

A Hazardous Venture! Action Research and Doctoral Studies: Part 1¹

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Abstract

Action research was viewed as a productive and feasible research approach for students enrolled on 'Educational Work', the new practitioner-oriented ('praxisnära') doctoral programme at Umeå University. This presentation provides a brief background to the Swedish context and then reflects on the experience of action research as doctoral research from the perspective of supervisor and student, in the latter case after or near completion. It will be argued that while action research is an attractive proposition for practitioners undertaking doctoral research in education and, indeed, attracted much interest across the university, it also generated difficulties and challenges that were only partly resolved.

Context

First, I want to provide a short introduction to the Swedish context for those who are new to the country, albeit from my 'outsider' perspective. Sweden is a small country in population, but a large one in terms of land mass, on the northern edge of Europe. Emerging at the end of World War II as a modern state, it used the gains of a thriving economy to invest heavily in a welfare state. The welfare state has survived more or less intact, though recently, with some downturns in the economy and a new conservative government, the future of welfare is in some doubt. This is despite the fact that the welfare state is popular, with few wishing to see a diminution of its level of services. Though still relatively prosperous, Sweden's membership of the European Union (EU) has been problematic because its strong welfare policies run counter to EU neo-liberalism. Thus, following Sweden's entry into the EU in 1995, criticism was made of its state monopolies and 'cartels', and the general absence of competition.

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In point of performance the economy of Sweden – one of the most prosperous countries in the world – posed few problems. However . . . the structure of the economy, and notably, the numerous state monopolies, cartels and absence of competition generally, required some adjustments in order to conform with the Treaty of Rome (*Bulletin of the European Communities, supplement 5/92*) (Bainbridge, 1998, p. 471).

Now a lot has changed since then and it could be argued that Sweden is highly competitive now. Nevertheless, as a small country at the edge of a powerful economic bloc – the European Union – Sweden has needed to re-position itself in order, first, to maintain its foothold in the global market and second, to preserve its high level of social and welfare provision. The reform or ‘modernisation’ of higher education (including teacher education) can be viewed as one means of achieving progress in both. For teachers and teacher educators, policy strategies have included:

- 1) development of research in teacher education parallel to other professional areas, such as nursing and social work.
- 2) alternative research avenues and programmes for school teachers and other education professionals.
- 3) maintaining a balance between research *about* teacher education (to increase the breadth and depth of teacher education), and research *for* teacher education, (on students, classrooms, teachers curriculum etc.).
- 4) collaboration with local schools and municipalities, to incorporate local priorities into teacher education planning and research.
- 5) collaboration between the three main university groupings involved in teacher education: subject, educational studies and methods departments (SOU, 1999).

Some or all of these strategies will also be familiar to many in this room who are not from Sweden.

To this end, from 2000 onwards, research funding was targeted towards schools and teacher education, one of a number of areas that were viewed as low in research capacity. Thus in 2001, the new doctoral programme entitled ‘Teachers’ Work’

(‘Pedagogiskt arbete’) attracted funding for a national graduate school in the subject, to be coordinated by Umeå university.

Alongside this, attempts were made to raise the research profile internally of teacher education in Umeå. Thus from 1998 onwards, professors were appointed to be academic leaders for teacher education in doctoral studies and research, and two years later (in 2000), a new faculty of teacher education was established. This in turn sanctioned the new doctoral programme ‘teachers’ work’, funded (singly or jointly) doctoral students through the programme and created post doc and research track posts to encourage and support research activity and research career opportunities. Action or practitioner research came to be viewed as a valuable means of facilitating practitioner research for school teachers and teacher educators. It was also important in contributing to a fledgling research culture.

Hamel and Larocque (2002) identify three key stages in the development of a research culture in universities²: (1) fledgling research culture (2) incorporation into the university sector (or ‘universification’) and (3) predominance of research culture. Teacher education in Umeå may be seen now as having come through the first two stages and in the process of constructing the third stage - an established research culture. The number and quality of the doctoral theses (many by teacher education staff) that have come out of the various research initiatives suggest that this is now well on its way.

Nordic Action Research

Now I want to turn to action research itself, but not to the general field which most of you here know about, but to action research (known as ‘aktionsforskning’) in the Nordic countries. It emerged in the 1990s in education, although was used for research on workplace conditions in the 1960s and 1970s. However it has struggled hard to become recognized as a respectable educational research genre, possibly due to the centralist stance taken by Swedish social democratic governments in the post-

² Hamel and Larocque (2002, p. 2) define research culture ‘as a culture within an institution that values and facilitates the development of new knowledge, from basic to applied research. This means a structured process of intellectual exploration, intervention, and creation leading to the advancement of knowledge’.

war period, which positioned practitioners such as teachers, as 'subjects' and 'consumers' rather than producers of educational knowledge; or possibly due to hostility from some university academics who wish to maintain exclusivity in terms of research knowledge and expertise

However, a number of Nordic researchers have developed important work on action research. These include perhaps the best known, Yrjo Engeström and his work on 'activity theory', derived from Vygotsky, which emphasises the importance of practitioner team-work and collaboration (Engeström, 1999). Paralleling what practitioners 'know', Engeström argues that practitioner activity is by nature collaborative and multilayered.

An activity system is always heterogeneous and multivoiced. Different subjects, due to their different histories and positions in the division of labor, construct the subject and the other components of the activity in different, partially overlapping and partially conflicting ways (Center for Activity Theory and Developmental Work Research, 2007)

Norwegian researcher Tom Tiller (2000) draws mainly on Schön and on UK and Australian traditions of teacher research, to advocate the importance of research partnerships between university researchers and school practitioners, a similar approach to that taken by Karin Rönnerman in Sweden. Rönnerman promoted action research in the north of Sweden during the 1990s (Rönnerman, 1995) and in Göteborg more recently (Rönnerman, 1999, 2002, 2003) and notes three main benefits for teachers: (1) being able to share professional concerns, (2) having access to action research and other knowledge frameworks, and (3) being able to reflect on and transform their thinking and practice.

Britt-Marie Berge's (from Sweden) and Hildur Vé's (from Norway) joint action research in the mid-1990s in contrast has a specific aim - to disrupt and challenge existing gender relations in schooling. Drawing on feminist poststructuralism and the pragmatism movement in the US, Berge and Vé (2000) used case-studies to show how teachers' made sustained attempts to change their own and their students'

gendered practices. Berge and Vé also made important theoretical points about practice; for example, in identifying 'moments of equity' where change was evident, and 'moments of normalisation' where there was a reversion to convention (Berge & Vé, 2000).

What is interesting about these action researchers is the relative heterogeneity of their theoretical sources, in contrast to, what I have also seen as the relatively homogeneous nature of educational action research generally.

Collaborations: Action Research for Doctoral Studies

Now we come to the main topic of this presentation - action research as part of doctoral studies. First, some background, In Sweden doctoral students generally engage in full-time study, have four years to complete their studies and are fully-funded. The outcome of an individual study is report or thesis which is a publicly available, and published in paperback and /or on the university website. Funding of doctoral students may be targeted towards new 'relevant' programmes like 'teachers' work' or 'gender' to bolster research capacity in what are considered underdeveloped research fields.

As we have seen, collaboration is much encouraged both as a means of spreading funds and in determining research questions and goals, and thus, the topics of the two doctoral students co-presenting here were to some extent influenced by the policy decisions and wishes of their funders.

- Lena Granstedt: *topic*, supporting teachers in the multicultural classroom: *funding source*, National School Agency (Skolverket) and Umeå municipality
- Eva Nyström *topic*, exploring gender courses in science and mathematics education, *funding source*, the national gender graduate school and Umeå faculty of teacher education

All well and good! However, I now want to turn to the issues that we were confronted with in incorporating *action research* as part of doctoral studies. I have grouped these under four headings, epistemology, methodology, ethics and research management

Epistemology

I'm not sure if epistemology is the right word, but what I want to explore is what doing an action research allows one to do. It could be argued for instance that for students wishing to undertake action research as part of doctoral studies, there are (at least) three options

1. to remain in their existing professional/practitioner role and to research their own practice, although the fact they carrying out their research for doctoral studies will inevitably change the nature of the process;
2. to carry out action research on doctoral students engaged in like activities, like for example, Zoë Parker's doctoral study on "the experience of a number of doctoral students in different fields and 'disciplines', with a particular focus on action researchers in education" (Parker, 1998: 120). The focus for Parker was presumably on people like herself, presumably as a means of making her a better scholar of and practitioner in education.
3. to act as research facilitator on a chosen topic for practitioners who are willing to develop action research – this was the option mainly chosen by Umeå students

While not wishing to claim 'purity' in relation to specific action research models, can any of these be said to properly fit action research, which necessarily involves someone in charge of researching their own practice; perhaps 'practitioner' research is a better term.

Methodology

The methodological difficulties of action research will be familiar to many in this room. As Guba says, the need to be (seen as) rigorous is always important to research: 'relevance without rigor is no better that rigor without relevance' (Guba, 1981). But in the case of doctoral studies, the methodological stakes are at their highest.

Doctoral students need a sufficiently robust methodological basis for their work, and the ability to publicly defend it, particularly if like action research, it is relatively rare. The usual validity checks do not work for action research viz. large samples, controlled experiments etc. Anderson & Herr's (1999) conceptualisation of validity in

action research as different to other research approaches has therefore been life-saving!

- *outcome* validity – did it solve the problem?
- *process* validity – was the activity educative and informative?
- *democratic* validity – was the research undertaken in collaboration with all partners involved with the problem under investigation?
- *catalytic* validity – to what what degree did the research transform the realities of those involved
- *dialogic* validity – to what extent could the research be discussed meaningfully with peers in different settings?

Thus a key point about validity in the context of action research is that it needs to be judged differently, or is it? Surely conventional validity questions still apply to some extent as does the extent to which the research has met the specific demands made of it, e.g. to solve a particular classroom problem or to transform a particular pedagogic situation.

Ethics

Frequently, ethical research questions relate to anonymity, non-disclosure and informed consent. Again, often conventional resolutions do not work with action research. For example, the guarantee of anonymity is especially difficult where a specific school is known to be participating in the project or where individuals are actively and publicly engaged in reflecting or problems with a view to solving them. This is even more important where self-reflection is concerned with admitting dissatisfaction with the practice of others or senior management, concerning, e.g. how teachers, headteachers are able (or not) to deal with discriminatory behaviour, sexism, racism etc.

Also the process of action research is particularly difficult to control, for example, research participants to keeping true to the agreed research process? Pritchard (2002, p. 5) succinctly explains the problem as follows:

Researchers are supposed to provide prospective subjects with information about the project's objectives and design. In practitioner research, if the objectives and

data collection strategies are not fully formed, the practitioner research's ability to inform prospective subjects is limited. The subjects cannot know exactly what they are getting into.

An aspect of action research which has caused particularly problems for doctoral students is their in/ability to fully determine the research process - which leads us to the final set of issues around research management

Research management

In Sweden as in other countries, doctoral students have to do their research alongside taking various methodological and theoretical courses. They have strict time limits, and are required to give "staged" research seminars on the progress of their work and report back regularly to their supervisors. Overall, they need to show they are research-competent, theoretically discerning and have contributed something new to their discipline. All this is especially difficult to balance alongside the ongoing ethical and logistical requirements of doing (or facilitating) action research (as above). To re-phrase Princess Diana's famous comment – 'there seem to be an awful lot of people in this relationship'.

Concluding points

To summarise, what would I now say to prospective doctoral students if they asked me about whether they should engage with action research? I think that I would be largely encouraging on the grounds that it generally suggests something fresh and different from the usual doctoral topics and methods, and is rooted in the world of practice which to my mind, is a good thing. So I'd say "go for it" but only if the following conditions apply: that you/they

- are good at "people", "negotiating" and "paper" management skills
- have a solid background on what action research entails
- are willing/able to be theoretically "promiscuous" and flexible
- are willing/able to take risks
- have access to an appropriate practitioner group/setting
- have a topic that lends itself to action research
- have the confidence to defend what may be perceived as an unusual research approach

- invest time in learning to write for different audiences
- find supervisors who are sympathetic and who have a working knowledge of the action research field.

This is a long, and some might say impossible, wish-list. But my view is that for the protection of students, this is the bare minimum, base-line set of requirements and that doctoral study in action research should *only* be allowed, if these conditions apply.

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