On the importance of language

As it is with the development of human societies, institutions, organisations and the individual members of them, language functions as a means of or a vehicle for collaborative meaning-making and joint activity. It enables the partners in action research - researchers and practitioner - to coordinate their joint action that is to negotiate goals, to choose means and to evaluate outcomes. Besides this interpersonal function language also has an ideational function by providing means by which we are able to represent objects and phenomena as well as interpret and understand the relationships between them. Language is maybe the most “powerful tool for collaborative remembering, thinking, problem solving and acting” (Chang-Wells & Wells 1997, 149). When we reflect on (action) research in educational settings we should not allow ourselves to overlook the matter of course. Firstly that everyday life in schools is (almost) entirely dependent on language, both written language and spoken language. Action within different kinds of educational contexts is impossible without language. Schools exist both in and by language. Secondly, research, at least within social sciences, is also dependent on language. Research is conducted in and by language. The very “object” of for example educational research is - the language. Or maybe we should talk about to different languages, two different vocabularies. Language in everyday contexts is natural, informal and constantly evolving whereas the language of science is or should be characterized by formality, high stylisation and precision (Elden & Levin 1991, 131).

On (action) research

The repertoire of skills, or metaphorically the toolkit of action research, has been widely presented and discussed in the literature. One basic tool; namely the “tool of language”, needed for communication within action research seem however to be missing. Or maybe it would be more accurate to state that the action research toolkit seem to be defective when it comes to systematic reflections on the meaning and importance of language. The language aspect, the role and importance of language within action research seem to have been noticed mainly within the postmodernists and poststructuralists conception of action research, in connection with for example the idea of discourses (e.g. Brown & Jones 2001). Language, metaphors, narratives and discourse form the central elements of post-modern epistemology. The starting point and the focus is, instead of final and overarching truths communicated through a scientific language alienated from everyday practice and problems, on short and little stories – narratives - that reflect for example a certain group of practitioners (e.g. teachers’) way of organizing and making meaning in a certain the social reality. Rich storytelling and detailed narratives as illustrations of the particularity embedded in specific cases can be used to test the validity of general scientific laws (Greenwood & Levin 1998,
A postmodernist perspective might, according to Jennings and Graham (ibid. 171) require the action researcher to both “consider meaning in terms of relations of struggle embodied in everyday practice” as well as to view his actions in relation to “local contexts” Action research can be looked at as a discourse of it’s own. Action research, when looked at from both the researchers and the practitioners’ point of view is constituted by an identifiable narrative or story. It challenges the traditional ways of making sense of research for example by having rules and metaphors of it’s own (ibid. 172).

Reason and Bradbury (1991) reflect on the interest in language in the light of the linguistic and cognitive turn within social sciences since the 1960’s. The focus is mainly on the role of language in cognitive construction and presentation of the reality and the world, less on the fact that the constructions and presentations researchers and practitioners hold has to be communicated in some way. They admit the great importance of language in the process of creating shared realities within action research, especially when the emphasis is on developing democratic forms of knowledge. But they find the coupling between the concern with discourses, texts and narratives and the knowledge in action needed successful action research loose. They summarize their viewpoint in a following way

We need to find a way of acknowledging the lessons of the linguistic turn while not ignoring the deeper structures of reality, and propose a more creative and constructive worldview can be based on the metaphor of participation. (Emphasis added)

Scientific rigor and action in everyday life, can be looked at as two socially created and preserved realities, differing from each other both considering the methods by which they are created and considering the formal presentation of them. The presentation and communication of the two worlds during action research is totally dependent on language, the main means for not only of human communication but also for human meaning making. Language is one of the fundamental, if not the most fundamental elements that help a group or a community of action researchers, firstly to construct and make sense of their own research activities, and secondly to communicate within and make sense of the social reality they are involved and engaged in during “action research”. Success, referring both to true participation and meaningful action, is in many ways dependent on how well a action researcher is able to constrcut and share a common language with the practitioners involved (Jennings & Graham 1996, 172).

One crucial starting point within action research, the prerequisite for action is to both look at and understand the social reality under scrutiny from the viewpoint of the practitioner (Nagy Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2004, 134). Action researcher has to get-together with the practitioners. Miller & Crabtree (2004, 187) discuss this get-together as a conversational research and action journey constituted by certain rules of which some are given and some have to be constantly re-negotiated throughout the journey. Reason (1999) calls this ‘journey’ a co-operative inquiry, which refers to a way of working with other people with similar kinds of concerns and interests. The aim of this inquiry is, firstly to understand each other’s worlds, make sense of them and elaborate new and creative ways of comprehending these worlds, and secondly to learn to act in a way that leads to change and improvement. One could conclude this by stating that the basis, the means and the end as well as the outmost challenge of action research is the meeting of two “worlds”; two different traditions, perspectives or frameworks on human life and existence.

Elden and Levin (1991, 129-132), when presenting their version of participatory action research, describe the process of action research as collaboration between practitioners and researchers with the aim of co-creating a local theory. This local theory is based on two different frameworks, the practitioners’ framework, which is implicit, individual and fragmented, and the researchers theory based framework. The concept of framework is used
to refer to a certain way of understanding, a cognitive map or a language. But maybe one should try to make a distinction between the construction and development of a cognitive framework and the processes by which these cognitive frameworks are communicated, for example during actions research. Both are dependent on language by which the content and the characteristics of one’s framework are communicated. The richness and quality of participatory action research to be dependent on how well practitioners and researchers manage to play their differing frameworks against each other, understand each other in order to create an amalgamation, mutually created and accepted local theory as a basis for action.

The social reality called action research is impregnated with metaphors. Maybe we should look at the concept ‘action research’ as a metaphor. It is in many ways as explanatory and misleading as metaphors usually are. The intensive use of metaphors within a certain social reality, for example within a certain field of research, might be interpreted in many different ways; as a sign of uncertainty, dynamic evolution and complexity. Why don’t we simply call action researcher as an action researcher; why do we have to use metaphors like change catalysts, agent, detective, technician, trainer, therapist, critical friend, the friendly outsider, chameleon or ropewalker (e.g. Greenwood & Levin 1998, 104-108; Salo 2004, 81)? Sanger (1996, 193-195) presents four metaphoric assumptions in order to shed a light over teachers and other school personnel’s attitudes considering an implementation of a system appraisal presented and brought forward during a large-scale action research project. The appraisal system became metaphorically compared and with a court of law, a physical science, a conspiracy and a chimera (alternatively a fools paradise).

On metaphors

Metaphors, as one of the tools within rhetoric’s, represent a figurative use of language. They are used in order to communicate specific features of the culture within a certain field of activity or within certain kinds of organizations (e.g. schools) as well specific features of an individual’s way of understanding and making meaning of his life, his world and his thoughts. The use of a metaphor is based on comparison or analogy between two, at a first glance separate terms, linguistic frameworks or domains. Metaphors are mostly used to describe or even explain a phenomenon, which is unfamiliar or complex by comparing it with some other phenomenon that is supposed to be familiar or simple. Therefore, the use of a metaphor is based on the likeness or the unlikeness of two phenomenon’s or between two separate domains (e.g. Coffey & Atkinson 1996, 85; Proctor 1991, 63-64). Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 5), who claim that human thinking is essentially metaphorical, define metaphor as follows: “The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.”

The very idea of a metaphor is to focus, underline and demonstrate a certain aspect of a phenomenon that might be somehow unfamiliar, complex or complicated - beyond the ordinary and well-known words or concepts. But a metaphor has it drawbacks. Instead of underlining a point or making things clearer it can be perplexing and misleading. The political function of the metaphor relies besides the aspiration of underlining and focusing things or ideas that are regarded as desirable on the potential that metaphors also hold, namely to disregard overlook certain aspects of a phenomenon. The use of metaphors by practitioners in a certain cultural or social contexts reveals something about the characteristics of this specific context. Metaphors are grounded in traditions, common experiences, specific values, shared knowledge and collective identities. A researcher can use metaphors, somehow as a short cut, when striving for to identify the cultural features, shared understandings or situated realities of a group of practitioners in a certain social context (Coffey & Atkinson 1996, 86). Metaphors can be used both as a means and as a method. One can identify metaphors in the
everyday language of the practitioners or ask the practitioners to describe important aspects of their everyday activity by using metaphors (Salo 2002, 210-214). Within science metaphors are often used in a heuristic and imaginative way, to describe and label ideas, thoughts, concepts, models or perspectives that are new and evolving. Miles and Huberman (1984, 221) identify several possibilities for using metaphors within qualitative research. Qualitative researchers can use metaphors besides as data-reducing, pattern-making and decentring devices as ways of connecting findings to theory that is to bridge the “gap” between practice and theory.

Quite often, the metaphors used in educational research derive from nature, technology or social life at large. Scientific concepts are quite seldom used metaphorically, even though it is possible to find examples of metaphorical use of the most fundamental concepts within scientific research. Bromme (2003) discuss in detail the use of the metaphor ‘theory’ as conceptualisation of the action-relevant knowledge teachers’ rely on when they act in their classrooms. The concept of ‘theory’ seems to have become a research guiding metaphor, kind of a root metaphor, in studies of teacher’s cognitions. The use of theory as a metaphor is often extended by complementing it with prefixes like subjective, private, personal or naïve. But Bromme seems not to feel comfortable with the metaphorical use of the concept of theory. He is aware of the fact that metaphors are often used in research, especially within young fields of research, at the very early stages in order to make preliminary propositions of and name the object under study. His main objection against the use of theory as a metaphor is the difference between the two domains in question, namely the domain of scientific research based on certain criteria of rationality and the domain of practice with certain criteria of effective action. The challenge of handling this difference is one of the main challenges also in action research. One of the most fundamental criteria of rationality in scientific research is the separation of descriptive-analytical statements, referring to observations of things as they are from normative-prescriptive statements, referring to for example decisions on how things should be done in order to be considered effective. Consequently, when a teacher confronting a restless group of students in her classroom does not have, before she makes a decision how to handle this, the possibility to make systematic and analytical observations of all the variables in hand as well as the couplings between these, the ‘theory’ as a metaphor for her action-related knowledge is inappropriate. But what Bromme (ibid 283) does not seem to accept, even if he is very much aware of it, is the very fact that metaphors function by shedding light on certain aspects of reality while leaving other aspects, maybe not totally in the darkness, but in the shadow anyway. Metaphors, as research at large, are and should always be open-ended, in the sense that a hypothesis can be both proved and disproved. The function of a metaphor, as little as the function of a certain scientific theory, is not to cover everything, just to make some connections apparent.

Teachers’ use of metaphors after the study in action learning

In the following we present some examples of the different ways that metaphors has been used for communication during action research. We try to look at the use of metaphors from both the researchers theoretical interest point of view and the practitioners practice interest point of view.

The Study of Action Learning

We want to present two examples of teachers ’ metaphors as they were formulated during an interview I made about Action Learning. In a period of five years, the University of Tromsø, Norway has been responsible for a study in Action Learning for teachers in Sweden, mostly from primary and secondary schools. The aim of the study is to develop a better learning situation for young people. The study were organised with two physical meetings and four
videoconferences during one year. Between these meetings, the students met in groups with their "critical friends" to reflect about their experiences from their "actions". To document what was happening in the classrooms, the teachers wrote journals with their reflections and interviewed their students.

A close connection between "learning at workplace" and "learning at university" was important. At the meetings the students brought with them experiences from the workplaces. Theory presented at the University was used to reflect about practice. The role of the researcher was to be a process facilitator by asking questions about the teaching, to make the teachers to get distance to their own experiences.

Action Learning means a systematic, intentional developing of the practice together with other teachers and in partnership with a researcher, and is often called “the little brother of action research” (Tiller 1999). During the study, the teachers started up with a developing project –”action"- at their workplaces. They asked themselves: What can I do to change the social reality (Kalleberg 1992)? With their own practice as starting point, they formulated their questions. To find the answer, the teachers conducted the inquiry in their classrooms. They planned, acted, observed and reflected (Carr & Kemmis 1986). They wrote a rapport from the inquiry where they used theory, both to support but also to open up for new thoughts about their “actions”.

While I was leading this study, I recognized both by reflections of the teachers during the study and the evaluations they wrote afterwards, that they expressed high energy and enthusiasm. They told that the study in Action Learning had given them legitimating to try new ways in teaching and that their professionalism had increased. These teachers had been working for about twenty years. Why did they express like that after having participated in a short study like Action Learning? To find more about what the study had meant to the teachers, I made an interview with them a year after they had finished their study at University of Tromsö. When I was analyzing the interviews, I recognized that some of the teachers used several metaphors when they tried to explain what Action Learning had meant to them. In this paper I will present two metaphors as Ditte and Eva expressed under the interview.

Ditte
The metaphors are creating a lot of pictures (Alvesson & Sköldberg 1994:141). What pictures comes up when I read Ditte’s metaphor “Chisel is better than knife”? We use a chisel when we want to work with hard material like tree and stone. Together with chisel we are using a hammer. Chisel is more specialised for the task to form something very hard. In that cases knife is not a sufficient tool. When you have the tool you need, it goes much easier and you will get a better result. Knife is a more common tool, but is not sufficient for this task. Metaphors are mostly used to compare one phenomenon that is complicated with some other phenomenon that is supposed to be familiar (Lakoff & Johnson 2003).

To understand what Ditte has meant with this metaphor, it is necessary to give a short description about her process in Action Learning. Ditte was teaching in German in secondary school. She was wondering how she could increase the pupils’ learning for their own sake and not for the teacher’s. Through pupils’ journal reflections and by interviewing them, she

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1 15 norske studiepoeng (10 svenske studiepoeng)
2 The names used in the paper are not their real names
understood more about how the youth were thinking. During the process she developed concepts about students’ way of learning and could express it in words. By writing down her reflections, she found out what she would focus on in her daily life in the classroom.

By using the metaphors she tells something about “earlier” and “now”. Action learning has given her a tool that gives her a better possibility to do her job than earlier. What tool is she speaking about? The action learning process consists of planning, acting, observing and reflection. This inquiry has developed her teaching, but has also strengthened her role as teacher. Through the study of Action learning she felt she has got a tool that was more suitable for her job.

Eva

Eva, a teacher in primary school at the countryside, is using many metaphors. One of them is “to wind up the yarns and weave..” What pictures are created in my thoughts when I read these words? When you are weaving, you use a shuttle leading a yarn under and over the basic threads in the loom. If you are going to weave, and all the yarns with different colours are lying all over the floor, everything is chaotic. First you have to wind the yarns to a ball. Then you can start weaving with those yarns, and create a mat or other things. When the yarns are lying on the table, there wouldn’t be created any mat. It must be weaved in the loom, to be a part of what is created. When you weave, you are creating a pattern. The pattern can be something you want to make a copy of or you can create your own pattern during the process. Eva created her pattern during her weaving. During the years she has been working as teacher, she has collected many “threads”. Now she had the chance to wind them up and weave them to a pattern.

What was Eva’s context? She had been thinking about the fact that when pupils were working with mathematic tasks, they got too little time to problem solving. She wanted to find answer to this question: How can pupils’ reflection during the solving of mathematic tasks be a vehicle for new ways in teaching? When the pupils were doing their subjects in mathematic, she asked them what they thought about problem solving. Afterwards she wrote down her reflections. Then she let them work with solving mathematic problems individual and in groups. To document what was happening, she taped her conversation with the pupils and let them write reflections. Through the action, she became aware of how important the language in mathematic is for the pupils. In literature she found how important it is for the pupils to “speak about mathematic” (Emanuelson 1991). She was also reflecting about how she answered when the pupils asked for her help. Instead of leading the pupil to the answer, she asked he or her to express their thoughts.

When I asked her about the study in Action Learning, she says that her thoughts have grown. She has had the chance to create an overview by all the threads she has collected during her life as teacher. Before the threads are winded, we can imagine the chaotic situation with different colours of yarns spread around the floor. The teachers’ experiences can be described as broken up, different, messy and separated. Teachers need both time and space to reflect what are going on in the classrooms (Handal & Lauvås 1999). During the study, Eva has the time, the room and colleagues to reflect with. She thought so many things took the focus away from the meeting between the teacher and the pupil, e.g. conferences, plans, papers etc She said: “I have got my voice as pedagogue back.” During the study she got the chance to ask questions to her own practice, reflect about it and present her thoughts in the reflection group where all the participants were interested to set the pupil’s learning in focus. The study in
action learning had also empowered her. She felt proud and strong and expressed her opinions when discussing with colleagues. “I hold my head up high”.

The reflections of the researcher
Teachers are using metaphors to make a bridge between the old condition and the new one. Daily words are saying only what we already know. It is only with metaphors we can craps the new phenomena (Lakoff & Johnson 2003:179). The aims of teachers’ systematic intentional inquiry in classroom: 1) strengthening the teachers and 2) developing the teaching are mentioned in almost all literature (Fishman 2000:14). These two metaphors are putting light on both these aspects.

As they articulated their thoughts about their role after having ended the study, they focused on their identity as teachers. By creating metaphors they got a language as they can use for themselves but also in conversation with others to speak about their beliefs for implementing the curriculum. In a research about the connection between teachers’ beliefs, metaphors and practice they found that teachers’ belief sets were associated with specific roles and metaphors (Tobin 2001). Teachers’ beliefs about how students learn and what students should learn had an effect on how they implemented the curriculum. The research focused on how new metaphors could be constructed to help teachers to reconceptualize teaching roles and change instructional practice. The conclusion of the research is that “by conceptualizing teachers’ beliefs and roles through the metaphors they use, and then introducing other, more appropriate metaphors, teacher change can be implemented “(ibid s. 127). When Eva and Ditte used metaphors, they got new concepts for their role as teacher.

Questions to discuss:
1. Why has the language as an important tool in (action) research been overlooked?
2. What can the teacher (insider) learn from the metaphors?
3. What can the researcher (outsider) learn from the metaphors?

References
ERA Oslo, March 10-12, 2005

Symposium 20: Knowledge, tools and the role of the researcher in action research


