the "outside world" did not go away during the academic year of 2009/2010. There seems to be the firm belief that one goes to university mainly to have proof of formal qualification that will hopefully lead to some qualified employment.

A course in action research as I had earlier described here will lead to a cognitive crisis (as I came to think of it), that can range from mild to dramatic, as the following quotes from participants show

I never knew you could study like this at a university. I mean, this course is like no other I've ever attended. Everything is so much better, and yet much more difficult to understand.

To this, another participant replied on First Class

You're absolutely right. Quite frankly, I still don't really know what I'm doing. Thinking in circles and funny spirals, questioning my workplace practices and myself, discussing with you guys here is all very well. But what are we doing? Yes, I know, we're doing lots, but it's just so difficult to grasp and put into words sometimes.
ARGH!

A third one wrote

The thing is that all this takes time, lots of time, which is really, really good. Claudia told us how much time it would take to get used to this type of class and learning, and she was right. The problem is that you can't read about this theoretically, take notes and tell yourself and everyone 'This takes time'. You need to be in it, experience it, and have a great deal of faith in what you're trying to do along the way. You guys and Claudia have been of great help, I couldn't have had faith in this on my own.

Whereupon a fourth student commented

Exactly. You can't do any of this on your own. When I enrolled for this course, I thought I'd do everything myself, simply swish through this course as I usually do. I thought I'd go it alone, the studying bit, which I've always found easy, the project at my preschool, everything. I soon realised that this would never work, that I'd better think twice. You can't 'learn' a process on your own, do it on your own, it's absurd. Honestly, I had to do some serious rethinking, but when I sort of got that collaboration is required, it was like 'but of course!!' It's really what I needed, what my preschool needed. They're all on board now.

As I had never taught a course in action research (in preschool) before, but other university courses at both full time and part time (for the students), I had to do a lot of rethinking myself, as we went along. This also meant that I had to negotiate with superiors and the dean at my department, to convince them of something I myself could not be sure of in terms of "learning outcomes." But I knew that I had to create spaces for learning (and teaching) that normally do not exist for other courses, in order to cater to the needs

of the preschool teachers and in order to be able to say something about teaching and research in the university. The irony of my own actions did not escape me: here I was, trying to create spaces for development and doing things differently for the sake of the preschool teachers, the sake of a more multi-perspective knowledge building process that would not cast the preschool teachers in the same old roles of "better child minders" and for the sake of other ways of teaching in HE. Yet, the only way for me to do this was to assure superiors of the expected "outcomes" of such a course, basically by trying to convince them they would endorse a safe product. Yet, I was most careful to emphasise it was the process that was of significance, and that "we" (academics) would have to make room for this if we wanted to collaborate according to our collaboration mission that is said to be of equal importance as teaching and research in for instance our own university's policy on this issue (see point 3 in the introduction).

It is important here to remember that the municipality's failure to pay for a tailor made course had resulted in collaboration between a principal's and my creative collaboration make this course happen. Now, the course was officially just that: a university course not an explicit collaboration project. It seems that the location of the course had an impact on people's notions of what we did there – or should do. This may be indicative of collaboration not being an entirely acceptable form of learning, at least not when the setting mainly is a university course, and the distance-learning platform is accessible to any student who is eligible to enrol. It does make a cognitive difference in so far that it operates on a logic that appears to be reserved for strictly syllabus-adhering, traditionally rigorous forms of teaching and knowledge transferral. The contract between teachers and students holds strong, so strong in fact that I had to explain this course's intentions and "goals" times and again to all parties involved. It was as if I had to fight hard to for legitimacy. In the end, a legitimacy was established because there were a) so many students enrolled for the class that it was literally not possible for my superiors to say no to the course, and b) I succeeded in receiving research funding from the Swedish Research Council in order to attend the ALARA conference, which signified expert recognition of academic rigour, and lastly c) exceedingly positive student evaluations, and an official letter from the assistant principal to my superiors, in which she underlined how valued our collaboration is, and how much development had been possible owing to my "outstanding efforts".

IV. SOME TENTATIVE ANALYTICAL POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

This is merely a tentative analytical chapter, as not all empirical data has been processed at the time of wrapping up this conference paper in late July 2010. While there are far more points for discussion and further analysis than the ones I limit myself to in this paper, *trust as well as learning and knowledge from a pragmatist perspective* are the main focus for my preliminary attempts at analysis here.

As with all processes I have been involved in (Gillberg 2009, 2010), it is hard to pinpoint exactly what triggers the manifold actions, directions, and reactions that complex projects encompass. This elusiveness means among other things that the most sensitive factors that need delicate handling and undivided attention are the easiest for those in charge to dismiss. "Trust", "time", or even "ethical issues of participation" are not terms that connote academic rigour. These terms much rather convey an approach to learning and development that is not automatically embraced by those in charge, neither within HE nor outside (cf. Levin and Greenwood, 2008; Morley, 2003). However, action researchers who locate their AR projects within HE have no choice but to attempt to convey alternate meanings and the significance of even the most elusive and improbable sounding terms as well as other issues relevant to learning in HE and other organisational settings. AR could be the expansion of methodology that Dewey (1927) had called for; to derive sense from our practices, our actions, and to see knowledge as transactional, ongoing, and never finished, as it cannot be a product. This may very well be worth our time and effort when it comes to time-consuming dialogue and debate inside and outside of HE regarding the nature of knowledge and how to go about organisational change.

The need to redefine and –construct terms such as quality is obvious, if there are to be more than one perspective, or rather discourse, on what learning and knowledge in organisational settings "is" (Gherardi,

2006; Morley, 2003). The preschool teachers made sure they furnished their respective municipalities with multi-perspective approaches and organisational development when they not only enrolled for this course, but began to engage in it on the basis of their own rethinking of what HE is and how their new-found insights could be best put to use in their own practices.

Regarding organisational change in HE, it is troublesome that the core business of academia, teaching and research, appear to be in the hands of administrators, bureaucrats, and policy makers, who know nothing or little about the necessary prerequisites for teaching or research in a genuinely collaborative spirit, and I find that there is a very real risk of separating teaching from research (Levin and Goodwin, 2008).

A. Trust as a prerequisite for collaboration and AR

Issues of trust work on various levels in the case of AR projects, and in the case of a university course it acquires yet another dimension as there are several contradictory issues that need to be addressed. Telling students to disregard their previously gathered experience of HE in favour of process-oriented, collaborative learning is one thing (McNiff and Whitehead, 2000). For the students to believe in this piece of information is quite another. Constant dialogue on the nature of the course is required, ultimately to explain the course's intentions and goals, and to make sure the students have really understood and accepted the conditions and logic on which the course is designed and offered. There is a fine line between trust (and therefore legitimacy for the teacher) and distrust, as the uncertainties around HE and its key purpose remain elusive to most of us, including those who are located inside HE (cf. Benson, Harkavy, and Pucket, 2007; Levin and Greenwood, 2008). How to trust any individual teacher who says one thing, when the entire system says something quite different (cf. Levin and Greenwood, 2008)?

Also, there are trust issues on the part of superiors in HE who need to be convinced of the teacher's abilities to conform to certain norms and directives, i.e. mark papers and report them into the system in an acceptable way, so that quality audits will be positive in terms of academic rigor, and thus secure more government funding. As this is a reality for universities and especially those in administrative functions in it, it is not too hard to understand why the two essentially different rationalities – teaching and research as a process versus quality audits based on assumptions of knowledge as a marketable product – collide and can not naturally co-exist in meaningful ways, unless there is an outspoken will and ambition to do so (cf. Morley, 2003).

Ultimately, trust will also need to be established among students. Not everything could be discussed at ease, which should be a matter of ethical consideration on the part of the teacher, and an important topic to be taken seriously when planning a course like this. I would like to suggest that the catalytic confusion I spoke of in my empirical examples can be turned into a powerful, creative tool for change if there is trust at all of the organisational levels here mentioned. To be allowed to be outspoken, to feel that one's thoughts are welcome by others, and to trust one's own personal and professional abilities is rather empowering. This applies to myself just as much as to the preschool teachers who attended this course. Without trust, there cannot be an honest dialogue to begin with. The more I think about it, the more astonished I am that trust should come across as a touchy-feely issue to be dismissed in favour of more rigorous sounding aspects of learning (cf. Griffiths, 1998).

B. Understanding knowledge and learning from the perspectives of feminist action research and feminist pragmatism

Feminist pragmatism could serve to fill a knowledge vacuum with regard to the multi-perspective aspirations feminist action researchers share with pragmatists. However, feminist pragmatism requires a feminist methodological interpretation so that the concept of action need not remain a concept but can be practiced in meaningful ways (Gillberg 2009). Learning and knowledge are ultimately meant to contribute to a democratic society where democracy is understood as subject to constant renegotiation and reconstruction. While for instance researchers' role never ought to be to prescribe how to do things (Biesta,

and Burbules 2007), they may very well have important roles to play when it comes to understanding complex processes of renegotiations and reconstruction. We must not forget that universities not only excluded certain forms of knowledge and the people connected with these, but also bestowed rights and privileges to others (Dahle, 2008; Levin, and Greenwood, 2008; Morley 2003). To think critically about how we construct various types of knowledge, and avoid contributing to knowledge hierarchies, is therefore an essential principle for feminist action research, that I imagine to have consistently observed, practiced, and discussed with my course participants, who would then attempt to apply such principles in their own practices. I explained repeatedly that HE as a location for knowledge building needs to be especially careful of not repeating mistakes of the past (Dahle, 2008). It is time preschool teachers' knowledge is fully acknowledged as one of these dominant forms of knowledge that Smith (2005) speaks of. During the course, I endeavoured to encourage meta-reflection concerning the preschool teachers' professional status and organisational boundaries within their respective municipalities.

V. IN CONCLUSION: THE NECESSITY OF ORGANISATIONAL BOUNDARY WORK AND AR INSIDE AND OUTSIDE HE

A key issue in terms of Action Research and Action Learning appears to be that often, the people behind change projects do not envision change as something fundamental to the organisation's development. Change for change's sake, or possibly for the dynamic and progressive sounding rhetoric of change, I fear, may sound more attractive than actual change, which requires the very challenging of traditional notions of knowledge. Here are some concluding thoughts to sum up this paper's main points:

- I. Process-oriented learning goes against the grain of how most universities organise their courses, view research as market-driven object or a product of excellence (cf. Levin and Greenwood, 2008). This directly and indirectly limits much needed knowledge development, the development of theories of learning in higher education, but most of all, the development of theories and practices of collaboration (Benson, Harkavy, and Pucket, 2007). The collaboration that is described in this text has been informed by a (feminist) pragmatist take on knowledge sharing and the concept of reciprocity as described by Addams (2009) and Dewey (1927). It has democratic meaning in the sense that participation in knowledge building and sharing was actively sought and offered. However, as teaching and research are driven apart, as Levin and Greenwood (2008) have discussed in their article on the future of higher education, there are serious problems in overcoming obstacles that by far exceed the problem-solving powers of individual academics and municipal representatives who endeavour to overcome them.
- II. Action research takes up space and time, which are essential requirements for learning and knowledge building processes. There cannot be too much predetermined course material and there cannot be any guarantees as to learning outcome. The pragmatist take on this is

One of the most significant and characteristic implications of Dewey's transactional approach is that educational research will not result in rules for educational action. Educational research can only ever show us what has been possible in a specific situation of something called a 'representative sample' – but it can never tell us once and for all what to do.

(Biesta & Burbules, 2007, p. 110)

- III. Action research' principles need to be explained, time and again, to superiors, municipal managers, or others in power to decide how learning and knowledge building and management in organisations should be viewed and done, operating on principles that stand in stark contrast to the methodological and theoretical approach in this paper (cf. Addams, 2009; Dewey, 1927; Elliott, 2007; Griffiths, 1998). An aspect of this is that a

senior lecturer does not have the time and the resources to do this explaining herself (but which she will ultimately do in the interest of action research' inherent principles of process-oriented learning and borne out of an ambition to grant each and every participant the possibility of learning and understanding these). Hence, the teacher in charge will literally work for free as the hours and resources allocated to a 25% course with about 30 participants will not generate the kind of money needed to offer adequate course contents or structures for learning. There is a dilemma here (cf. Morley, 2003): while recognising the need for organisational change both inside and outside HE, this cannot be done by non-recognition of the academic's professional contribution to HE and collaboration. Non-recognition, however, means that no one in charge actually acknowledges the new forms for knowledge building (Smith, 2005), which will then not allow for any sustainable change in structures or discourses of quality, collaboration, participation, etc, simply because they go unnoticed.

Without recognition, there is also the danger of de-professionalisation of some of the work that is done within HE and in preschools, as this is reminiscent of discourses of "women's work" and the relative low status and value attached to such efforts (cf. Dahle, 2008; Witz, 1992) This will not lead to more empowering, status boosting organisational practices in the long run, on the contrary. Organisational studies on the development of the professions show that work which is minimally recognised and valued will inevitably lead to diminished professional autonomy, and knowledge devaluation in certain organisational settings.

IV. In light of III) it is reasonable to conclude that coordinators and other semi-administrative/academic staff functions are required to fulfil the communication needs prior to the initiation of collaborative, process-oriented knowledge building projects. There are hardly any such posts within the academic world, as most jobs are either administrative or academic, without the all-important hybrid functions that are needed if modern universities wish to collaborate with the "surrounding" society in collaborative rather than one-dimensional ways. It is as if the two different logics administrative/academic work (that is teaching and research) are encouraged to stay apart. Discussions on university's core tasks are absent, to my knowledge, as well as reflections on how to bridge the gap between a rigid bureaucratic system and the creative capabilities that are required for good teaching and research (Barnett, 2003; Levin and Greenwood, 2008; Percy, Zimpher, and Burkardt, 2006).

Despite some of these more gloomy conclusions, I would like to conclude by saying that I do believe in the possibility of transforming knowledge (cf. Minnich, 2005), and that action research is an expansion of methodology (cf. Heldke, 2002) that I would like to advocate in order to show alternative ways of doing teaching and research, both inside and outside higher education.

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