Introducing 'Concepts and Transformation' Editorial

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On the role of 'Concepts and Transformation'

The aim of 'Concepts and Transformation' is to build bridges. One main goal is to help improve on the insights and understanding that are operative in real organizational contexts; another is to provide a channel for results, reflections, theories, emerging out of research, in particular research on work, organization and leadership. Such a goal does not set 'Concepts and Transformation' apart from numerous other journals that aim at improving on practices through making wisdom from the sciences available to decisions makers. The problem is that this bridgebuilding is easier said than done.

When science became broadly established as a resource in the formation of organizations and societies — in the immediate post-World War II period — it was thought that if science could only live up to good scientific criteria its practical usefulness would follow more or less automatically. There might perhaps be a demand for popularization, training programs or similar specific

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efforts, but on the whole science should be able to make itself felt just by being itself, so to speak.

With hindsight, we know that things did not turn out that way. The social sciences seldom deliver 'the truth' and if they do, then many truths are usually delivered without telling the user which one to choose. Even when there is no disagreement on what theory is valid within a certain area, a theory about 'good organization,' say, can still be difficult to apply. The theory stands out as an abstract, ideal construction while in the everyday world of work and organization the organizer is faced with a range of problems which have to do with persuading people, organizing processes, creating learning situations, and the like. These preconditions for using a theory often become more difficult and important than the theory itself.

In the light of this, the optimism characterizing the social science-inspired schools of management training, organization development and shop floor democracy that emerged in the 1940s and 50s came to be replaced by a growing gap between theory and practice. Theory and practice, so to speak, turned their backs on each other. Over the last decade or so, however, more and more people — in both the research and the practical worlds — have made conscious efforts to close the gap once again. Given the competition and complexity characterizing the situation confronting many organizations today, there is actually a need for ordered thinking and good documentation — whatever we choose to call it. Research, for its part, has turned towards itself starting to discard the overblown intention of telling eternal truths in favor of an orientation towards supporting practical evolution.

The intention to close the gap, however, is not the same as making great strides ahead in actually doing so. The linking of theory and practice in the social field has turned out to be an exceedingly difficult problem. It is only during the most recent years that we can see a turn towards this complexity as such. Instead of dealing with theory and practice as different phenomena that need to be related to each other, there is now an emergent tendency to look at the theory–practice combination as *the* issue. Social philosophers like Charles Taylor have paved the way for this focus, but it has now started to gain momentum within the research community as well as among people who would like to apply research as an aid in dealing with their problems.

'Concepts and Transformation' seeks to be an actor in this movement. It is still in an early phase; it is still a movement where the greatest challenges lie ahead rather than behind us. The journal has its roots in the action

research movements which, in various shapes and forms, are more than 50 years old. That something calls itself 'action research,' however, is no guarantee that it actually does deal with the theory–practice interrelationship as the phenomenon on which the main emphasis should be laid. Much action research has been an experimental, or other form of traditional, implementation of theory. The various action research traditions to be found do, however, have one asset of major importance in today's situation: a long experience in actually confronting situations where theory and practice have to be brought together. However the idea of action research has been defined, those who actually enter a workplace with a view to doing something can hardly avoid facing managers and workers in the workplace: one has to deal with them, whatever that may mean, in ways ranging from persuading them to be the subject of an experiment to helping the organization produce more and better than before. In this confrontation with reality lies a source of experience that is an asset in the modern efforts.

When we say that 'Concepts and Transformation' aims at a dual audience it should not be interpreted to mean that the journal will aim at a simplistic, semi-journalistic kind of popularized report of what happens in the great halls of science. If there is anything in which the founders of this journal have little belief, it is just this sort of popularized simplicity. Unless people on both sides of the table are willing to face the real complexities of the theory–practice relationship we will get nowhere. The real complexities can be dealt with only if the best of research confronts the most advanced practical situations.

Remarks on the theory and practice of action research

'Concepts and Transformation' thus focuses on the relevance of social research with regard to the various questions arising from the changing world of work in both the public and the private sector.

Like most developments which take place in a context characterized by cultural and historical diversity, the connection between research and workplace reform followed a path that was punctuated by shifting conceptual and political views; its development does not resemble a linear process. Today, the role of social research in organizational development does not present a uniform or even a coherent picture; it is more like a patchwork

quilt.¹ We shall therefore not attempt here to provide a comprehensive or systematic overview. Instead we shall present a brief historical summary, a summing up of lessons learned, of overlapping shifts in thinking and practice. This profile has a mainly European focus and within that orientation it has a slant towards Scandinavia, which has provided more than 30 years of experience with programmatic action research approaches in workplace reform. These developments make up a mosaic of different kinds of changes. Some constitute a shift from one type of orientation to another; others represent a widening of approach in which various orientations are combined; another, more radical, type of change can be seen when the relationship between theory and practice in action research is reframed and put in a linguistic context.

The following changes in the practice and theory of action research present themselves:

- From an initially socio-psychological orientation, to a socio-technical approach, which has been rapidly moving in a socio-ecological direction.
- From regarding the organization as a structure, to understanding it also as an ongoing process of evolving functional relationships.
- From a view of theory as an ordering framework, to an understanding of theory as an ongoing process of conceptualization, i.e. *theorizing*.
- From a structurally oriented theory of organization towards a generative theory, a theory about how to create solutions to problems of work and organization.²
- From engaging in organizational design by means of a detailed, step-by-step, socio-technical analysis performed by external experts, to an organizational redesign practice in which workers and management, using their knowledge and experience, develop the new design themselves, and in which the experts mainly have a supplementary role, to the most recent approach, which is a programmatic, open, broad and large-scale, discourse-based development strategy, supported by research.
- From viewing communication as one of the condition for change to communication (i.e. the 'use' of language) as the crucial element in the change process.
- From the organization as the unit of change to an orientation which also includes inter-organizational processes and networks as engines of change.

- From viewing organizational change as mainly an expert-driven process to understanding it as a concept-driven change which is organized around words, ideas and linguistically expressed visions, and which takes the form of totalizing efforts encompassing the organization as a whole.³ In this type of change process, the foundation is formed by broad participation, encompassing all major topics and issues. That way, the mobilization and generation of local knowledge is merged with general knowledge as well as highly specialized knowledge.
- From workplace reform in the context of a relatively stable relationship between the local and the global, to workplace reform as an unfolding development process which is part of an increasing interpenetration of the local and the global.

These shifts provide an impression of the link between changes in the conceptualization of work and the way in which action research has been organized. In particular they reflect a development in which work as experience, work as a concept, and the relationship between theory and practice can be brought together in an integrated process of generating new kinds of practice as well as new kinds of knowledge.

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Although one talks about the field of action research, it does not represent a field in the sense of a clearly identifiable and coherent set of social science perspectives and activities. To the contrary, there is a variety of approaches with different positions and emphases, both conceptually and in practice. We will therefore not present a definition of action research. Not because we would then have to choose between various 'schools,' but rather because we believe it is basically wrong to do so, at least at this stage. Generally speaking, social science is in a process of redefining itself, and thereby repositioning itself *vis à vis* social reality. Action research is very much a part of this movement. In the action research process we experience these shifts on a personal level. We are faced with the challenge of working through this redefinition of social science in an experiential sense in our role as researchers in the context of a local setting, and in doing so, we are confronted with the relationship between definition of self and our epistemological stance. There is a strong relationship between our self image and our image as social

scientists and what social science is all about. When reading as well as writing about action research, one should therefore remember, as Charles Taylor argues,⁴ that the use of theory as self-definition has to be borne in mind when we come to explain, or when we practice, social science. Were we to define action research, we would have to draw boundaries, thereby deciding what to include and what to exclude. Apart from the fact that the present state of the 'field' does not allow us to do so, we would draw boundaries with regard to our own learning. We would bring our own development to a halt and thereby make it impossible to engage in action research. In other words, the last thing one should do in action research is to *define* action research.

Instead, 'Concepts and Transformation' will take a more thematic position in order to be able to accommodate the various open questions one encounters in action research, as well as the unfolding issues connected with new forms of work organization and enterprise development. In this way the Journal will be a forum for dialogue concerned with identifying and exploring the meaning of the contours of this emerging landscape of inquiry.

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Since the War, driven by the need for economic, industrial and political reconstruction, particularly in Europe, the development of organizations and the democratization of work have become one of the primary points of focus for the social sciences, and as such also the domain in which the practice and 'theory' of action research has been developed further. Action research was, and still is to some extent, a radical perspective when considered from the conventional empiricist epistemological position in social science, but also in view of the questions it raises about the importance of participation and democracy in enterprise development.

In action research the question at issue is addressed by both researcher and the so-called 'researched,' the 'other' (e.g. an organization) who presents as well as represents the question. The research, the learning, is in the joint action, which, if successful, will at the same time and in the same act make a contribution to solving or clarifying practical problems as well as generating knowledge. Action research thus reflects the mutuality of research and development. Jointness refers to the fact that the researchers participate in practical change efforts in collaboration with the actors in the field (e.g. a

company, an institution, a community, etc.); there is therefore a shared responsibility for the process as a whole. Both parties are engaged in some common problem of improvement and change. However, they have different tasks and roles within this common problem situation. Consequently, the relationship between the researchers and the actors in the field is a complementary one. In order to cope with the joint action within this interdependent, complementary relationship, both parties are confronted with the challenge to communicate, based on mutual obligation; thereby, the linguistic character of action research comes to the fore.

By taking the relational aspect and thus the linguisticity of the human condition as point of departure, the relationship between theory and practice, between researcher and 'other' becomes one of dialogue. In action research the focus is on the need to develop a new, better communicative 'theory' as well as new, better, practical means of communication in a dialogical manner.

It is therefore crucial to increase our understanding of the meaning and use of language, in addition to increasing our knowledge of the various aspects and perspectives connected to processes of organizational renewal in the world of work. The use of language will serve both as a means of creating new knowledge and as a vehicle for disseminating or 'applying' knowledge, as it is usually conceived. However, when reflecting on the fact that the kind of knowledge of the researcher and that of the 'other' are complementary, it becomes apparent that even the so-called 'application' of scientific knowledge to any practical field, is actually a process in which new knowledge is being created through the dialogue between the parties. Consequently, within the context of joint action, there are in action research three interdependent, though different, main sources of new knowledge:

- The practical work and the dialogues among the actors of the field.
- The dialogues between the researchers and the local actor.
- The dialogues between the researchers.

When regarding these three practical and dialogical sources of new knowledge, the question which presents itself is: what would be the nature of a fourth source of new knowledge and what kind of new knowledge should it generate? With this question we refer to the written text of the researcher. There is no general answer to this question; any contributor to this Journal, for instance, has to answer it in his or her own particular way. However, it

seems to us that an appropriate answer would not be to 'tell the whole story,' that is, to reproduce in a written form the knowledge that is already generated through the joint action within the action research process. Rather, the written articles, essays or monographs of the researcher should generate that kind of new knowledge which is required as a critical supplement to the knowledge that already exists, in different forms, among the various actors in the field, both within and outside the scientific community. Another reason why the attempt to tell the whole story is somewhat misplaced is, of course, that the knowledge of social phenomena is always bound to personal experience and awareness. No knowledge, whether scientific or otherwise, can reach beyond the limits of the very subject who writes the 'story.'⁵

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When describing and discussing action research we use words like learning, action, knowledge, etc. The use of these words is somewhat problematic. First of all, words and language are not only representational and referential, but also, and foremost, they have a formative function, they are tools to be used in dealing with reality.⁶ They constitute so-called speech acts; their meaning is in the action, as "words in their speaking,"⁷ so to say. The word is a two-sided act. "It is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant . . . it is precisely the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee. Each and every word expresses the 'one' in relation to the 'other.'"⁸

In trying to clarify our understanding of action research, we are therefore confronted with the same difficulty all action researchers face when trying to use written text to explain what they do. That is, trying to depict the living, dialogical relationship between research and development. In written rhetoric it becomes unavoidable that words are usually understood by the reader as being referential, that is, representing an unequivocal and true reality, when in actual fact one tries to describe a process which is formative, interactive and unfinished. There is therefore some truth in the statement that it is impossible to write about action research in such a way that one can do it justice, and really make clear to the reader, unacquainted with this field of inquiry, what it is all about. To the contrary, one usually succeeds in confirming the notion that action research is neither research nor scientific. The difficulty is that when one uses in writing such words as 'research' and

'learning,' one uses words that are very ambiguous and seem to suffer from a lack of proper definition and clarification. However, their ambiguity is precisely the reason why they are so powerful and useful as tools in dialogue, in a process of joint action, where one is making choices and is engaged in creating meaning and constructing social reality. The point we want to emphasize here is that it is this dual nature of language, its referential and formative features, and particularly the latter, one has to bear in mind when using language, that is, when engaging in action research, discussing it and reading and writing about it.

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The position taken by 'Concepts and Transformation' in the landscape of the social sciences is determined by three coordinates:

1. The linguistically mediated character of social reality. Method and object of study are not regarded as being separate and independent, a position which is similar to the one in modern physics as well as in today's theory of science. Hence, the relationship between epistemic subject and empirical object, between researcher and 'other' (e.g. the enterprise) is an intersubjective one and therefore it is primarily a linguistic relationship. Consequently, this is shaped by the *use* of language; the action research process is thus one of social constructionism.
2. The reflexive nature of social inquiry. The 'action' in action oriented research affects both the researcher and the other. The theories and practice of the research process refer to themselves. In other words, the research seeks to understand a practice in which it is itself involved. It thus departs from conventional social research which on the whole merely is concerned with the description, analysis and explanation of phenomena in a world 'out there' that excludes the researcher; the researcher is not part of the explanation. In action research, the interactive reflections by researchers and the other actors on their own practices in the research process are an integral methodological component in the generation of knowledge.
3. Action research is about change; it is about improving conditions in social reality. It is problem driven, concerned with making choices and therefore guided by norms and values of the actors involved and based on the context of the research. The issues that will be addressed in this Journal have to do

with criteria used in workplace reform and organizational development and renewal. In this connection the ethics of action research will present themselves on three interrelated levels: (a) in the process of reflection in which both researchers and the others must take a personal stance as responsible social agents embedded in cultural values; (b) with regard to the policies and practices on the organizational level; and (c) in terms of the cultural and political legitimacy provided by the wider societal environment. As meaning and morality are intimately connected, we therefore do not consider that a value-neutral conception of social research a feasible scientific proposition.

The focus of 'Concepts and Transformation' and its underlying ideas and assumptions can be further clarified by means of the following considerations.

The first one concerns the dramatic shifts taking place in the world of work and in the field of organizational renewal. They both refer to the accelerating necessity for the development of new effective forms of work organization and to the rapid re-contextualization that is going on with regard to work and organization. Both of these interdependent developments have far-reaching implications for the relevance and role of social science in this field.

The second one has to do with the epistemological and psychological significance of the dialogical relationship between theory and practice as a result of which the knowledge in its various forms generated by action research, such as scientific knowledge, expert knowledge, everyday knowledge and tacit knowledge, is formed by the interdependency and interpenetration of facts, values, theories and interpretations. Epistemology is no longer reduced to a method. Researcher and 'other' are both engaged in a process of discovery and creation, together they traverse an epigenetic landscape.⁹ Furthermore, in their joint action, they have to deal with the normal psychodynamic features of any human interaction, such as love and hate, fear, confusion, collusion, transference and projection, all of which have significant implications for the professional role of the researcher and the nature of the unfolding action research process.

The third consideration recognizes the need for a medium that not only presents research findings and the views of the researcher and other actors (i.e. the so-called practitioners) who are directly involved in the process of change, but that will also provide space for views offering a wider perspective. 'Concepts and Transformation' will therefore also include discussions

about socio-economic, cultural and political developments on both the national and international level pertaining to the kind of challenges one faces with organizational renewal.

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An important consideration behind 'Concepts and Transformation' is the notion that it is logical and desirable to steer and guide publications about workplace reform from within the actual developments in the field. A steering process that is based on the mutuality of research and development and that finds its point of anchorage in the concrete challenges we are faced with in the practice of organizational renewal. Also, work place reform can no longer be understood only in terms of local research and development. The significance of the linkages between the local, the regional, the national, and indeed the international level, as well as of the interdependencies between the social, economic, cultural and political conditions effecting organizational performance, makes it imperative that, in accordance with the notion of mutuality, the views of people in strategic positions — i.e. significant other actors in the various domains of social reality — can and should be heard, in addition to those involved in the actual research process. It is of the essence that 'Concepts and Transformation' provides this space and thereby, in addition to being an expression of the relationship between theory and practice, between research and development, it also becomes a forum for societal debate that will thus further illuminate the political and societal conditions for and implications of new forms of work organization.

To summarize:

'Concepts and Transformation' will be steered and guided in general by the developments in the field. More specifically, it will be problem driven and will have a general orientation that recognizes the mutuality of research and development. Its focus will reflect the linguistic nature of the relationship between the researcher and the other actors in the field, and its content will therefore mirror the views of the researcher as well as the concerns of the 'other,' the practitioners. It will also try to bring new perspectives on the relationship between theory and practice and in that connection it will include in its contents views and comments from philosophy and the theory of science. 'Concepts and Transformation' recognizes the political and cultural significance of organizational renewal and will express in its

contents the dramatic contextual shifts that are going on with regard to work and organization. In this connection the Journal will have a distinct international orientation. In view of the essential reflexivity of action research, which is further accentuated by the fact that we live in a situation of contingency, plurality of values and cultural choice, the style of the journal will be primarily reflective. It will draw attention to the nature of the questions we are faced with and, in that connection, to new developments rather than offering general or all-embracing solutions. It will therefore provide a wide range of interpretations and commentaries. The Journal will be a forum for dialogue and thus an actor in the societal debate. Each issue will be designed and put together in such a way that the contents form a balanced 'whole.' In addition to an occasional editorial and regular book reviews, the contents of each issue can be grouped into three areas: illustration of practice, discussions of a conceptual and theoretical nature, and articles about the changing world of work.

Most important, the development of the Journal itself will be an enterprise in action research and thus an illustration of the nature of the relationship between theory and practice.

Notes

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