

A SENSE OF PARTICIPATION: PROXIMITY IN ACTION RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

The postmodern take on action research has increased the range of critique and reflection. The addition of complexity theory/cybernetics has developed a fertile ground for new developments in action research by redefining the role of theory in interaction to practice. Theory no longer represents, is no longer the result of mere analysis. They are communications that help to compare events and practices. These communications demand attention for the ambiguity, indeterminateness and dynamics of situations. This postmodern take on complexity is interested in the way people attempt to make this messiness tractable and the ethical implications thereof. This paper argues for such a postmodern-complexity take on action research, emphasizing the role of participation. It illustrates this practice describing a change process in a Polytech.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Complexity Theory, Levinas, Action Research.

*I knock at the stone's front door,
It's only me, let me come in.
...[the stone answers]...
You may get to know me, but you'll never know me through
My whole surface is turned toward you,
all my insides turned away.
...[after repeated pleas for entrance]...
You shall not enter - the stone says -
You lack the sense of taking part.
No other sense can make up for your missing sense of taking part.
Even sight heightened to become all-seeing
will do you no good without a sense of taking part.
You shall not enter, you have only a sense of what that sense should be,
only its seed, imagination.*

From Wisława Szymborska's, "Conversation With A Stone", Nothing Twice: Selected Poems, (transl. Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh) Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, (1997), p54. Szymborska was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1996.

INTRODUCTION

The verse above is a part of a poem which could well be read as the question as to in how far we are able to know the Other. It raises the question what knowing through taking part could entail, what a sense of participation could entail. The 'I' asks to enter a stone, asks for a door to enter the world of the stone. The 'I' longs to know what it would mean to partake so that it may sense the otherness in its own terms. This longing of the 'I' seems to come from a fatigue of a world of givens. Still, the 'I' asks for an

explicit opening; a door, thereby still bound to its usual world, despite its longing for something else. The stone's answer is a denial of this possibility, the act of entering, the precondition for knowing otherness, can only be guided by a sense of participation. Until then, only the outside-surface is turned towards the inquirer, while the *inside* is turned away (and *insight* is impossible). As the poem continues, the 'I' keeps on insisting, negotiating for entrance. Finally, the stone plainly tells the 'I' that there is no door. There is no explicit opening to the inside, knowing the inside is no spectator's event, it requires the tacit taking part of.

The poem hints at the importance of participation as an act grounded in a tacit sense of direction. Interestingly, this same connotation can be found in methodological descriptions of participatory research and appreciative inquiry (Patton, 2002; Reason, 2001). Inquiry in the context of participatory action research is an attempt to develop an understanding from a shared activity. It should be stressed that this is different from a classical hermeneutical approach that understands participatory research in terms of empathy (thereby going back to Schleiermacher, Dilthey, or the early Weber). Participatory action research need not have the pretense to enter the inside, to understand the other in their own terms. Still, participation is to leave the role of the expert aside and develop knowledge and understanding together with other participants by participating in collective action. Just as in the poem there is no pretense that the 'I' will gain entrance to the *inside*, but sharing in action does allow for *insight* in the process of collective action and its boundaries.

Recurrent ethical themes in action research are related to participation. They consider the role of democratic involvement, and differences in power and influence. In contrast, this paper attempts to demonstrate that participation is more rich in ethical content. Participation could also entail the quality of sharing in each other's lives. A lack of allowing participation could be about avoiding the presence of the other - even when present - or making the other into an object.

The postmodern-complexity take demands attention for the ambiguity, indeterminateness and dynamics of situations. This approach is interested in the way people attempt to make this messiness tractable and the ethical implications thereof. It is interested in when collective action is still collective and the messy edges or boundaries that separate collective action from conflicting initiatives. The meaning of participation in action research from this perspective entails the idea that a researcher finds him or herself in an indeterminate, ambiguous situation. This situation is an in-between unity and differences (Hagen, 1998); collective action is not separate from chaos, nor is collective action and chaos the same. This paper develops the practice of action research out of these considerations.

The first part is a sketch of a development that could be understood as the postmodern take on complexity theory/ cybernetics and how that poses new demands on action research as a methodology. We will especially focus on the tension between self / system, knowledge / intervention, research subject / research object, research / practice. In the section thereafter, the second part, we will then question the use of the concept of participation (and similar terms such as engagement, involvement) in action research.

The third part of the paper entails the outline of an alternative conceptualization of participation in action research. For this the concept *proximity* from Emanuel Levinas is used. Proximity is not an attribute of the self or the collective. It is an encounter from which we find a self and an other. Proximity is relevant for action research for its ethical ramifications. It's relevance lies not in that ethical rules on how to conduct action research. Rather proximity emphasizes the qualities we can find in participating and the ethical appeal and discomfort we sense when participation is subverted into an instrumental relation. Levinas has described proximity also as an anti-event, disturbing a world of givens, interrupting the relation between identity and social order (Davis, 1996). Participation is described in this paper in three dialectic aspects: proximity vs. distance, indwelling vs. instrumental rationality, accommodation vs. alienation. Participation can be considered at the level of direct human experience the proximity and distance we have with clients and colleagues. At the level of interaction the depth of indwelling is considered together with the appropriateness thereof. At the level of structure, structure is valued in terms of accommodating dialogue and in terms of the responsibility we implicitly take on us by

embodying structures. The three different dialectic aspects of participation are illustrated with an action research in a polytech.

A POSTMODERN TAKE ON COMPLEXITY THEORY

From the early days of action research there has been a strong interest in systems theory (Lewin, 1951). Action research has been related to a series of interventions, where interventions have been understood in the context of systems, understood as effecting systems. Action research and systemic intervention have thus been closely related in terms of the intended effect.

Looking at the last three decades there have been two separate developments that are recently coming together. This synergy creates new demands on, and alternative directions for action research. Complexity theory and postmodern perspectives in their combination may impact our understanding of action research fundamentally. This combined development allows to avoid and reconstruct the usual dichotomies that in traditional action research have been assumed. No longer has the researcher as change agent any superior strategy over conjoining workers. Instead all are participants in a shared endeavor for change. This is closely related to the idea that the researcher can not merely observe and interview, without intervening. The Hawthorne studies still echo in current methodological considerations. In short, from a postmodern perspective the distinction between action research and observational research is inherently blurred. We will return to this point when discussing Midgley's approach to action research in the next section.

A related theme is the practice / theory dichotomy. No longer theory has a privileged position over notions of practice in the field; they are all communications in different social practices (Czarniawska, 1997), neither of them are value-free, separate from power and politics, or free from interpretation. For instance, Michael Payne argues that social theory should consist of a moral perspective, a theoretical component and a model for action. The theoretical component is a coherent set of theoretical explanations (with the arguments therefore). Any position, any statement reflects a moral position (which is quite common in postmodern science, cf. (Boje, 2008; Cilliers, 1998)) and thus Payne argues that this moral position should be made explicit and reflected upon. Moreover Payne argues that if there is no communication with social practice, also reflection on the theory is poor. This leaves open what social theory is, besides communication. A postmodern take on this could be that theory is a translator, a way to translate one situation or reflection into the next, or to systematize the comparison between situations (Serres, 1995).

The postmodern take on complexity theory is so powerful because it allows us to handle the dichotomies in more creative, less naive ways. The trap of dualism, which is making the differences essential but thereby makes the interaction incomprehensible, is avoided in the postmodern take on complexity theory by relating the two in terms of emergence, structural coupling and autopoiesis. The differences emerge, are reproduced and thereby become real, without any essence. Unification as an alternative for dualism, which is to find a general principle so that the two differences are essentially one is also avoided. The danger of unification is that there is no explanation for multiplicity. To put it simple (and slightly oversimplified): "Why are there differences in the first place, when all is one?"

We may illustrate this by considering the relation between self and other, inside and outside, which is a central theme in postmodern discussions. This discussion also develops as a result from ideas from complexity theory/ cybernetics. Causality there is no longer merely linear, but complex. This means that causality is not only about feedback, but about self-cause and co-development.

Concepts such as self-cause, autopoiesis (self-reproduction) are radical changes in our thinking about identity and cause. They emphasize - in terms of Aristotle - the final cause over the efficient cause (Juarrero, 1999). Final cause is a causal relationship which has been neglected for centuries and which may seem odd at first (e.g. the seed grows because it needs to develop into a tree). But when we think

though the concept of autopoiesis we get final cause. The identity of the system as a result, creates the circumstances for its own reproduction.

This allows us to consider identity - which is usually defined in static terms - in terms of dynamics. We avoid thereby dualism; There is no essential difference between identities, only the difference that the systems themselves produce. Even more so, these identities sometimes collaborate so intensively that it becomes hard to distinguish one system from the other, to decide when we we should conceive of an emergent larger system, etc. This is described in literature as co-evolution (Kaufman, 1995), complicity (Stewart & Cohen, 1997), the reproduction of each other through structural coupling (Luhmann, 1995; Maturana & Varela, 1980), etc.

Apart from the possibilities for avoiding dualism, complexity theory/cybernetics allows us to avoid unification, since differences are produced and reproduced. Instead, if there is one principle it is change that produces differences, tensions. In the postmodern take, this is easily connected to the poststructuralist philosophies of Lyotard and Derrida (Cilliers, 1998; DeLanda, 1997; Hayles, 1993, 2000). We understand, act, are, in systems of signs. Meaning is signification, indicating something else than itself, which refers to something else, which in its turn refers to... in an endless process of deferral (Derrida, 1979 (1970 or.)). Nothing is understood on its own, in its own essence. We always find ourselves thrown in a world of traces.

The development of the combination of complexity theory/cybernetics and postmodern sciences start impacting action research for their shared interest in dynamics, process and change. Complexity theory and postmodern perspectives in their combination may impact our understanding of action research fundamentally. The combination of the concepts and images from complexity theory and the postmodern emphasis on the fluid, indeterminate, underdetermined nature of language, communication and interaction has lead to surprising insights, new ways of developing explanations, but also the nature of theory (Cilliers, 1998; Hayles, 1999; Juarrero, 1999; Letiche, 2000; Morin, 2008; Tsoukas & Hatch, 2001). Its power lies especially in connecting the usual dichotomies without reducing the differences: body vs. mind, natural sciences vs. social sciences, theory vs. practice, structure vs. process, individual vs. social. The crucial point from this perspective is that there are no essential differences. However, the way these differences are constructed in particular contexts involve questions about power, violence, and ethics. These questions matter greatly if we intervene, act, attempt to change.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN ACTION RESEARCH

Gerald Midgley is one of the first to consider the implications of the postmodern take on complexity theory for action research. In his book "Systemic Intervention" (2000: 129) attempts to reconceptualize action research as systemic intervention aimed at developing and critiquing boundaries and questioning boundary judgements. A boundary is something that is produced by an open system. The boundary is that which distinguishes the system from its environment, the visible from the invisible and tacit. The boundary includes and excludes, defines identity and at the same time subsumes, intrudes other boundaries.

However, the system is not one thing, it relates in multiple and changing ways to its environment and thus produces different boundaries that may overlap, conflict, etc. "[S]ystemic intervention is purposeful action by an agent to create change in relation to reflection on boundaries" (Midgley, 2000: 129).

What is this agent then? According to Midgley, it can be an individual, but also a community, family, a team, an organization, or any collective. There are no fixed boundaries for the agent either. It is for this reason that he criticizes the role of the agent as conceived of as in traditional action research as too autonomous and embodying a God's eye point of view. Instead, he argues for a participatory forms of action research.

Although I find Midgley's point crucial that the way the boundaries are produced are not neutral but involve ethical choices (however implicit) I find his position too relativistic. He is not answering the

question in any sense of how to relate to the Other. Though he emphasizes that the setting of boundaries is not free from ethical decisions, he gives no clue of *how* to set the boundary..

A related point is that although Midgley looks at power and ethics, he is de-emphasizing violence. If he would have emphasized the role of violence in boundary setting, the overly relativist position would have been more apparent. If for instance we bring Michel Serres in the debate we would easily conceive of systemic intervention in terms of boundary setting (and the critique thereof) in terms of violence. With every line we draw or deconstruct, we exclude, we invade space, violate borders. And on the other hand, a lack of engagement, leaves anarchy to exist, with the danger of tyranny and the rule of opportunism. (Serres, 1980).

Or, vice versa, this brings me to the third take on the critique of an overly relativist position, there is no attention to conviviality, sharing in each other's lives, respecting the in-between, tuning into the rhythm of the body, the process, etc. Surely, one way of participation is not worth the same as another. Even though our knowledge is contextual, historical, bound to a perspective, we may still need to judge, and may have good arguments to do so. Is it not strange that in all this emphasis on the ethical, together with practice, there is no attention to what a good life could entail, and what we could do to develop such?

Similar critiques unfortunately apply to related efforts. Brown and Jones (2001), for instance make a point for the role of ironic narrativity in action research. But again the ethical question as to what to consider for bringing in a narrative perspective in action research remains hidden. Sure enough a narrative approach may enrich action research, but Hitler used narrativity as well to propel his change program (though he seemed to lack in irony).

In all of these examples there is little consideration for violence, suppression, conviviality, etc. Thus, despite the implications the use of terms such as participation, involvement, and engagement have to study lived interaction, to develop living theory, learn through dialogue, the description of these terms themselves remain abstract, separate from the domain of lived experience. If indeed we assume that theory and morality are closely intertwined, than how can we avoid an ethical perspective on participation?

Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen (2005) emphasize emergent and mutual involvement in action research. Also here we see the increased attention for participation in relation to the emergence of organization. They develop the idea of dialogue in action research, giving it a central position in the change process. Similar to Argyris and Schön they consider practitioners in the action research are co-inquirers, and the researcher are also experient-agents. They make a division of labor, between the two groups. Practitioners are being directly involved in the problematic situation and more oriented towards practical solutions (p.250-2).

This paper is closely connected to the effort of Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen. They are concerned with the role of ethics in action research as a central issue. They quote Martin Buber for the I-thou relation, emphasize caring in action research, they develop the role of reflection in action research, and connect change with dialogue, as conceived by David Bohm. For these ethical concerns and the complexity of integrating ethics, emergence, and organizational change I admire their study. The role of explicit reflection makes their book rather messy, unclear at times, but it adds depth. For this I see their work as an example of the postmodern-complexity take on action research.

However the reflection is on their concepts, and how these develop. What is lacking is the reflection on their experience of the process. In other words, there is largely outside, and little inside to see as a reader (see poem). The process is described from an outsider's perspective, but there is little space to see the shared joy, uncertainties, ambiguities, the experience of oppression, etc. Although the study of Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen discuss humor, there is actually little depth to their description. Moreover, the role of violence and strife in their study is virtually lacking. What such a study could do is to describe their own uncertainty, rising from the indeterminateness of a situation and overdeterminateness of a situation (examples follow).

This critique is similar to the point that Foucault (1988; , 2005/2001) and Hadot (1995) have made on the dominance of the analytic voice in modern philosophy. It is too ordered, too separate from the qualities of living. They have questioned the dominance of the analytic on the basis of that in the classical Greek tradition philosophy was related to the art of living. Philosophy in that time was not predominantly a mental activity. Rather knowledge was embedded in the way one lived, to a care of the self (according to Foucault) and to spiritual transformation (according to Hadot). The adagio on the Delphi temple: “know thyself” was a part of considerations what a good life entailed. In a similar way I question the dominance of the analytic voice, and ask for the lived ambiguity, uncertainty, the multiplicity, the messiness and the ethical response, the art of living perspective, of how to deal with those messy issues.

One way to address such is to take the living quality of the experience of proximity as a starting point. Proximity gives us a way - in terms of the poem -to experience inside but avoid the colonization of the other. It is not that we enter otherness, but that we make use of the action we share, while respecting otherness.

PROXIMITY

The concept of participation is crucial in the postmodern-complexity take on action research. The point is not that there is no concept of participation in action research literature. In general, participation is related to considerations for who has the power to influence outcomes and on what level. Participation is related to a democratic concern for allowing or suppressing the voices of the involved during the decision-making process. But I have argued that we would need a perspective to understand the human qualities of participation. In more postmodern takes on action research there is indeed consideration for mutuality, dialogue, engagement. However, despite the implications these terms have to study lived interaction, the use of these terms hardly lead to *a sense of what it means to participate*.

Action research need not to investigate the inside of the other, but can make use of the shared experience of change. However, this need not mean that participants (including researcher) experience the same, or need consensus on the meaning of experience. Participation, may also imply a sense of not connecting, of distance, of objectification. In the following I would like to discuss participation in the sense of a disruption of the given, participation in the light of conflict, dissensus, and structuring - reification.

In action research literature there is a varying consideration for moral accountability. In some literature it takes the place of research ethics (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). This entails the traditional consideration of the outcomes of the research for society and some moral rules to apply during the research, like dealing with informants and confidential information. In other literature, moral accountability is a more central theme, as the researcher intervenes and is thereby morally accountable for its effects together with the other participants (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2005).

I suggest to take with Levinas another starting point. As explained above, there is no essential, unchanging identity presumed in the postmodern take on complexity theory. The subject is not given, but is dynamic as a way of perceiving, acting, understanding. This dynamic subject is interdependent with Others. In touching the Other, we become touched (Schmid, 2004:244-5). In touching, in a broad sense, there is implicitly a self found, as well as the opposite: difference, otherness.

Levinas' concern was that the role of ethics would be secondary to social interaction. This means that ethics and morality is something that is socially constructed. At that moment relativism becomes a tremendous problem. From one perspective we may construe a particular morale and from another a conflicting morale can be construed, and there is no neutral perspective to judge the differences. His solution was that the ethical relation is before identity. Thus there are no social actors that may or may not construct an ethical relation. Rather, the ethical relation is there *before* we take up an identity or rather become a subject.

Proximity has an immediacy. It is beyond intentionality, the ground of all intention (Bauman, 1993). Before we decide how we relate to the Other, we already relate. Before we are in a particular relation to the world and assume a particular identity, there is the proximity of the Other.

Proximity is the opposite of distance or even more so the rejection of distance. It calls attention to those situations in organizations that are characterized by a violent rejection of otherness, a neglect of wonder. For instance top-down reorganizations work through unifying roles and neglecting individual qualities and experiences. Human resource management and culture management is more and more aimed at colonizing the identity of employees to produce and align ambition with organizational goals, as so many critical studies point out.

From the concept of proximity, these kinds of management initiatives are not obviously right - nor wrong. The importance of the idea of proximity is that it brings to the attention the more subtle pleasure and qualities of sharing in each others lives. Sharing in conviviality, celebrating the success of other breaks through the narrow perspective of an identity that only pursues its own success. The identity that we take on during our work for our functional role, need not determine our lives in organization. Even though we are continuously addressed in that role. Proximity is our natural potential to feel compassion with our clients and colleagues, to care for our environment, etc. Thus despite the ethical connotation of proximity, proximity also refers to conviviality, the humane qualities of sharing in each other's life (Polanyi, 1962). Proximity need not be a preambula to identification and merger, absorption or swallowing. Proximity may also be satisfied with being what it is, in a state of permanent attention, come what may. We may share in the experience of the Other as a mystery. That may be one of the most intimate experiences of all (Davis, 1996). Proximity is therefore something which is there anyway, but it also challenges our art of living. The question is whether we allow ourselves to be called upon, to meet the Other, allow the other in its Otherness, have attention for the Other without subjugating differences.

The relation to the conceptualization of participation in action research is the following. Action research sure enough is about impacting power structures, be it in an emancipatory way, facilitating, perhaps even in terms of establishing a regime. It is about shared sensemaking, collective understanding. And in the participation in shared sensemaking, the development and change of structure and organization there is responsibility of the action researcher. We may consider this responsibility in terms of mutual adequacy, democracy, emancipation. But all these terms do no in themselves justify the participation of the action researcher, nor the opposite - passiveness, withdrawal.

Proximity in action research is noticing the disruption of collectives, the cracks in the structures, the rupture in the expected expectations. Proximity is a way to be sensitive for the moment when collective action becomes oppression. The Other remains a mystery to the collective, that may accommodate some of its ways and exclude others. That means that any collective, any structure is inherently an outcome of suppressive power. But it may be the least of the worst. On the other side of structure there is chaos. Radical violence, raw power prevails when principles, structures, authority lacks.

Proximity calls our attention away from a world of givens. It may allow us to find autonomy in a new sense:

Breathing in a conscious and free manner is equivalent to taking charge of one's life, to accepting solitude through cutting the umbilical cord, to respecting and cultivating life, for oneself and for others.

As long as we do not breathe in an autonomous manner, not only do we live badly but we encroach upon others in order to live. We remain confused with others, forming a sort of mass, a sort of tribe, where each individual has not yet conquered his personal life but lives on a collective and social respiration, on an unconscious breathing of the group, beginning with that of the family.

(Irigaray, 2002a: 74)

The image for autonomy is cutting the umbilical cord, so that one is able to breathe in an autonomous way. Breathing is the process of sharing in lives of others, in space, time, rhythm - largely performed subconsciously. As long as we conform to a world of objects, to the coercion of the given and the conventional, our world is determined by the cultural. We would then still live as a foetus in a social-cultural placenta (Irigaray, 2002a). For, is it not the case that all this instrumental emphasis on tacit knowledge, culture management, or management of human competencies is an attempt to develop placental, non-autonomous 'participation'.

This point of view is opposite the idea of autonomy as it arose during the Enlightenment period and which is still maintained in neo-liberalism. There is no autonomous individual with property rights, self-interest and preferences. Instead, autonomy arises - how ironic - from meeting the Other. From the experience of proximity, from touching, meeting the Other, is it possible to find a self interdependently, mutually adapting. Despite, the connotation of responsibility, proximity has everything to do with freedom. It allows to acknowledge "the presence of the face as my responsibility" (Bauman, 1993 : 86).

Perhaps surprisingly, this perspective informed by proximity rejects action research when it is aimed at conquering the differences between self and Other for establishing consensus, shared understanding, and coordination. Instead, the mystery of the Other may continue to exist, it may even be something to abide by. From this perspective we have redefined autonomy and thereby what choosing action is.

The following is a brief description of an action research. Its function is to illustrate what a postmodern-complexity take on action research could entail informed by proximity. At first it may not be clear how this description is different from other descriptions resulting from action research. For this reason I would like to highlight a number of aspects on forehand. There is emphasis on what is happening at the edge of collective action, the deterioration of collective order and the sources for maintaining and disrupting order. Secondly, there is attention for the Other as a mystery. The Other is not to be explained from the inside, but experienced in relation to collective action. Thereby, collective action is questioned for its qualities in terms of accommodating Otherness. Thirdly, action and narration are not separate. The interventions may seem pretty limited to some classical action researchers, but the aim is to develop narratives. Fourthly, care is an explicit theme, even when care relates to people who no longer participate in collective action.

A CASE OF ACTION RESEARCH

A polytech in the Netherlands has a master's program which is in content related to what generally goes under the name of critical pedagogy in the United States. For research as an educational practice performed with students, the lecturers rely on hermeneutical and phenomenological approaches to science. Some of the lecturers even explore more postmodern oriented approaches, using concepts such as discourse, subjectification, narrativity. This group draws from philosophers such as Foucault, Derrida, Sloterdijk and Spivak. There has been elaborate discussion in the past on what these approaches could mean for the masters education.

The director of the master's program had invited me to facilitate the development of the curriculum and help to address problems in masters thesis supervision. After two meetings (one with this director, one with two lecturers who have been intensively involved with teaching methodology) there was a first agenda set for a plenary meeting, with about 25-30 lecturers. The agenda was to develop the question: "what kind of methodologies will be relevant for the master's program in terms of the development of the lecturers and to teach to students".

After my brief presentation of the agenda, the discussion started in five break-out groups of about 5-6 persons. Quite good, all of them seemed willing to pursue the agenda I had set forth. But under this guise of willingness after some time the first cracks appeared. Lecturers subscribed to the relevance of the agenda and still there was hesitance. Listening in to the discussions in the different groups there was uncertainty what the different research methods entailed and what they could mean for the master.

In the lunch-break there was still no discussion on whether research methods were relevant, it seemed the agenda had been accepted. Instead, the informal talk bore emphasis on *not knowing* what to do, not knowing how to guide a masters thesis, not knowing how to supervise a student research. Lecturers supported one another in narrating how they attempted to solve issues in thesis supervision despite their lack of knowledge: “together with the student I develop an understanding of the situation and the method that could apply there”. But it also expressed discontent with the outcomes and lack of quality of students research.

After the lunch-break we proceeded with identifying themes and a first exploration of what these themes could mean for the institute. I closed the meeting with a brief summary of the inventory of methods and the issues about the master that were recurrent in the discussion, making the issue of not-knowing an explicit theme.

The second meeting was two weeks later. For this, I prepared five propositions that at first sight could capture their consensus on research methods and its position for their master. I constructed the propositions from excerpts of the first meeting and selected them on the basis of their potentiality for impacting the organization of the master in terms of curriculum and the setting of shared intellectual development. Again, the discussion took place in breakout-groups. There was general support for the propositions with a few but important nuances (of which later). The question then was what these proposition would imply for their organization. On the basis of these answers I created a draft vision report, which was to become the start of further discussions.

Some lecturers remained very quiet. One of them I knew from the primary school of my daughter as our children share the same classroom. At the first meeting this lecturer talked at me during lunch, but during and after the second meeting she avoided me altogether - also when we met at the school of our children. The second meeting had been about the organizational implications. So the question for me was, what was the content of her silence?

Interestingly, the director of the institute that organizes this master (which is part of a larger faculty in sociology, society and law) recently published his PhD.thesis, comparing teachers to coolies - subalterns in terms of Spivak. This reminded me of several excerpts where lecturers seemed to be able to expect from each other to run the extra mile to solve problems of each other. It also reminded me of several passive stances where lecturers expected me to tell them which methods they should use and how. Also in interviews this was a recurrent theme in how some lecturers described the passivity of their colleagues. Although, this Ph.D. thesis mainly aimed at discussing the practices of teachers and the dominance of educational management, he explicitly mentions the polytechs (and thus his institution?) as well as part of his scope.

It became increasingly clear to me that this research maneuvered in an ethical dilemma, or rather a trilemma. A dilemma that had all the qualities of the ancient depiction of a dilemma as an onrushing bull - where you only seem to have a choice in what horn will pierce you. On the one hand, action research would entail telling the lecturers how to supervise research and thereby the action research would become a means of educational management. On the other hand, it would mean to demand of lecturers to take up a challenge that some of them could not answer. The action research could become the start of putting some of the staff in the pillory, while they had worked hard to provide solutions for their students and colleagues. Not acting as a third option, would be agreeing to leave the vacuum intact in which lecturers would not know how to supervise research and students would experience research as mystical, frightful, as an experience of disempowerment.

There are some obvious ways to deal with a dilemma. For instance, we may want to find an extra option that allows us to escape. Or we may attempt to combine the dilemma's in such a way that something new develops. Or we may alternate between dilemma's, never solving anything essentially, but still finding a practical way to go around the major obstacles.

I choose the latter. In regards to educational management, I instigated training in research methods that seemed applicable, co-developed a list of a body of methodological literature that every lecturer received. I started organizing larger research projects in which staff and students would both participate.

In this sense I was more of a change agent than a participant. With all these initiatives I ran the risk of becoming a proponent of educational management. The drawbacks being that I would define their educational tasks and (partly) estrange them from their jobs, or - possibly worse - reinforce them into a passive role.

My interventions now are mainly aimed at creating a starting point, which most of them could use. Hopefully this allows them to gain some autonomy with the educational system.

PROXIMITY AND ACTION RESEARCH

The previous description of an action research is used to highlight aspects of a postmodern-complexity take on action research informed by proximity. The starting point is not a self and an other that are in some pre-given way separate. Instead, identity is something that is assumed. Identity, as related to its etymological connotation of the latin 'idem', the same. We assume a particular identity, become a subject, instead of being some essential self separate from the other.

Autonomy literally means to set one's own laws. Who is the one that sets its own laws then? Proximity is not about two given actors that are in any sense near each other. No rather, proximity is first and from there we find a self and an other. This is crucial for conceptualizing participation in the context of action research.

Proximity gives me a sense of participation. For participation I need not ask for entrance, for a non-existent door to enter the inside of the other, of otherness. The power of action research is that we experience participation in collective action. Yet, there is no complete, unambiguous, determined description of what this participation entails. Proximity is about the sense of this ambiguity, indeterminateness, where the edges start to unravel. Proximity is also intervention. Meeting the Other is important in that it is another voice to be heard. But more than that meeting the Other is another self to find.

Perhaps the most important point in the discussion of ethics for action research. Proximity is not prescribing moral rules, not necessarily an deontological argument for democratic participation. Rather proximity is about the art of living: not how we should be, but how we can be.

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