

Regional Universities

Pragmatic Dialogues or Confrontation between Different Regimes of Knowledge?

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In recent years we have witnessed a discussion on the role of regional universities within a *pragmatic epistemology* or linguistic philosophy of social science. In this article we criticise the pragmatic approach, not in its general formulation, but on practical grounds. We will demonstrate that the pragmatic approach fails to incorporate important societal aspects of the development of working life and argue that action researchers at the regional university should not altogether drop the classical Humboldtian idea of universal (“allgemeine”) orientations in science. What we need is an unauthoritarian or democratic interpretation of Humboldt’s concept. Two Danish action research projects provide illustrative material for the discussion.

Introduction

The background to our contribution to the discussion of “the regional university” is that we ourselves work at one, Roskilde University or Roskilde University Center (RUC) as it was called when it was founded in 1972 as an interdisciplinary and practice oriented university. In the beginning of its existence, RUC had many research projects that were in line with the image of the regional university; researchers and students collaborated with local groups in development projects. Researchers and students had both educational and facilitating roles in relation to workers and other unprivileged social groups. During the first ten years, we conducted “action research projects” in the sense that regional groups collaborated with researchers and in particular students. The tradition followed the concept of “resource building action research” (Clausen et al 1992), a well known research tradition in Norwegian and Swedish projects (Sandberg et al 1981). Those projects had methodological problems in their “field activity” and problems with legitimisation in the local context (cf Gustavsen 1992, p 18), but we see it as a quality that they supported a universal idea of knowledge orientation – truth and criticism. This, in those projects, was connected to a critical Marxist theory of liberation, and the development of productive forces in society. Owing to the universal approach, the projects were in dialogue with theories of societal development – mainly critical theory. The problems were real and demanded a deeper methodological reflection concerning procedures for obtaining validity. An an-

swer to the demand was in fact developed in Norway and Sweden (and internationally) and was known as the “pragmatic turn”.

In the mid-1970s, regional projects were no longer conducted among the university’s scientific staff, partly because of the problems with scientific and local legitimisation. Only student projects mediated by a Science Shop continued with relevance for local social movements (Vogelius and Aagaard Nielsen 1997). Researchers only involved themselves in regional development as “applied science” or educational activities. Among academic researchers the action research understood as joint development more or less stopped.

From the mid-1980s the regional university concept had lost its significance in relation to “region” (but in other aspects, like interdisciplinarity it retained significant image). RUC became more and more a copy of the traditional universities. Regional relations became formalistic and without any impact on research.

In the beginning of the 1990s we tried to redefine action research along the lines implied by the resource development tradition and to propose solutions to the methodological problems. The redefinition led to an action research approach wherein researchers play a role as confrontative collaborators and not only as teachers and facilitators.

We have tried to renew the Roskilde tradition in another direction than the “pragmatic dialogue tradition”. Not that we deny that dialogue is a key concept for action research. We interpret dialogue in a less consensus-like way. We argue that the classical ideals of the traditional universities should not totally be ignored in regional universities. Although we do not in an absolute way believe in a universal truth, we suggest that the search for the universal (Humboldt calls it “das Allgemeine”) in a relative sense brings important aspects into regional or local problem oriented studies and action research. We will exemplify with two action research projects – both carried out at Roskilde University. In the two projects the search for “das Allgemeine” brought important societal qualities into the innovative processes in the projects.

In the last part of our article we try to redefine our understanding of “the regional university” with more weight on elements of general (critical) theory and participation in the *local public* than on instrumental co-operation with “partners”. We do believe that this way we can find solutions to the validation problems and the problems of legitimacy of normative intervention.

University – Workplace – Dialogues

Since Skjervheims philosophy of participative science (1957) the action research tradition has argued for a categorical criticism against social science that objectify the workplace relations. In different traditions it has been a common understanding that workplace relations should be understood as unfinished or *living relations*. They are always in a process of change. Social science has to partici-

pate at least to some degree in the change process to create truth. The participation can either take place in a joint creation of ideas for experimental democratic structures or in creating arenas for development of new co-operative structures.

The dialogue concept between scientists and practitioners in the workplaces is founded on an understanding of work as *unfinished*. Scientists should never come to the workplace with finished prescriptions (theories) of organisational reform or new technology.

In consequence the universities should co-operate with the whole workplace and only mediate or implement a new model. The co-operative relation between action researchers from universities and all kinds of actors in the workplaces is an argument for so called regional universities and for close relations between the university and companies in the region. The nature of the co-operation can only be specified if we clarify our understanding of the workplace and the understanding of the university.

The dialogue must of course be understood as contextual and essentially “local”, but besides this, workplaces and universities are also social entities with structural characteristics of importance for understanding the nature of the dialogue.

Workplace

The social structuration of work took a historical turn from the time of industrialisation as a result of scientific management. Until then work was, broadly spoken, organised in a patriarchal structure. The values and interests of the “master” defined the organic meaning of work operations. Scientific management rationalises the work process and from now on the authority of the master became embedded in technology and engineering. Relations between science and work were dialogical, but they only included dialogues between the master and the scientist. Because of the scientific management revolution the development of work was split up into two parts – one part was management’s guidance and planning and the other part was operators’ routinized functions. As Braverman (1974) very convincingly argues in *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, scientific management was effective in achieving rationalisation (overcoming traditionalism and traditional patriarchal structures). The result was a totally new work culture: the instrumentalist culture and the deskilled and mechanic forms of co-operation. The wage-worker got two different lives: a working life and a life outside work. Working life had no other reason than earning money for the life outside work.

Yet, scientific management did not totally eliminate the role of work experience, subjectivity and social relations in the work process. And therefore it was possible to change and even increase productivity by means of human relations – and without fundamentally breaking with scientific management. Within scientific

management the human relations movement succeeded in a modification of the Tayloristic imperatives.

Since the 1970s the nature of work in western countries has changed. Social or organisational needs for continual transformation and development have emerged as also an economic imperative in the name of the so-called Porter economy (Pålshaugen 2000). Researchers revealed more basic irrationalities in the principles of scientific management. In order to overcome the new needs the modern organisation had to vitalise itself to a degree which was not possible within the structure of scientific management. Leaders in modern organisations looked desperately for new ways of making the work organisation dynamic and transformable.

Theories of the *learning organisation* (Argyris and Schön 1996) and the *culturalisation of the firm* (Schein 1992) expresses mainstream trends in companies today. They are tools to meet the new economic needs of continual transformation. In these organisational concepts we see a vitalisation of the dialogue among individuals in the company; but it is not a vitalisation as such, but an instrumentalist one. The vitality is developed in a functional way to increase the flexibility in daily work and increase the capability to overcome subjective resistance to top-down defined transformation. Management tries to mobilise the subjectivity for a functional purpose: flexibility and efficiency in organisational development.

However, organisation will always represent a “prison” for subjectivity and co-operation. Some aspects of human social relations are welcomed by organisational demands and some are met with hostility or reluctance. The company or the organisation can always be conceptualised as seeing itself more or less as one entity or a whole; or it can be conceptualised as a group of individuals with great diversity and conflicting experiences and interests. The dynamics and substance in dialogues within a company or organisation differ in relation to that approach in the top of the organisation. It might be a closed or narrow dialogue when the organisation is defined by “strong” images of the firm as one entity or open when the context is defined by high acceptance of diversity in experience and interests. You will never be able to determine objectively or even to give a solid indication of where on the line a particular organisation should be situated, but the question should always be a part of the dialogue.

Leithäusser argues in his theory of “Betrieblisches Lebenswelt” (organisational lifeworld), put forward in 1986, that dialogues in working life are ambivalent. Employees come to work with social or lifeworld subjectivity as well as with instrumentalist orientations to the organisational rationality. By lifeworld subjectivity, Leithäusser means an orientation towards being social in relation to a living community and in relation to society. And since the worker also comes to work with an instrumentalist or productivist orientation one will see ambivalence in the “workers’ collective”.

The particular ambivalence is not reduced in modern flexible work organisation. On the contrary, Sennet's (1998) research in the US argues that the ambivalence will be stronger and more frustrating. In the new flexible organisation (read: learning organisation or culturalized organisation) the productivist dynamics overrule the lifeworld orientation in a painful way.

To speak about social orientations as ambivalent is not the same as to ask for a better balance between work and family life; this has been the typical interpretation in for instance the Danish flexibility research (Agi Csonga and Helle Holt 1998). The ambivalence is more about the loss of balance between the experiences and interests of the worker (he or she might be deeply involved in aesthetic or social matters of the work process) and functional "necessities of the organisation".

Our conclusion is that dialogues among and with employees in modern working life have to respect the ambivalence and not reproduce the traditional organisational rationality by the management or leading professionals in the company.

If the working life is to be related to the *regional university* in dialogical relations it is necessary to create situations and arenas for constructive self-expression of the ambivalence and to define relations between scientists and employees in a way which is not biased by conceptual or cultural symbiosis with the organisational rationality. To be aware of the late modern notion of work you need, as a researcher, to bring that kind of critical theory into use in the construction of arenas.

University

The history of western universities is not a history of the search for knowledge or universal truth. As powerfully stressed by Bourdieu in *Homo Academicus* (1984) it is a history of cultural and instrumentalist relations between the powerful social classes and academics belonging to the same classes and experiencing the world through the same "habitus". In some parts of academic society we find close relations to industrial managers and in others we find them to public servants, and of course the humanities' disciplines were connected to the cultural elite of society. The Hawthorne experiments were also an expression of academic research wrapped up as neutral science. But in reality, the design of the entire project expressed a social alliance between progressive managers in a constructing dialogue with the researchers (Gillespie 1993).

200 years ago Humboldt (1903) formulated a program for emancipation of the universities as institutions. He argued that universities should not only develop science and humanistic studies as such; universities have an institutional role to search for universal ("allgemeine") values and develop "educated" scientists. Humboldt was, historically, a critical philosopher. He wanted to liberate the academics from a narrow connection to the power elite. If you only refer to his ideas

of an education for universal truth in an ahistorical way – you come to the wrong conclusions. He argued for the necessity of the university as a *free space* – unbound to certain interests and ideologies. He was a modern academic trying to keep alive the heritage from the enlightenment philosophers. The university should not have specified groups or a culturally narrow-minded role, but a role as educator of “das Allgemeine” or “humanity”. It was necessary for Humboldt to argue for the universal idea of universities. In modern times Bourdieu demonstrated in his social anthropological studies presented in “homo academicus” that the historical image of the universities was an image of being narrow and interwoven in the economic-, political and cultural power elite. The university should represent a place for the general – “allgemeine” – interests of knowledge. The meaning of “das Allgemeine” is in its context not absolutism – it is relative to the historical role of science in society.

It is true that Humboldt’s idea was institutionalised in a way that gave an impression of elitist dogmatism – many of us belonging to the 68-generation faced this dogmatism in all universities. The research quality was presented as a function of scientific internal – often quantitatively testable criteria (Levin and Greenwood 1997).

Yet, even within that dogmatism the universities were dominated by a “habitus” linked to and defined by the elite. You cannot construct “neutral” classifications or interpretations of facts. Therefore the neutral science ends up reproducing the dominant social ideologies.

Since 1968 the universities have found themselves in a permanent contradiction between a dogmatic idea of free or universal critical science and an idea of the university as necessary for and co-operating with big business and the ruling processes of society. In this contradiction we also found a normative hierarchy as expressed by Göran Brulin (2000). Brulin argues that in Sweden the so-called neutral science managed to construct itself as more important and more high-ranking than applied science or science involved in practice.

The current discussion about regional universities needs to be seen in that historical light. For the last 30 years, the politicians in Scandinavia have tried to create a balance between the university understood in line with the Humboldt-concept and the university understood as an institution responsible for applied science. But the contradiction has remained as a kind of unproductive dispute among universalist researchers and researchers involved in applied science.

We see the concept of regional universities as one of the most promising – and potentially also democratic – reformulations of the above-mentioned contradiction.

In Göran Brulin’s opinion regional universities abolish the contradiction. With help from pragmatic epistemology he tries to overcome the contradiction: All knowledge should be understood in communicative relations – contextual and dialogical. The regional university grasps the post-modern philosophy as a wea-

pon against Humboldtian universalism. So the regional university seems to have overcome the contradictions that also led Humboldt to his concept of universal knowledge: knowledge for “das allgemeine” or “humanity”.

Our main argument here is that the solution throws the baby out with the bathwater. The nature of the university cannot be harmonised by dialogical action research. The contradiction remains there as long as you can speak about a difference between *particular* orientations of knowledge development and universal/“*allgemeine*” orientations.

This is also the distinction that Kalleberg (1999) tries to develop in an elaboration of Habermas’ ideas of *universal pragmatics*. The researchers at universities should see themselves as producing “*lifeworld knowledge*”. For Kalleberg (and Habermas) lifeworld knowledge does not relate to an instrumental practice but to a communicative practice. Researchers should always ask for an increase of the democratic spirit or culture by strengthening the lifeworld communication. In relation to “region” or local community, lifeworld knowledge should be a question allowing participation from all sorts of perspectives – not only commercial or administrative matters, but also for the quality of local democracy.

Kalleberg’s distinctions underline the necessity of a public and *cultural* dimension in regional universities. We agree on this, and find his arguments a relevant complication of the idea of the regional university. The consequences of the argument are that in dialogical research you should always consider whether the actors or participators in collaborations have the ability and possibility to develop their own *lifeworld perspective* in the dialogues.

In our opinion, the methodological development in action research has not yet succeeded in creating good solutions to the problem. Where have we seen researchers consider *their own lifeworld experience in the region they live*? As participators in a public sphere we gain experiences and develop social values and orientations; our public orientations, such as values of sustainable development, are often ignored in the organisational context. We understand the problem as a parallel to Humboldt’s 200-year-old demand for liberation and “allgemeine” perspective. The solutions should be found inside the procedures of dialogues and not as a reproduction of a new neutral superior science. The first of our case stories below illustrates the “lifeworld problem” in the discussion above.

But still one problem remains. Dialogues among actors in the local community will always have a pragmatic reason. We find it necessary that researchers still try to define themselves as “universally educated” *in the local community* – not in an absolute way as representatives for the highest truth, but in a relative way as contributors to a sustainable society as a whole.

We have in the last 25 years seen important contributions from critical natural scientists to issues like climate crises, global biodiversity, soil erosion etc. They would never have been able to insist on critical research etc if they had considered themselves as embedded in local pragmatic dialogues.

Instead of defining regional universities as something different from the “universal university” in a division of labour we find it more reasonable to take in an aspect of the Humboldtian idea of universalism in the regional university itself. But of course we should not define universal orientations as better or more privileged compared to practically related science activities. We should instead consider the researcher as universally educated in the sense that he or she has to reflect dimensions of universality in the dialogues on practical matters. In that way we open up for the possible survival of productive conflicts on the “orientation towards truth as such”. Such conflicts are in a critical way able to liberate hidden experiences and aspects of everyday life orientations in working life – as for example taking care of the environment and global nature. Our second example illustrates our approach to the problem.

First Case Story: Dialogues Open Up for Lifeworlds in a Domestic Service Organisation

The domestic service of taking care of elderly and handicapped people in a Danish local administration (in Køge) was reorganised in the early 1990s. In a top-down reorganisation all employees were forced to join a model of group organisation. Many of the employees resisted and conflict increased in the following year. They also experienced an increase in absenteeism. In this context, action researchers from RUC together with management and shop stewards invented a project based on open dialogues among all parts of the organisation. In the organisation there was a widespread mistrust as to the representative bodies’ capabilities to co-ordinate the dialogue development.

To overcome the problems, researchers proposed that the employees should carry out “self-research”: in the entire organisation employees should interview each other in so-called “*relay interviewing*”.¹ The interviews were given that name because they were organised as a relay race; one group interviewed another group, and when finished the second group interviewed a third group etc. The employees, in groups, went through a process of problem formulation which they developed and they went all around the organisation. The interpretation of problems in daily work was developed in a differentiated manner. The *lifeworld* of the employees was given time and space.

The “*relay interviewing*” resulted in a catalogue of items for further project work and for dialogues with the management. Through the process itself, group organisation in the domestic services in the local area overcame mistrust and developed self-organised new rules in the practical co-ordination of the daily work. In open conferences during two years the participants developed dialogues

¹ In the article “Aktionsforskning og kritiske forskerroller” (Lauridsen and Aagaard Nielsen 1998) we have made an empirical description of the “*relay interviewing*”.

among the employees and between management and employees. The users (old and disabled people) were invited to participate, but they were unable to do so.

In the dialogue conferences, the researchers constructed an arena for the dialogues among “relevant actors”. But the dialogue conference was organised at the same time as an arena for researchers to confront “organisational pragmatism”: management often tried to take back the control from the groups and the groups tried to throw the responsibility back on management. The researchers confronted such dispositions by means of *universal knowledge* or value: sustainable work – here domestic service – will be best served if the employees act as persons with a *lifeworld* and not as functionaries for an organisation. The researchers argued out of their own lifeworld orientation: as future users (living in the area) of the domestic service we wanted an unbureaucratic development. The researchers became spokesmen for “humanitarian” general values – not as experts in such questions, but as themselves citizens with a lifeworld. The possibility of the confronting dialogue among researchers and the functional actors in the “field” was the common or shared lifeworld orientations. They could, so to say, speak into the ambivalence of the actors in the domestic service organisation.

Our main conclusion from the domestic service case is that action researchers have to develop a methodology which is capable of giving time and space for *lifeworld reflections* in the group of employees before they join dialogue-processes with management and others. And we even see here that researchers can enter the dialogue with the *lifeworld theory* as a universal value and use it confrontatively. By doing so the partners and groups in the organisation are productively “irritated” in their organisational dynamic.

The action research project was characterised by a regional connection and networks, but it was also characterised by researchers bringing in universal or “allgemeine” orientations. And they succeeded in doing so. The results of the action research project was a consolidated working group culture; they have since the researchers left the organisation even repeated the relay interviewing and today see the method as their own. Three years have passed since the researchers left and as far as we know the domestic service has been able to maintain an unbureaucratic group organisation with a high degree of self managed co-ordination.

Second Case Story: New Technology in the Fishing Industry

In an experimental project in the Danish fishing industry, action researchers from RUC and the Technical University (DTU) had for some years been working together with workers in the Esbjerg region. We had succeeded in developing a democratic design of a fishing plant, where workers were supposed to take part in product development through a dialogue with local customers; the supply and selling processes were also intended to be integrated as a function carried out by the

same workers who also worked at the assembly line. A large problem however remained unsolved: we could not find proposals for a good alternative to the mechanical assembly line and everybody agreed that the work process by the assembly line was inhuman – even when you could reduce the working time at the line to a minimum. So it was essential for the design of a democratic concept for fish production that we found an alternative technology.

The action researchers constructed a so-called *research workshop* to deal with that particular problem.² In it, many different experts and researchers took part – but the main group in the workshop was the unskilled employees in the fishing industry. They outlined the utopian ideas of the democratic concept of fish production and the “problem with the assembly line”. In the beginning the invited experts and researchers were asked to reflect on the utopian model itself, and they were committed to the idea of an outline of democratic fish production. In the workshop, the experts and researchers and workers were asked to function as “spokesmen” for a universal value: one for the reproduction and diversity of fish in the sea, one for economic efficiency, one for the good health and safety, one for the environment, etc. We asked them to specify the universal values of their field, and from this point produce creative and utopian proposals for a new technology in fishing industry.

What happened was that a wide range of proposals were put forward. It became evident that the dialogue among the very different rationalities *deconstructed* the existing technological state of order and allowed for many new points of departure. After the creative processes with the experts the workers were able to give a first preliminary design of an alternative to the assembly line. They mixed high technology and handicraft or manual work tools in a new way. First of all, they were able to insist on their own qualifications: to follow the fish with their own eyes and cut it manually was something essential for developing quality in the work activity. They also constructed a working round table, where they could themselves decide the speed of work. Some elementary mechanical functions in the preparation of the fish could be carried out by robots, for example putting the fish in boxes.

Of course many functional and technical problems remained unsolved in the workers’ design, but they were able to present something useful for a further dialogue with researchers and experts.³

What happened in the research workshop was the opposite of a pragmatic dialogue, or at least we postponed the pragmatic dialogue to a stage very late in the creative processes. Most of the time the research workshop is confrontational in

² In an article (Nielsen et al 1996) we have outlined the idea of the research workshop and described the technical details of the arenas in the workshop.

³ The democratic experimental plant was never fully realised because of political opposition among employers in the region. It was functioning as a laboratory for workers’ involvement in developing new products for one year. The whole experiment stopped 1995.

the sense that general values respond to specific ideas. The confrontations open up for deconstruction of existing ideas of possible technical solutions.

The reason why the *method* functions productively is that the participants have committed themselves to a utopian horizon – going for a future of “allgemeine” interests and needs. The universal aspects in the dialogues in the research workshop suggest solutions and proposals for change, which is “loaded with sustainable values”. The practical implementation is very local and grounded in practical experiences. But the confrontation with universal values allows for a creative reflection on sustainability in the design process. They are productive in a phase before the pragmatic dialogues take place.

Conclusion

In both the projects outlined above the results of the dialogues have called for public initiatives. The strengthening of lifeworlds and the bringing in of for example environmental and social values in “local” and organisational development organisation means that the public sphere can become a relevant and obvious partner in the dialogues. Both projects succeeded in arranging public exhibitions of the results and experience. They contribute in strengthening a democratic public sphere in the region. And we see researchers as also responsible for that dimension of regional development.

We find the regional university concept promising and an opening for a democratisation of universities as such. But we fear that the pragmatic epistemology of science in the context of the regional university will leave critical and “allgemeine” interests out of the picture. In the 1980s and 1990s RUC has been known for its research in interdisciplinary studies and studies of sustainable development. Those studies expanded in spite of, or as part of the break with regional self-identification. We reinvented action research at RUC and we found that such “universal” studies could make a good contribution to our action research project.

What still remains is a more systematic development of *dialogue methods*. We need methods to strengthen the “lifeworld experience” in workshops – as well for participants from working life as researchers. If we succeed in this we will also be better at creating democratic dialogues between the Humboldtian knowledge regimes and the regimes of knowledge, which are practically oriented to problems in the workplace and local community.

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