

## **LEARNING SYSTEMS ORGANISING REFLECTION – ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING AS COLLECTIVE, EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING**

By Olav Eikeland, University College of Akershus, Norway<sup>1</sup>

**Still quite unfinished draft article – Do not quote!**

**Abstract:** The article discusses shifts and continuities in practical and theoretical work on organisational learning since the mid 1980s within a tradition at the Work Research Institute (WRI) in Oslo promoting work place democracy. Projects over 20 years are reviewed. All the projects discussed have had a participatory *action research* design. The point, however, is the emerging justifications for the changing approaches chosen. The learning within and across the different projects is a kind of “justificatory trajectory”. This justification and explanation constitutes the real purpose of the article.

This article presents and discusses shifts and continuities in practical and theoretical work on organisational learning done by the author since the mid 1980s, in Norway. The work has been done from within a tradition at the Work Research Institute (WRI) in Oslo promoting work place democracy since the 1960s (ref.)<sup>2</sup>. Several different projects over more than 20 years are reviewed. All the projects discussed have had a participatory *action research* design, either in small enterprises or in municipalities. The short project presentations are chronological and basically descriptive. The most interesting aspects, however, are the emerging justifications for the approaches chosen; the transformations and developments, and the learning within and across the different projects as a kind of “justificatory trajectory” leading up to an explanation of the title of the article. This justification and explanation constitutes the real purpose of the article.

Hence, the article presents ways of thinking and means employed and reflects upon the learning emerging over time through the projects; especially – although this dichotomy is really too simple – on the interaction between “theory and practice”, i.e. on how theoretical perspectives have informed the practical measures and *vice versa*. As I will try to show, there are radically different concepts of both theory and practice at play in the discussions. My own theoretical work preceding and running alongside the practical work, inspiring it, springs mostly from philosophical considerations on the history and meaning of concepts like “experience”, “theory”, “dialogue”, and others, and from methodological considerations dealing with the question of what it means for social research to be empirical (Eikeland, 1985,

---

<sup>1</sup> Olav Eikeland, Høgskolen i Akershus - Avdeling for yrkesfaglærerutdanning, Postboks 423, No - 2001 Lillestrøm, Norway, Tlf. +4790822463, [olav.eikeland@hiak.no](mailto:olav.eikeland@hiak.no) & [oleik@online.no](mailto:oleik@online.no)

<sup>2</sup> The WRI was part of the public administration in Norway from its establishment in 1964 until 2002. As several other institutes in other policy areas in Norway, the WRI provided research support for broadly consensus based policies in Norway on promoting work place democracy and improved work environments, both physical and socio-psychological. While most political parties in Norway were “social-democratic” in the 1960s and 1970s, they’ve all become increasingly saturated with neo-liberal ideology since the 1980s. While there is still public policy regarding work environment improvement, there is hardly any political will or direction left at all concerning work place democracy.

1995, 1997; 2008)<sup>3</sup>. Ending up with recommending an increased and improved utilisation of so-called “basic historical concepts” (ref.), as I do, also questions the usefulness or the adequacy of the still prevalent dichotomy between “theory” and “experience”.

## ***1. INTRODUCTION: FROM ACTION RESEARCH TO ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING***

There are basic differences between action research approaches and more conventional research approaches which I will not try to sort out at this point (ref.). Even the institutional contexts and the historical and cultural settings within which action research is conducted differ considerably between different countries. My comparison is between Nordic contexts and broadly English speaking contexts (which admittedly are coarse categories). In order to make the Norwegian setting clearer, and although there really exist differences like these, they may be somewhat exaggerated in what follows. Seen from the perspective of professional research, action research projects in Norway are usually effectuated practically as a common collaborative effort between the researchers and local management and employees in the enterprises concerned. In large and medium sized businesses – both private and public – Norwegian employers and employees are normally organised. At least since the early 1980s, organised labour and capital interests have provided more or less explicit frameworks for collaboration about development projects on a national, regional, or enterprise level based on negotiated agreements going back to the 1930s (cf. e.g. Brøgger, 2007).

Although there are many exceptions, action research in English speaking countries is most often organised as discussions or dialogues in groups of individuals who are based in different work places – mostly from professions and semi-professions – coming together as part of a master or a PhD program to discuss their individual research projects (ref. action science, Bath group etc.). As in many courses of further education provided by educational institutions, the educational effort or the individual research projects of the program participants organise everything happening. The group of action researchers coming together discuss mostly second-hand, the individual experiences brought into the group from elsewhere by the participants. Their action research group is “artificial” in the sense that it does not work together on a daily basis. The group formed works as a temporary project organisation set up for a limited purpose, which is closed down when the period of education has come to an end or when other specific objectives are achieved.

In Norway – at least as these projects have normally been run from the WRI – but also more generally in the Nordic countries, action research is more often organised as collaborative development projects in existing work places. It is usually done in organisational settings in close collaboration with both management and unions, and with broad participation from the employees – real communities of practice – in work life, dealing collectively with real life challenges within the organisations concerned. Researchers, based in professional institutions of research or education, collaborate with existing communities of practice in the work places

---

<sup>3</sup> Many of the projects have been carried out in collaboration with other researchers from the WRI, while in many others I have been the only WRI-researcher. Although agreement among researchers and practitioners has always been reached on the practical measures, the reasoning behind, the interpretive horizon for, and understanding of these efforts have mostly been different. Hence, this presentation represents the viewpoints of this author, not necessarily those of other participants. This may seem obvious, but I return to address some of these questions through the text.

concerned. Broad participation is pursued from practically every employee in the department or division concerned. The participants discuss their own collective and common work experience with task solution and with each other first-hand. They discuss their own ways of working and collaborating together in “natural” settings. Collaborating in creating changes and promoting permanent collective reflection and learning *in the work place* organise and direct the efforts. While the practitioners remain the experts on their own organisational realities, the researchers provide assistance and guidance in organising and conducting reflection. Reflecting, relating, and integrating the experiences emerging from the projects into research discourses has been the challenge and responsibility of the professional researchers<sup>4</sup>.

As a result of this Norwegian or Nordic approach, questions about how to organise and facilitate continuous collective and organisational learning in the work places have become natural concomitants and close conceptual relatives to any action research or action learning project, at least for this author. Accordingly, building the permanent capacity for work place learning and for organisational learning has increasingly become the explicit and conscious objective in the projects run by this author. But since the beginning (ref.), the effort has been to “organise reflection” (cf. Eikeland, 1987; Reynolds and Vince; 2004).

## **2. PRACTICAL CONCEPTUAL TOOLS**

In order quickly to bring the reader in a position better to understand the content of the discussions, some common denominators of the projects discussed must be briefly presented right away. As already indicated, all the projects have been based on broad participation from those concerned within “real-time” and “natural” communities of practice and within an action research approach and horizon. This is usually done by inviting everyone to participate in so-called “dialogue-conferences” (ref.), developed at the WRI from the Australian search-conference model (ref.). Hence, the broadly participatory action research *cum* organisational learning efforts have been more like shifts in the *mode* of being together among the same people working together, than a total shift of place (to schools), context (to education), people (to other students), etc.

In order to operationalise this shift of mode, “popularised” distinctions have been employed between *performing* “on stage” in a “work-organisation” mode, and *reflecting / inquiring* “back-stage” in a “development-organisation” mode, alternating between them in order to organise individual and collective learning from practice (cf. Eikeland & Berg, 1997). The alternation is a way of giving the well-known learning cycles of action research an organisational expression, embedding them within structure and everyday life of an organisation.

When discussing different organisations and different kinds of organisations in organisation theory, these have mostly been differences within the category of “work organisations” (ref.), i.e. in ways of solving the primary tasks of the organisations – producing commodities or services – providing their *raison d’être*. In the dramaturgical terms of a theatre the work organisation is the “on stage” where people play their roles defined in relation to the primary

---

<sup>4</sup> While Paalshaugen (ref.), Engelstad (ref.), and Gustavsen (ref.) at the WRI normally think of the relationship between researchers and practitioners as complementary, I personally think conceptualising it as a *mutual* master-apprenticeship relationship is more adequate (cf. Eikeland, 2006).

tasks. The back stage of a development organisation, however, makes visible and systematizes the work with the secondary tasks or meta-tasks of an organisation; the discussion, evaluation, maintenance, modification, shifting etc. of roles. The back stage also creates a reflective “role distance” and an open free space relieved from the immediate practical exigencies of the staged roles. Inversely from Goffman’s way (195x) of relating these terms, the back stage here constitutes an internal public space of a certain kind within the organisation (ref. Kalleberg, Paalshaugen, Eikeland). The development organisation is meant to organise, provide space for and develop the meta-tasks permanently. Hence, it is not simply a temporary project organisation for solving unique and limited tasks within given time limits.

The importance of the distinction is that it relieves the work organisation from dealing with everything, in both directions, so to speak. Tasks require task adjusted ways of organising. Certain limited tasks may require quite hierarchical, authoritarian, and technically specified ways. Others may require very “flat” and non-authoritarian ways, leaving most things to the discretion and prudence of individual performers. What the on-stage / back-stage distinction does is to establish an organisational meta-level of organising for learning about and making decisions about the successfulness and design of the work organisation. It makes it possible to adjust the work organisation more easily to varying tasks instead of forcing all kinds of tasks into the grid of one given work organisational structure. The work organisations are made less permanent and more flexible as they are relieved from carrying (or simply suppressing) these meta-tasks as well. Opening and establishing the back stage is, to use a metaphor, to produce a pelvic distortion due to pregnancy (Norwegian: “bekkenløsning” – a metaphor used) of the work organisation.

The whole scheme is employed to facilitate and organise collective experiential learning in the organisation; not merely individual parallel learning, not merely theoretical learning through words alone, but collective learning by doing trying out common solutions together. Collective learning examines our collective ways of relating to each other in solving the tasks set for the organisation (single loop), or in changing the tasks (double loop). The theoretical backdrop for the different “popularised” distinctions will be discussed below.

### **3. EXPERIENCES FROM 6 PROJECTS**

This section reviews experiences from 6 selected projects (1985-2007), lasting 2-5 years each, all concerned with building / institutionalising learning capacities and learning systems – organising reflection (Reynolds and Vince; 2004) – within the organisations involved. Aims, challenges, and results / learning from each project is presented and discussed showing how clarity about objectives emerged through a – not always straightforward – learning process.

#### **3.1 Car dealers / repair shops**

“Car dealers / repair shops” project (1985-1990) involving industry associations / unions and several small firms. The challenge was to know what to do when firms involved were not ready for large restructurings of work organisations suggested by researchers. The theoretical horizon of Engelstad & Paalshaugen at the time (ref.) was “multi-organisation” trying to find an adjusted organisational form for each kind of task. This required major changes in the work organisations of the firms involved. The different task-adjusted organisations were all *on a par* however. The “solution” found was the introduction of a “simpler” distinction between “work organisation” and “development organisation” in order to be able to set objectives for collective reflection and inquiry *without* immediate change consequences for the work organisation. Leaving all the different work organisations behind, the development

organisation emerges as something common to all of them, i.e. not as just another one beside – on a par with – all the others. Although the distinction itself does not, the specific terminology (section 1) originates from this project. Different Scandinavian research trajectories extending from this project (Engelstad, Paalshaugen), using a similar distinction is reviewed briefly. They left the former “multi-organisation” perspective but have never really clarified the development organisation as something different from a project organisation. One explicit objective for the project was to enhance the absorptive capacity (Cohen & Levinthal) of the firms.

### **3.2 Learning organisation and participatory culture**

“Learning organisation and participatory culture” project (1990-1996) working with and following up on a merger of 4 municipalities to create a new town of 45.000 people. Main challenge: Building learning structures and participatory culture during a major transitional phase for 4000 employees. This is where “back stage” and “on stage” was introduced systematically. Also the different ways of learning.

### **3.3 User participation for the disabled**

“*User participation* for the disabled” project in several municipalities (1994-1997). Challenge: to organise a fragmented field of user-participation across divisions between central and local public authorities, volunteer organisations, and individual users. The project used “back stage” reflection actively in its own organisation.

### **3.4 Retaining older workers**

County administration project (1999-2002) to *retain older workers*. Challenge: to use dialogue conferences / experiential reflection in developing policies adjusted to needs in different life phases. Systematically analyzing the extant “meeting places” in the organisation, both formal and informal.

### **3.5 Organisational learning in one town municipality**

*Organisational learning* in one town municipality (2000-2004). The municipality wanted to build organisational learning capacities within a newly established organisational structure from 2000. We decided to design a college education to support the construction of learning systems in the work place. Challenge: to transcend common pitfalls in “customised courses” when using education to build learning capacities.

### **3.6 National Initiative for Senior Workers**

National Initiative for Senior Workers project (2002-2005), sponsored by all organisations in Norwegian work life, employers’ and employees’. Challenge: to address and develop life phase policies through indirect approaches, i.e. through broadly participatory work place learning, building a learning system and organising reflection in a large nursing home. Learning: Learning in the work place and organisational learning need to be addressed directly, not just indirectly.

## **4. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

This section discusses the theoretical background. Both theoretical and practical work has focused on *organisational learning* defined as *collective* experiential or practical learning (Eikeland & Berg; 1997). Learning objectives are connected to, but distinct from democratic objectives (decision-making). The distinction from section 1 above did not just emerge, nor

was it imported from everyday theatre-analogies or from Goffman (1959). It has deeper historical roots (from the temporary, task-dependent authority bestowed on strategoi and imperators by assemblies of equals (ekklêsía / *senatus*) in Greece and Rome) explored by the author in parallel studies in a) the history of philosophy, b) social and political theory, and c) research methodology, besides d) springing from important early personal experiences from an experimental educational institution in the early 1970s (make a point out of “hatch-ring” as a. breaking out of on-stage work organisation roles, and b. hatching new ideas). This background connects philosophical and methodological thinking approaching basic historical concepts, *directly* to practical attempts at building both individual and collective learning in organisations.

The article relates the distinctions with their background, to “mainstream” literature on organizational learning in e.g. Cohen & Sproull (1996) and Easterby-Smith & Lyles (2003), work place learning in e.g. Boud & Solomon (2001), and Boud & Garrick (1999), and action research traditions in e.g. Reason & Bradbury (2001). Bringing the background into the discussion of the projects raises *methodological* questions about the division between theoretical and empirical “entities”, and between knowers (researchers) and known (natives / researched) as unsuitable for social research. Reasons for seeing the work as practitioner research is presented and discussed. The work is considered part of a “turn to practice” (Gherardi; 2000, Nicolini et al; 2003) not just theoretically, but more importantly, *methodologically*.

Concepts and insights from specific authors and approaches, all with a direct bearing on the practical distinctions used, are discussed:

- a. E.Goffman’s distinctions between public and private, being on- and back-stage (1959).
- b. Public sphere concepts in J.Habermas (1962) and O.Negt & A.Kluge (1972).
- c. Distinctions from Aristotle between dialogue or dialectics, didactics, rhetoric, and between forms of knowledge as well as other distinctions from ancient Greek philosophy. Cf. Eikeland (1997).
- d. Distinction between empirical and transcendental “I” in Kant (1781 / 1787). The “transformation” of these concepts by Karl-Otto Apel (1973).
- e. Distinction between “personal individual” and “group individual” in Karl Marx (1842-1844 & 1845-1846).
- f. Distinctions between “I” and “me” in G.H.Mead (1934), between “Dasein” and “Sosein” in M.Heidegger (1927), and between the “interpersonal” and the “social” in M.Buber (1984)
- g. Methodological implications of the philosophy of Aristotle, Plato, Hegel, Marx, Dewey, the late Wittgenstein, and Heidegger for the use of “theoretical” and “empirical” concepts, and divisions between researchers and researched in social research. Cf. Eikeland (1997).
- h. The idea of “basic historical concepts” (geschichtliche Grundbegriffe) (Koselleck; 2002 & 2004) is introduced to the discussion about a “turn to practice”.
- i.

## **5. SYMBIOTIC LEARNING SYSTEMS**

This final section discusses design-implications and challenges in an emerging collaborative project for building “symbiotic learning systems” involving several health educations at several university colleges and university hospitals in Norway, and the WRI.

## ***SELECTIVE LIST OF REFERENCES***

- Apel, Karl-Otto (1973):  
*Transformation der Philosophie*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt a.M.
- Eikeland, Olav (1997) (in Norwegian):  
*Experience, Dialogics & Politics – The Importance of Ancient Dialogue Philosophy for the Reconstruction of Modern Empirical Social Science. A Contribution from Philosophy and the History of Concepts*, Norwegian University Press, Oslo
- Eikeland, Olav & Berg, Anne-Marie (1997):(in Norwegian):  
*Participatory Organizational Learning and Development Work in Municipalities*, Kommuneforlaget, Oslo
- Eikeland, Olav (2006):
- Eikeland, Olav (2007):
- Buber, Martin (1984):  
*Das dialogische Prinzip*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt
- Cohen, W M and Levinthal, D. A. (1990), 'Absorptive Capacity: A new perspective on Learning and Innovation', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, vol. 35 no. 1, pp. 128-152
- Easterby-Smith, Mark & Lyles, Marjorie A. (eds.) (2003):  
*Handbook of Organizational Learning and Knowledge Management*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford
- Gherardi, Silvia (2000):  
Practice-based Theorizing on Learning and Knowing in Organizations, *Organization*, 7 (2): 211-223
- Goffman, Erving (1959):  
*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth
- Habermas, Jürgen (1962):  
*Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit – Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*, Herman Luchterhand Verlag, Neuwied, English translation: *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1989
- Heidegger, Martin (1927):  
*Sein und Zeit*, Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen, 1986
- Kant, Immanuel (1781 / 1787):  
*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt a.M.
- Koselleck, Reinhart (2002):  
*The Practice of Conceptual History – Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press
- Koselleck, Reinhart (2004):  
*Futures Past – On the Semantics of Historical Time*, New York, Columbia University Press
- Marx, Karl (1842-1844):  
*Zur Judenfrage*, in Marx Engels Werke (MEW) 1, Dietz Verlag, Berlin, 1983
- Marx, Karl & Engels, Friedrich (1845-1846):  
*Die deutsche Ideologie*, Marx Engels Werke (MEW) 3, Dietz Verlag, Berlin, 1969
- Mead, George Herbert (1934):  
*Mind, Self & Society – from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1974
- Negt, Oskar & Kluge, Alexander (1972):  
*Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung*. English translation: *Public Sphere and Experience – Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis & London, 1993
- Nicolini, Davide et al. (2003):  
*Knowing in Organizations: A Practice-Based Approach*, London, M.E.Sharpe
- Reason, Peter & Bradbury, Hilary (eds.) (2001):  
*Handbook of Action Research – Participative Inquiry in Practice*, Sage Publications, London
- Reynolds, Michael & Vince, Russ (eds.) (2004):  
*Organizing Reflection*, Ashgate Publishing Ltd, Aldershot