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# General Reflections on how to Practice and Train for Action Research

Werner Fricke

There is much uncertainty about action research (AR) in the academic social science debate; that's why critical comments on AR are often uninformed. One of the main reasons for these deficits is the lack of training opportunities at universities.

The following article is general in style, though based on broad action research experience. It is not my intention to present the great variety of AR concepts and practices or my experiences in detail, but to draw some general lines about the possibilities and difficulties to train students in AR in academic contexts. On this ground the need for action research training is demonstrated, and some opportunities in university contexts are pointed out. I conclude enumerating some criteria for writing action research and elaborating the difficulties to write AR in academic and in action research contexts.

**Key words:** action research training, democratic dialogue, action research values, action research culture, writing action research

Action research is not based on the separation, but on connecting theory and action, both understood as social praxis, i.e. embedded into social contexts. That's why action research cannot be taught like any academic discipline; it may be trained and has to be experienced.

The topic raises several questions:

- Who is to be trained?

- Who are possible trainers?
- How is training action research connected with self learning and practicing AR?
- What are the dimensions of the training process? Is it just knowledge?
- Which is the context of training for action research?

As action research takes place to a great extent outside the usual academic context, training for action research has to follow a logic that in important respects is very different from academic training with its traditional institutional context, methods, contents and fields.

There is much uncertainty about action research in the academic social science debate; moreover many research concepts and findings, claiming to be action research, are characterized by an unclear understanding of action research and its epistemological foundations. One of the main reasons for these deficits is the lack of AR training opportunities at universities and during the research career of young social scientists. To clarify this point, I will start by presenting the main elements of action research, pointing out the differences to academic social science.

Action Research is based on dialogues between researcher and practitioners. This is not an accidental characteristic, but one of its basic elements with a lot of both theoretical (epistemological) and practical implications.

- 1) Practitioners, people in the field, are regarded as subjects, not as objects of research or research questions. The field talks back. The researcher meets and respects “the other” as an independent subject, as a person with his/her values, knowledge, interests, experiences, personal history etc. The only adequate relationship between the researcher and the practitioner is characterized by listening to each other, by entering a dialogue about research questions and methods, by joint reflection and learning. The result is a democratic dialogue (Gustavsen 1992), based on joint reflection.
- 2) Democratic dialogue is characterized by certain criteria:
  - it must be possible for all concerned to participate
  - all participants are equal as contributors to the dialogue

- work experience is the basis for participation
- the work role, authority etc of all participants can be made subject to discussion – no participant is exempt in this respect.

These criteria sound easy, but in fact they imply a radical research approach, difficult to be realized, which anybody with some research experience will be aware of.

This concept of democratic dialogue is not simply a theoretical concept like e.g. Habermas' "ideal speech situation"; the mentioned criteria have been developed in Scandinavian action research and are based on experience. They are agreed upon by all participating in a research process and are open to change and restructuring in the light of experience.

- 3) Action research is guided by values. This is one of the crucial differences to academic science and social science, which claim to be neutral, exclusively obliged to abstract concepts of truth. The main action research value is democracy in social as well as in personal relations. The other, whom action researchers meet in the field, is respected and treated as equal, though different in many respects.
- 4) Action research is problem or praxis driven. This means, that research questions are neither developed outside of social contexts nor imposed to the field from outside. They are in the contrary agreed upon jointly by researchers and practitioners, after both have reached a joint understanding of the situation and the problems to be solved.
- 5) Scientific and practical knowledge are equal, there is no hierarchical relationship between them. Both are equally necessary to understand the social context from which action research starts, to identify the problems to be solved, to elaborate research results adequate to contexts and problems.
- 6) This again sounds easy, but the implications are fundamental. Research results are not evaluated according to fixed theoretical criteria such as validity, reliability etc. but according to their problem solving capacity. In this respect action research may be compared to medicine and medical science: The result to be obtained is a positive effect for the patient's

health, not some kind of abstract “truth”. Like in action research the successful strategy to restore patients’ health is to combine theoretical (medical) knowledge, the doctor’s experience and the patient’s participation contributing his/her perception of his/her situation. It is this value orientation, which constitutes the special relationship between theory and practice (theoretical and practical knowledge) in action research, the results of which are contextual and relevant for praxis and social change.<sup>1</sup>

- 7) In action research the relationship between theory and practice is very different from any academic concept:
- Theory is not a body of knowledge, which is constantly accumulated by research
  - Theory is not applied to practice, but developed from local contexts as a result of a joint learning process between researcher and practitioners. Theory as well as truth are therefore always contextual
  - As a consequence theory is not owned by single or groups of researchers; there is no individual copyright in action research
  - Theory is not external to practice; the idea is not to test theories by empirical research or to verify/falsify hypotheses; in action research theory is developed from within social contexts as a result of a joint learning process with practitioners.
  - In action research researchers are both inside and outside social change processes. They are always engaged in social development processes (be it in an organisation or in regional contexts), but they also reflect the process before, during and after action.

From all these characteristics of action research it becomes clear, that training for action research has to take place according to its own logic, which is different from academic types of learning in many respects.

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<sup>1</sup> In his excellent article „Phronesis, Aristotle, and Action Research“ Eikeland (2006) elaborates the foundation of social science aiming at generating practical knowledge (i.e. knowledge suitable to solve praxis problems) in Aristotelian philosophy, especially its concept of „phronesis“.

Above all we have to be aware of the fact, that training for action research cannot take place in academic institutional contexts or according to academic rules. This has consequences for the career paths, which are opened by training. Action researchers are not principally excluded from academic careers, but there are many examples of action researchers who are not really accepted by or even excluded from the academic community. I have mentioned many of the reasons above:

- 1) The conception of theory as guided by values; theory is not regarded as neutral.
- 2) The twofold role of action researchers inside and outside social processes.
- 3) The difficult question of individual property rights (copy right); in action research the researcher is not regarded as the only author of theories.
- 4) Jointly with practitioners action researchers are responsible for the theoretical and practical results of their research: do they improve the “human condition” (Fred Emery), can they contribute to heal (social) diseases, do they promote democratic values and practice in organizational and social contexts?
- 5) Action researchers have to develop empathy in dialogues, the ability to listen and to jointly reflect with “the other” instead of defending their concepts in competitive, conflict discussions, which is the normal academic attitude.

Action research is not a method, which may be taught and exercised like any other scientific method. Action researchers must be able to use a toolkit of different methods, but their competence is far beyond the knowledge of methods, theories, research approaches. Value orientation, empathy, responsibility for the consequences of their research cannot be taught, even training is possible only to a limited extent. To be extreme, one could say: Being an action researcher is as much a question of personality and character as of training, knowledge, being capable to use the full range of social science methods.

As action research is such a different intellectual, epistemological and social milieu than the world of academics, concepts of training action research

have to be different also. Learning action research is learning rather from experience and practice than from texts. The ongoing action researcher has to understand, that he must not approach social contexts with a stock of general knowledge in his rucksack, but with openness to enter dialogues and joint activities with practitioners, with open questions rather than with prefixed answers in terms of theory, knowledge, hypotheses. Of course, the action researcher has to be trained in all kinds of methods of empirical social science research, but he/she must free him(her)self to see the world from the perspective of his/her methods, theories and hypotheses only. In the contrary: he/she should approach the field with an interest to learn, to see the world with the eyes of “the other”, to enter a dialogue with him/her and to develop both knowledge of the situation and contextual theories in a process of joint action and reflection.

### **How can the “action research culture” be trained, and who is to be trained?**

To train these competences and attitudes is not possible in the traditional academic way of teaching, reading books and discussing theories within an academic context only. The process of training action research has to include practice. I imagine that students will first have some basic courses in sociology, organizational theory and perhaps regional politics to understand the essentials of society and organizations, of social and organizational change and of regional economics.<sup>2</sup> A course about the origins (Kurt Lewin) and the history of action research should follow. It is necessary and important for students to be aware of the traditions and history of action research, especially its development within the last 40 years. Students may learn something about basic action research approaches (star cases in single organizations versus

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<sup>2</sup> Basic knowledge in regional politics and economics is necessary for action researchers because of the recent regional turn in action research. In 2003/2004 the action research journal “Concepts and Transformation”, now “International Journal of Action Research”, published a series of articles about the future perspectives of action research, esp. about the alternative concepts of single case research versus creation of social movements and regional development to generate broad, but incremental and persistent social change; see “Concepts and Transformation” vols. 8 (2003) and 9 (2004).

creating regional and social development processes), problems (such as dissemination beyond the single case) and values (democratization; industrial democracy). It is interesting to see, how in the 60s and early 70s of the last century action research was restricted to single organizations trying to establish industrial democracy in enterprises. The results were isolated “star cases” (Emery/Thorsrud 1975), but the question how to disseminate the experiences beyond the single organization remained unsolved. Consequently action research enlarged its scope to regional contexts, building clusters of enterprises and research institutions; the idea was to create sustainable development generating mechanisms (Gustavsen 2003, 2004, Palshaugen 2002).

A second phase of training action research has to take place in praxis by participating in action research projects. This is certainly the most difficult and crucial part of the training process. It is a challenge to both, trainers and trainees, because they have to leave the well known, traditional social and institutional context of academia. The essentials of action research in fact constitute a culture of its own. Action researchers have to

- integrate theory and praxis in joint action with practitioners
- develop (contextual) theories from within a social situation
- combine reflection and action, which is a major difficulty, because reflecting and acting follow different time structures, take place at different times and in different places/contexts
- be open to learning in and from praxis and from practitioners
- meet the other exploring and respecting his/her personality, value orientation, interests
- negotiate focus, methods and possible results of the research
- be present in the research process as a person with all his/her experiences, values, interests - not only as an expert, a scientist
- acknowledge that practitioners are experts of their situation and interests as well as scientists, who have their special interests and are experts in their fields (it is legitimate to have interests, also for scientists!)



- combine general and local knowledge
- cooperate in fields structured by power and interests without being misused for purposes which are in contradiction with their values such as democratization by, e.g., creating public spaces in enterprises and regions<sup>3</sup>). This means: researchers must not give up their independence, values and scientific interests (reflecting; dialogues; contextual theories) even in difficult contexts.

All these abilities, values and strategies cannot be trained at university, neither by reading texts, listening to professors or discussing theories in seminars. All these classical teaching and learning instruments should be further used, but enriched by guided participation in action research projects.

To organize guided participation in action research means that an experienced action researcher, who is in charge of training and teaching, takes time to act as a coach for young action researchers to be trained. His/her main task would be to take part from time to time in an action research process itself and to conduct reflective sessions with his/her students as an opportunity for them to present and jointly reflect their experiences made during the action research. The idea behind is what we call in Germany “Projektstudium”, i.e. a teaching and learning process centred around practice instead of theories and methods in the classical academic sense. In other words: The idea is to identify by means of a joint learning, teaching and reflection process how practice may inform theory ad vice versa: how theory may guide practice. The students will thus be enabled to discover and to understand a concept of practice driven theory, which is different from the academic understanding of theory as a store of knowledge. Instead of learning from texts they experience and develop knowing instead of knowledge, and they learn from personal experiences, jointly reflected with practitioners and experienced action researchers.

It is needless to say that the above mentioned action research values and strategies are valid for practitioners as well, when they want to cooperate in action research projects. Compared to young scientists their training will be focused on action and joint reflection with researchers. They need not learn

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<sup>3</sup> See Palshaugen (2002); Bohman’s (2004) „mini publics“.

the scientific foundations of social science (methods, theories etc). The main challenge for practitioners is to free themselves from the routines and stereotypes of their organization (social concrete block, see Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2005) in order to be able to perceive and develop strategies for change. In this respect they are in a similar situation as action researchers who have to leave the academic culture, which is as much guided by routines, stereotypes, power structures and interests as organizations are.

Guidance in research projects is the task of experienced action researchers. They have to train the trainees how to do research in fields structured by power and interest, i.e. how to encounter practitioners as persons and how to do the right thing at the right time (*kairos*) in often turbulent change processes, sometimes accompanied by conflicts. Very often employees in an organization have to be encouraged and to be trained to develop and to use their personal competences,<sup>4</sup> which are very often suppressed since years by power structures, routines in organizations, monotony and negative working conditions of all kinds etc. To encourage people in these circumstances needs empathy, imagination, sometimes courage, intensive reflection beyond the researcher's engagement in action and change.

To master these tasks the future action researchers need experience as a result of practical training. Besides taking part in change processes they have to reflect their praxis, the change process, the practitioners engaged, the relationship between theory and praxis. This means a double burden for action researchers, which many social scientists often refuse to accept. If they do so, either their research praxis, their reflection or their writing will miss the necessary quality standards. Reflection and writing action research are very often neglected; that's why action research trainers have to pay much attention to reflect their experiences with the trainees. Action and reflection should be equal parts in training action research, including conceptualizing local theories, based on experiences from action.

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<sup>4</sup> See the concept of innovative qualifications in Fricke (1983).

### **And writing action research**

Writing is an especially weak point in action research. This is due to several reasons, the two main ones being the double task of reflection and engagement in action and the academic tradition of writing.

Due to institutional and conceptual reasons action researchers, not only, but especially young researchers, often have great difficulties in writing action research. A major point is the lack of time and finance for social science in general, and especially for action research. Change processes on one hand side, reflection and writing on the other are characterized by different time structures. A researcher has little free space in action processes, which follow their own logics and time structure. Decisions have sometimes to be taken quickly, dialogues need time though finance and time for research are normally limited; research projects have their beginnings and their ends, very often limited to two years only. One has to acknowledge, that it is difficult under these restrictions to find free space for reflection and writing. If for financial reasons one project is followed directly by the next one, there is too little, often not sufficient time in between for reflecting and writing.

In addition there is the cultural difference between action research and the academic tradition of research. This difference becomes very visible, if you compare academic texts and good action research writing.<sup>5</sup>

In action research the researcher should be visible in his/her text as a person with his/her values, experiences, interests, personal attitudes. Action research writing needs I messages, while academicians pretend already in their style, that they are able to present general theory, abstract truth. Academicians prefer a non-personal style, general, often passive formulations such as "it has been proved", "hypothesis A has been confirmed/falsified" etc. This kind of passive, non-personal, general writing is originally not so much a personal attitude, but an academic demand (later it turns into a personal attitude by continuous academic training): academicians have to generalize their findings, regardless of their contextual and personal character. This is a consequence of the positivistic concept of science and its validation criteria: Scien-

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<sup>5</sup> See Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen (2006) as an excellent example.

tific results have to be validated and reliable beyond individual and local contexts.<sup>6</sup>

Scientific discussions in the academic tradition are normally characterized by more or less open personal conflicts, competition and hierarchies. Academically trained scientists have difficulties to listen to one another. Their discussions are characterized by “yes, buts...” instead of joint learning and reflecting in dialogue. This is rooted in the mechanics of academic careers: The scientist or researcher has to present some ideas, theories etc as his/her own, he/she must deliver something “new”, developed by him(her)self individually if he/she wants to be graded as a doctor or approved as a professor. Though the individual character of research findings is a fiction (even in academic contexts) it is broadly accepted as an important access criterion for academic careers.

Writing action research is for many reasons not compatible with the academic scientific tradition, and it has therefore to be trained intensively. All scientists are brought up in the academic culture, which they accept or even subordinate to in the interest of their academic career, and it needs time and learning by doing to write texts appropriate to action research.

In such texts

- authors should be visible as persons with their values, experiences etc as I said (I messages)
- researchers should openly present what they have learnt from dialogues and joint reflection with practitioners in their contexts
- the approach of “testing” theories in practice should be avoided

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<sup>6</sup> Regarding these standards, it is astonishing, that the academic culture is nevertheless based on competition between individual researchers (as well as schools). Though the scientific person hides behind his/her theories, he/she is regarded as the owner of the ideas he/she presents. This is very different from action research culture, where new knowledge is a product of joint reflection and dialogue. In action research it is not so clear, who owns the results individually.

Instead

- the development of local, contextual theories from joint action, from dialogues and by reflection should be demonstrated.
- it should be made clear, how theory was informed by praxis and vice versa during the action research process
- local theories should be presented as of limited validity in time and space; a research report might e.g. end with open questions or/and a reflection about the relationship between theoretical reflection and practical experiences.

It is an academic habit to start a research report by relying on several theories from literature before reporting the research process, the local situation etc. Especially young authors, even if they call themselves action researchers, start with presenting excerpts, pieces of theories from literature and call it the “theoretical or conceptual framework” of their study. By this procedure, the researcher limits his/her perspective to the field by already coined views. The reader does not get an authentic presentation of the researcher’s values, concepts and methods; the problems to be dealt with in the research process are not presented as seen by researcher and practitioners, but by – as prominent as possible – scientific authors and their texts; practitioners do not have a voice; the researcher avoids to present openly the learning process he/she experienced during the research. In extreme cases the reader gets the impression, that there was no learning in the project, that the author did not reflect him(her)self, i.e. took all his/her knowledge from texts instead of from experience, dialogues, individual and joint learning.

This style of writing is not compatible with action research, but as the great majority of future action researchers have been educated by academics in the context of academic culture it is difficult to learn. And if one’s academic career is in danger, possible learning is blocked.

### **Conclusion**

I want to conclude by quoting Eikeland (2006): “...action research cannot just serve everyday practical concerns, and the goals of science too, without

transforming both. This is easily neglected by carving out a separate and special ‘niche’ for action research as complementary ‘mediator’ in-between the existing academic world and practitioners ... instead of encompassing and transforming both the institutionalization of social research and our everyday practices in ways rendering space for praxis, phronesis,<sup>7</sup> and dialogue within practice based communities of inquiry.”

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<sup>7</sup> The Aristotelian concept of phronesis cannot sufficiently be explained here. See instead the very intensive discussion of the meaning of phronesis for action research in Eikeland (2006).

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