

Action research and the problem of the single case¹

Bjørn Gustavsen (1938-2018)

Abstract

In his article in Volume 7, No.2 of *Concepts and Transformation*, Greenwood lays the ground for a self-critical review of action research. This is very much called for, but there is a need to avoid this review becoming a revival of yesterdays "famous cases". Major parts of today's action research is oriented towards social movements, learning regions and other levels of organisation far beyond the small group. The associated research challenges can be met only by developing new research platforms and seeking new alliances with other branches of research.

Key words: Action research, social constructivism, development programs

Investigación Acción y el problema de los casos únicos

Resumen

En su artículo Volumen 7, nº2 de *Conceptos y Transformaciones*, Greenwood plantea una autocrítica de la investigación acción. Se trata de una reflexión necesaria ligada a los problemas derivados de los casos únicos pero no deberíamos caer en revivir los 'casos de éxito' del pasado. La mayoría de los procesos de investigación acción actuales están orientados a los movimientos sociales, los territorios que aprenden y otro tipo de organizaciones que van más allá de grupos reducidos. Los retos derivados de dichos procesos se pueden abordar mediante nuevas plataformas de investigación y alianzas con otras disciplinas de investigación.

Palabras clave: investigación acción, constructivismo social, programas de desarrollo

Action research may be something that the world needs, but it is also something that the world seldom wants. This is the point of departure for a recent article by Greenwood where the purpose is to look into why this is so (Greenwood 2002). Some of the reasons he places at the door of action research itself, for instance much sloppy reporting and even when the reporting is adequate it often pertains to issues of limited interest outside the action research community itself. Among the last are the epistemological and moral reasons why action research is superior to all other forms of research and detailed presentations of all the whys and hows of action research on project level. This focus is, it can be argued, akin to a sur-

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vey researcher continuously discussing the epistemological challenges of survey research and the construction of items, scales and questions, without ever doing any survey.

The purpose of this note is not primarily to disagree but rather to see to what extent some of the problems of action research can be even further highlighted. In this contribution, focus is on the last of the themes covered in the Greenwood article: the issue of scale (page 136):

While most people interested in society level issues tend to pose their questions and concerns in more or less general terms: what to do about poverty; participation in work, the process of globalization, the answers provided by action research are generally based on “local cases”. The cases are, furthermore, not only local; they tend to be very local in the sense that the great majority of action research studies pertain to processes between one or a few action researchers and very small groups of other people, often even during fairly short periods of time. Can, however, questions of concern to other actors than those directly involved in the project be answered on the basis of cases of this kind?

The standard research response to this challenge is to write a report where experiences from the case are set down, often in terms of theoretical and methodological reflections. This is what the researchers bring with them when facing the next group with which to do action research. The knowledge gained from the previous situation will help understand the new one better, it will enable the researcher to move faster to the point of identifying appropriate action, and so on. However, what is to emerge from the *second* case if the knowledge from the first is sufficient to do the right things? Theory and methods can always be improved on and the second case can help do that. This can continue with a third case, a fourth case, and so on.

But is there a limit? Do we ever reach a stage when action can be *suspended* and texts take over? Can a number reports from a number of cases eventually provide a reasonably “full” theoretical-methodological package? It will, of course, never be 100 % , but can it be completed to such an extent that further development can be converted to implementation of theory rather than continued action research?

Most action researchers would say no: Each new situation will always be more open than the idea of “applied research” presupposes and the need for action research will never end. But if the need for action never ends it means that no “complete theory” can ever be delivered. All the answers that action research can provide will be of the type: We can give you some points for consideration, some ways you can take but you have to add a strategy for action in your own context. Only through going into action is it possible to gain those additional insights and understandings that are necessary to act fully appropriate in your own context.

Most action researchers: and certainly Greenwood, would argue that if what action research delivers is limited, so is what other kinds of research deliver: The difference is that while action research sometimes admits that all conclusions are inputs into new action rather than self-contained theories, other kinds of research generally pretend to offer texts that in themselves give, if not a full, so at least an adequate understanding of the situation.

So far, however, the balance between action research and other research is at a draw. Both deliver limited products, the difference may be that action research does it in a way that is slower, more expensive and generally even more limited in terms of number of peo-