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*Reflections on conflicting knowledge interests and actionability*

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## **Participation as enactment of power in dialogic organizational action research**

### **- Reflections on conflicting interests and actionability**

*Marianne Kristiansen & Jørgen Bloch-Poulsen*

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#### **Abstract**

The article focuses on participation as enactment of power in dialogic, organizational action research. The article has a dual purpose: It shows how participation is enacted as power in processes between participating managers, employees and action researchers with different or conflicting interests. It discusses if and eventually how it is possible to handle participatory processes when participation is conceptualized as enactment of power. This is done by reflecting critically on two examples from a dialogic, action research project carried out in two Danish, private organizations in 2008 and 2009.

The overall perspective is to bring participation as enactment of power into the centre of dialogic, organizational action research processes and into action research that understands itself as participatory.

The article argues in favour of understanding participation as enactment of power in a project work between different partners (employees, managers, and action researchers) with different interests. This argument is based on a definition of participation as co-determination of goals and means. Moreover, the article argues that combining reflexive and contextualized analyses from 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person approaches with broader 3<sup>rd</sup> person action research perspectives might make dialogic, organizational action research projects more actionable. Theoretically, participatory processes aim at empowerment. The article shows that co-producing knowledge in dialogic, organizational action research implies ongoing reflections on tensions in the action research concept of ‘co-’. In practice, these processes unfold in a field of tensions between empowerment and constraint.

*Keywords: participation, power, actionability, dialogue, organizational action research.*

#### **Purpose and points of view**

The article focuses on participation as enactment of power in dialogic, organizational action research processes between participating managers, employees, and action researchers with conflicting or different interests. As Foucault (2000) and Giddens (1981, 1984), we understand power as a basic component of social practice (Giddens) and social relation (Foucault). Thus the article is based on the assumption that there are no power-free spaces in dialogic, organizational action research processes (Neidel & Wulf-Andersen, 2012; Lather, 1991).

In this article, we do not focus on power viewed from an agent perspective (Dahl, 1961; Bachrach & Baratz, 1962) or a structural perspective (Parsons, 1967), but on how power is enacted, i.e. performed, in concrete contexts. The article deals with the effects of power and it defines power as whatever creates empowerment or constraint (Hayward, 1998).

We focus on one aspect of power only, namely ongoing struggles of defining reality. Whose 'reality' counts or does not count, and whose knowledge is in- or excluded (Chambers, 1997)? The article has a dual purpose:

Firstly, it shows how participation is enacted as power in processes between participating managers, employees and action researchers with different or conflicting interests in dialogic, organizational action research projects. Here participation cannot only be characterized by concepts like co-, shared, joint, collaborative, interactive, or democratic. It is always enactment of power.

Secondly, it discusses if and eventually how it is possible to handle participatory processes in more actionable ways when participation is conceptualized as enactment of power.

We do this by reflecting critically on two examples from a dialogic, action research project carried out in two Danish, private organizations in 2008 and 2009. The examples deal with conflicting interests between different participants: managers, employees, and action researchers. Together, the examples describe a development in the ways our partners and we tried to handle conflicts and differences in practice and to understand them theoretically. They range from 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person action research concepts (Marshall, 2001; Marshall & Mead, 2005) to developing a dialogic dissensus approach (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2010) that includes 3<sup>rd</sup> person action research perspectives (Torbert, 2001). The examples will show how we moved from critical self-reflections, to reflections with our partners on our joint relations, to actionable results.

The first example from Danfoss Solar Inverters (DSI), 2008 presents conflicting interests between a Sales Team and its director and us as action researchers about defining the agenda at project start.<sup>1</sup> We handled them in various ways that included 1<sup>st</sup> person action research reflections as well as balancing expectations from a 2<sup>nd</sup> person action research perspective by meta-communicating. Meta-communication means talking about our communication while we are communicating. It might address power relations in the conversation.

The second example from Computer Sciences Corporation (CSC), 2009 describes conflicting interests between a manager and an employee discourse at a team meeting. It inquires into the possibilities of reaching consensus of a new work routine through a dissensus approach including different voices and a 3<sup>rd</sup> person action research perspective (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2010).

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<sup>1</sup> There are a number of abbreviations in this article:  
 DSI: Danfoss Solar Inverters  
 CSC: Computer Sciences Corporation  
 CSMS: Citizen Service, Municipality of Silkeborg  
 EDIT: Employee Driven Innovation in Teams  
 TAM: Team Action Meetings  
 DHTM: Dialogic Helicopter Team Meetings

The article shows that 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person action research approaches might work as initial ways of handling conflicting interests by making enactment of power more transparent. However, these approaches are not sufficient to make action research more actionable, because they tend to focus on the researchers' own reflections and/or on conversations between them and their partners with no actionable results outside the process (DSI). Handling differences by means of a dissensus approach might make action research processes more actionable (CSC). Even though such an approach addresses differences openly, it does not include larger cultural, political and societal power aspects.

The overall perspective of reflecting critically on these examples is to bring participation as enactment of power into the centre of dialogic, organizational action research processes, into participatory research and into action research that understands itself as participatory (Greenwood & Levin, 1999; Reason & Bradbury, 2001, 2008). Recently, action researchers have dealt with dilemmas of participatory action research (Pedersen & Olesen, 2008), with the paradox of participation (Arieli, Friedman & Agbaria, 2009), and with the complexities of building communicative spaces (Wicks & Reason, 2009). However, we are not familiar with much action research literature dealing with participation as enactment of power (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001).

The article argues in favour of understanding participation as unfolding in a project work between different partners (employees, managers, and action researchers) with different interests and of combining reflexive and contextualized analyses from a 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person approach with broader 3<sup>rd</sup> person action research perspectives. This might contribute to making action research even more reflexive and actionable. The article shows that co-producing knowledge in dialogic, organizational action research implies ongoing reflections on tensions in the action research concept of 'co-'. We think this might imply a change in action research understanding of participation based on different and sometimes conflicting interests and claims.

### **Theoretical frame**

Recently, we have worked with Employee Driven Innovation in Teams (EDIT) in our dialogic organizational action research projects. Employee driven innovations are defined as improved, sustainable work routines co-produced by the employees (Hoeve & Nieuwenhuis, 2006; Feldman & Pentland, 2003). We are inspired by theories conceiving innovation as an interactive process (Lundvall, 1988, 1992) and focus on the participatory aspects of these processes.

We define participation as co-determination. Ideally, employees, managers and action researchers co-determine the goals of their cooperation, co-design the cooperative processes, as well as co-evaluate and co-communicate the results (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2010, 2012). As such, participation is our approach. It is also a goal (Nelson & Wright, 2001). A purpose of our projects is to co-inquire into the possibilities of enlarging the scope of employee co-determination. A criterion for EDIT is not only surplus value for the organization, but also improved work life quality including enlarged employee participation. In order to avoid participation as a new tyranny (Cooke & Kothari, 2001), an important question has become if and eventually how managers and employees in an organization ask for participation. In the article, we inquire into how participation is unfolded in practice as enactment of power.

Participation means that employees do not only co-create improved work routines, they are also co-learners reflecting on research questions. This is based on the insight that to-day, processes in

organizations are so complex and unpredictable that they can be grasped only by a shared effort. Employees know best where their own shoe pinches. As such they contribute with experience and knowledge about specific work processes that we do not have as action researchers (Greenwood, 2007). Ellström (1996) points, too, at co-responsibility of goals as one among several learning facilitating dimensions in organizations.

Conversely, as researchers, we contribute with theoretical and practical knowledge about organizational communication and organizing of meetings and processes (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2009a, 2009b). Our relation is not characterized by us intervening in their practice from an outsider stranger-visitor position orchestrating an experiment (Eikeland, 2006), but as emergent, mutual participation (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2005). Consequently, we have worked on giving up a notion of being in control and knowing ahead, because principally we are never able to predict what waits around the next corner in these processes (Kristiansen, 2007). Both parties act as changers and being changed (Neidel & Wulf-Andersen, 2012), “researchers are learners too” (Solomon et al., 2001).

In this way, the action research project can be understood as situated within a power struggle concerning definitions where we try to maintain an employee or a social and humanistic perspective on innovation (Høyrup, 2010) in order to prevent EDIT deteriorating into a modern form of rationalization (Barker, 1999). Thus, we do not consider improvements – which do not imply amelioration of work life quality – as examples of employee driven innovations. This definition can be said to reflect a tension between two different understandings of employment relationship. A unitarist perspective focusing on shared interests between employers and employees and a pluralist one on different interests and power bases (Evans, Hodkinson, Rainbird & Unwin, 2006).

The theoretical contribution of this article is our renewed understanding of participation within dialogic, organizational action research. In this article, we define participation in three intertwined ways:

- Participation as co-determination
  - o As a means in action research processes meaning co-determination of goal, process, evaluation, and communication of results
  - o As a goal meaning more co-determination in future work situations
- Participation as a way of learning
- Participation as enactment of power.

This definition is based on practical experiences in dialogic, action research projects. When we tried to practice participation as co-determination and as a way of learning, we were faced with different and sometimes conflicting interests. These differences dealt with when to start a project, negotiation of contracts, our role as researchers, allotted time for meetings etc. etc. Gradually, we realized that there seemed to be a common denominator in these situations across different organizational contexts that dealt with power.

As mentioned, we focus on how power is enacted between different partners and only on one aspect dealing with the power to define ‘reality’. The article will show how participation is enacted as power between a sales team and us as action researchers (DSI) and between two discourses in an IT-team (CSC). We understand this fairly narrow focus on power as a first step towards a broader understanding of power and participation in dialogic, organizational action research projects.

## **Participation as enactment of power between conflicting interests of defining the agenda**

### ***Introduction***

The two examples are from an action research project on ‘Innovation and involvement through strengthening dialogue in team based organizations’. Here we cooperated with 18 teams in two private and one public organization: Danfoss Solar Inverters (DSI), Computer Sciences Corporation (CSC), and Citizen Service, The Municipality of Silkeborg (CSMS), Denmark. The project was financed by the Danish Agency for Science, Innovation and Technology, the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation and Ernst B. Sund’s Funding. It took place in 2008-2009 where we cooperated with the 18 teams between 3 to 13 months. We had a series of 3 hour meetings every second month with all the teams. The agenda was to improve existing work routines and to facilitate EDIT.

The EDIT-project resulted in a series of incremental, employee driven, organizational process innovations. Among others, a model of co-production of learning in the transition from one project to the next at DSI (Clemmensen, Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2009), a model of cross departmental ad hoc review meetings at DSI, and a backup model of improved citizen service, work climate, and competence development at CSMS (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2010).

### ***Co-operation with the Sales Team, DSI***

Before we started our cooperation with Danfoss Solar Inverters (DSI) in February, 2008, we planned to observe their ordinary team action meetings (TAMs), comment on team communication and collaboratively change TAMs in an innovation facilitating direction. During the spring of 2008, we realized that this was not possible and that the Vice Presidents at DSI and we had different interests. Below we will show how these were enacted by focusing on our initial cooperation with the Sales Team.

The Sales Team had seven employees and a new sales director who was one of four Vice Presidents (VP) at DSI. The team is part of the Sales and Marketing Department. DSI is a fast growing, relatively new, high tech plant producing advanced grid-connected inverters for residential and commercial solar energy applications to a global market. The plant is owned by the Danfoss Group. The Sales Team is in charge of selling DSI products globally, of customer relations and of developing sales strategies and procedures. The team consists of several minor groups.

When we met the Sales Team, DSI was involved in a difficult technological process of developing and testing a new product that took longer to close than expected. Seen from the perspective of the Sales Team, they needed to know the exact deadlines to tell customers when they were able to deliver. Besides, the fiscal crisis was looming in the horizon. This meant that DSI and the Sales Team were goal oriented here and now being on the look-out for new customers and increased turnover.

At our first meeting, the Sales Team decided to focus on developing action plans for increased turnover of DSI products, for improved customer relations, cooperation within the team, with the department and the rest of the DSI organization.

At the second team action meeting, the VP presented a new sales strategy. We noticed that he spoke during the major part of the meeting. There were few questions and reactions to his proposal. We presented our observations orally at the end of the meeting and in a written summary to all team

members: “We noticed that the VP had the initiative during the meeting and that only a few responded to his proposal. This pattern might be accidental, but we fear that innovation will not take place if you continue without dialogues.”

A sub group of three employees within the Sales Team participated in the third team action meeting where the VP was absent. The agenda was about developing new templates to be used in conversations with customers. Within two hours, the three members of the Sales Team developed a procedure for new templates in a dialogue where they asked questions, meta-communicated etc., when it was not clear what had been decided or when in doubt about differences within the group, etc.

At the second meeting, the VP might be said to exercise ‘power over’ the team who apparently accepted (Göhler, 2009). This seemed to work as exclusion of several employee voices and made it difficult to find traces of EDIT. At the third meeting, the three employees of the team seemed to practice ‘power with’ including all voices. This meant they developed new templates based on their workplace experiences thus indicating an innovative potential.

Before the fourth meeting, there was a mail correspondence between some of the team members, the VP, and us about defining the agenda of the meeting. The action research project was placed as one of the final items on the TAM-agenda. At the meeting, there was not time enough to address the project and we wrote in our field notes: “We must have a dialogue about this, because we do not intend to work merely as “tape recorders.” Before the fifth meeting, we negotiated with representatives of the team, so that project issues became the first item of the agenda. After this meeting, we realized, however, that the Sales Team had organized a regular, parallel team action meeting. We had not been invited to or informed about this meeting.

We understand this as a practical example of a participatory endeavour enacted as power between conflicting interests of defining the agenda. Seen from an agent perspective, it could be analyzed, too, as an example of a non-decision process (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962) where the Vice President and the team managed to exclude action research topics from their ordinary agenda at team action meetings. At earlier meetings, we had observed that some team members were being excluded or excluded themselves. Now, we experienced that we were being excluded (or had excluded ourselves) and the action research project was not prioritized.

During the process of these five meetings, our reflections made it clear that EDIT was closely connected with enactment of power dealing with defining the agenda, with voice, and with ex- and inclusion. We learned that participatory efforts unfold in the tension between empowerment and constraint.

### *Addressing conflicting interests*

We decided to share our 1<sup>st</sup> person action research reflections at meetings with the Sales Team and the Project Group at DSI. This group consisted of the four VPs and the CEO, Thomas.<sup>2</sup> The first part of the conversation with the project group dealt with why TAMs in Sales Marketing did not facilitate EDIT:

Jørgen: EDIT demands certain conditions that we did not become aware of until yesterday at the meeting with the Sales Team. It demands that we cooperate with teams engaged in, how shall I put it, more than reporting on day-to-day problems in the production flow.

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<sup>2</sup> Later at CSMS, representatives from each team participated in the project group.

Thomas: Yeah, some kind of workshop where something is generated, a solution, or?

Jørgen: Yes, exactly, something dealing with improvements. This was not clear to us from the beginning. We simply had not figured it out.

Marianne: The Software Team expressed it very precisely to-day: A workshop focusing on a burning issue that everybody is engaged in and where we do not know the answer in advance but collaboratively go for it. Then dialogues might emerge almost automatically ... Mads [VP of the Sales Team], you have been “exposed” to these meetings, what do you think?

Mads: I agree with you, completely. This is what happened when we look in the rear-view mirror. Our TAMs in Sales-Marketing are usually about information, reporting on day-to-day business. If a problem occurs, it is usually moved away from the meeting. We hand it over to a sub group who is then asked to present their suggestions at the next meeting.

As stated in this sequence, TAMs focused on reporting from day-to-day business, not on producing new answers and learning. They dealt with information exchange more than knowledge creation (Nonaka, Toyama & Byosière, 2001). At that time, it was new learning to us that TAMs could not be used to facilitate EDIT, but not to Mads, the VP of the Sales Team. In hindsight this seemed fairly naïve, but we wanted very much to cooperate with DSI and feared they would not join the project if we had suggested a more time consuming project. Moreover, we had entered DSI through the CEO who had participated in an earlier project. We think he convinced the VPs by arguing that participating in the project would not need something extra.

The second part of the conversation addressed conflicting interests about defining the agenda:

Jørgen: Yesterday, we talked with the Sales Team that we had positioned each other as fighting about the agenda. Were the meetings to focus on their reporting on day-to-day burning issues or on dialogic communication and EDIT? We had hoped these interests might be integrated, but it has been more difficult than imagined.

Søren [VP]: Initially, we got the impression that the process was to be part of our daily business. That was the reason why we dared embark on this project, because we could not tackle an extra project now.

Klaus [VP]: That being our interpretation, I understand now that you have been fighting for something else ...

Jørgen: Yeah, some clash or mismatch occurred.

Marianne: I would have liked to ask the Sales Team and you, Mads this question at an earlier meeting ... Did we fight about the agenda or how do you see it?

Mads: I think we did ...

Thomas [CEO]: Well, it’s important that we speak out, yes ...

When we meta-communicated about the conflicts of defining the agenda, it became clear that DSI and we had different interests. DSI chose to embark on the process, because it was to be part of their daily work and not a project demanding something extra in a strenuous period. Originally, we thought that EDIT could be developed at regular TAMs and hoped to integrate our different



interests. We think the differences between DSI and us can be understood as a clash between the logic of production and the logic of development (Ellström, 2005).

In the sequences above, we changed from reflecting critically in our field notes from a first person action research perspective to meta-communicating openly about conflicting knowledge interests between the Sales Team and us from a 2<sup>nd</sup> person action research perspective. We think this contributed to making participation as enactment of power more transparent by clarifying our different interests. However, we did not manage to co-construct a shared ‘reality’ or to make the project more actionable. Words do not change reality unless they are accompanied by actions. In this case, they were not.

In hindsight, we could have negotiated our contract more clearly and balanced expectations from the beginning. This might have been the end of our cooperation with DSI where innovation and action research might be said to have lost the power struggle with day to day production and economic survival here and now.

## **Participation as enactment of power between conflicting discourses**

### ***Cooperation with Team Airline Delivery, CSC: context and background***

Based on the experiences from our cooperation with DSI, we re-designed the action research project by experimenting with Dialogic Helicopter Team Meetings (DHTM). They were meant as a supplement to ordinary TAMs, close to, but separated from them in time and space. The purpose of DHTMs was to improve work routines and to experiment with the development process itself. DHTMs grew out of practical experiments, too, trying to cope with various team patterns such as flying off at different tangents, postponing decisions, etc. We understand this kind of organizing as an example of meta-workplace learning based on participating in practice (Gherardi, 2000). The overall purpose of DHTMs was to make space for all voices and dissensus. Elsewhere, we have shown how it is possible to practice this dialogic dissensus approach in different practical ways, e.g., by using shifting small groups, rounds, bystanders, pro and con groups, systematic follow up, evaluation, etc. (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2009a, 2010).

The second example focuses on our cooperation with Team Airline Delivery at CSC. CSC is a global company with IT as its core competence. Team Airline Delivery consists of 8 employees and a team manager producing steering programs for their customers’ data processing. At our first DHTM, the team decided that their most important goal was to improve their release steering and estimation process. They wanted to create a process enabling them to clarify their customers’ needs when these asked for changes in their data processing programs in order to be able to give realistic estimates of necessary costs. They also wanted to develop a process enabling them to balance expectations of their internal work division: who were going to be responsible for changing what?<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> On a scale from 0 (very bad) to 10 (very good), their initial self-assessment of this estimation process or work routine was 1.4 on an average. When closing our cooperation 11 month later, it had improved to 6.3. Their final assessment comment was: “We did not succeed completely, but this EDIT-project has been the reason why we managed to take such a big step.”

The example describes the second but last meeting in a series of 7. It takes place in February 2009, 9 month after we started our cooperation. Recently, the team has got a new manager who participates, too. Prior to this meeting there has been a process in which we have cooperated on changing internal team communication patterns and organizing DHTMs.

### ***Purpose***

At the meeting, Team Airline Delivery focuses on their goal of improving estimation processes. Until now, they have had a tendency to underestimate the resources needed and their invoices do not always cover their costs. The conversation highlights three items: When will there be a follow up session on an estimate? Who is going to participate in the estimation follow up session? What are the estimation criteria? Below, we only deal with the second and third item. They seem to be difficult, because they inquire into the limits of openness within the team. Our analysis of the meeting has a dual purpose:

Firstly, it will show that the team members and their manager can be said to position themselves within two conflicting discourses constructed as the conversation moves along.<sup>4</sup> We have chosen to name the first one an economic learning discourse and the second one a participatory learning discourse. The economic discourse follows the logic of production whereas the participatory discourse follows the logic of development. The economic discourse is mainly advocated by two males: the manager, Flemming, and the co-dispatcher, Hans-Peter; the participatory discourse by four women: Tine, Mette, Pia, and Eva. During the conversation, Hans-Peter positions himself differently by including the questions raised by his four, female colleagues. We understand the two discourses as examples as enactment of power.

Secondly, it will describe the different ways the team and we tried to handle the conflicting discourses. These include meta-communicating about taken for granted managerial decisions, questioning the scope of dialogue as well as some basic assumptions of the two discourses. We understand these ways of handling conflicting discourses as different ways of making the conversation on estimation more actionable, because towards the end of the meeting they have contributed to produce a decision of testing a new estimation routine. We see this as an example of an employee driven, organizational process innovation.

### ***What is up for a dialogue?***

The conversational sequence below is initiated by us as outsider action researchers asking questions about a series of changes that apparently have taken place since our last DHTM:

Marianne: Some changes seem to have been introduced. I do not understand what they are about, and I do not know if all of you are familiar with the contents of these changes? I am rather curious.

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<sup>4</sup> Alvesson & Kärreman (2000) present an overview of discourse analysis by using two dimensions: a continuum between “discourse determination” and “discourse autonomy” (p. 1133) and a continuum between “close-range interest (local-situational context)” and “long-range-interest (macro-system context)” (p. 1135). The article is located within the field labeled “close-range/autonomy” (p. 1139). We work on a micro-(meso-) level with teams (close-range), not with Discourses as culturally standardized patterns of thought. We address discourses as conceptual patterns in team communication at CSC rather than as objects of linguistics (Phillips, 2012).

Tine: You know that goes for me, too. I think it is a relief you ask such questions keeping us on track, because this is what I would have liked to do myself.

Marianne meta-communicates about possible power issues by asking if everybody in the team has been informed about a new decision or if it is only her who does not know. Tine's remark indicates that some team members might not be familiar with the new changes. This prompts Jørgen to question the scope of team decisions. What is up for a dialogue, i.e., for shared inquiry and decision making, and what eventually, did Flemming, the new manager decide in advance (Isaacs, 1999):

Jørgen: Is it appropriate that Hans Peter and Mette [two members of the team] present a draft at our next meeting or is it more adequate that you, Flemming, now tells the team what you have decided in order to let the team know your frame work, or?

Flemming: I have decided upon a frame work demanding that Hans Peter is always able to brief me on the status of a task as well as on who is working with it. Mette is to come up with a draft for a template: is this a proper tool or do we need to look for something different. Everybody is then supposed to evaluate this tool.

It turns out that Flemming has decided to make two new changes. As a co-dispatcher, Hans Peter is going to follow up on all tasks in the team and report back to Flemming, and Mette is to make a draft for a new template which the team is supposed to evaluate. As a new team manager, Flemming underscores that he does not know the best way of organizing team estimation processes:

Flemming: I intend to be open to all suggestions. I have not been in a department where we have tried this ... So let us find out. I do not have the answers here.

Compared with the Sales Team in DSI, there are a couple of differences in handling participation as enactment of power. As action researchers, we meta-communicate about a possible tacit managerial decision that might define the agenda without the team or we knowing about this. We question, too, the scope of dialogue to find out if how to organize estimation processes is up for a dialogue in the team. We think both ways of handling possible differences contribute to make participation as enactment of power more transparent. At DSI, we re-learned the importance of balancing expectations of the scope of employee and managerial responsibility if DHTMs were going to result in EDIT practically and theoretically. Here at CSC, the team and we tried to practise this from the beginning. By doing so, they and we seem to move beyond a second person action research perspective dealing with meta-communicating and words to co-creating conditions for a third person actionable result of producing a new estimation work routine in Team Airline Delivery.

The rest of the conversation turns out to be a dialogic inquiry into: Who is going to participate in the estimation follow up session? What are the estimation criteria? In the following sequences, the team distinguishes between two groups: The estimation group is the employees who did or produced the estimate. They figured out how much time and resources were needed. The developer group is the group who afterwards tried to implement or produce the changes the customers have asked for within the estimated time.

### ***Who participates in the follow up session?***

Pia poses an open question:

Pia: Now, who is going to take part in this follow up?

Hans Peter: The group who produced the changes, I guess.

Mette: OK

Several: Yes, yes

Jørgen: So it is the developer group, who will meet, let us say, on Mondays in the week following the release?

Several: Yes.

Initially, it seems as if Hans Peter's proposal is agreed upon. In this way, he might be seen as the person who defines the agenda. His position is questioned, however, in the following sequence:

Mette: It will not produce very much feedback to the guys who actually did the estimate.

Hans Peter: Well, that is important. It might be presented to them at a TAM?

Pia: Or it might be those who developed the change and those who did the estimate who collaboratively do the follow up?

Flemming: From my perspective, it is the persons who actually developed the change who will meet with either Hans Peter [as a co-dispatcher] or me [as a team leader]. Any critical deviation between actual and estimated use of resources will then be given back to the estimation group [i.e. the group that made the estimate] as general information. I think, it is a process where we must try to find a way.

Mette: If it is you [Flemming] or Hans Peter who will meet with the people who developed the change, then I think it is very important, at least initially, that the people who did the estimate are going to participate so they can learn from the developers, e.g., if any part of the change has been totally underestimated.

Hans Peter: Yeah, is it not important to make a routine enabling us to learn from our failures?

Mette: Yes, if I, e.g., consequently underestimate tests.

Mette and Pia argue that the follow up session should include both the developers who developed and implemented the change and the estimation group who calculated how many hours it would take to implement the change, because this might be a learning journey for the estimation group, too. By arguing this way, they might be said to position themselves within a participatory learning discourse. It differs from Flemming's position. He only wants to include the change developers, Hans Peter, and/or himself and to provide the estimation group with general information later. The next sequence will show why Flemming argues this way. Hans Peter positions himself differently towards the end when including his female colleagues' wish to let the estimation group learn from the developers by including failures.

### ***What are the estimation criteria?***

At this point, the team changes its focus when Tine asks questions about the criteria for the follow up on estimation:

Tine: You are talking about identifying tasks which turned out either well or badly. But then we need some criteria of what is good and bad. To me this sounds like how many hours do we use on

a task/change. This might be our only criteria. Sometimes, it may be more complex, though. I think, e.g., there might be a proper accordance between hours used and hours estimated, but unfortunately, the change we implemented does not correspond with what the customer demanded.

Hans Peter: I agree, there are different ways of assessing quality.

Flemming: As mentioned, I suggested that I or Hans Peter did the follow up with the change developers. The reason was to avoid that too many people meet at the follow up. Time is money. And only the customer can pay ... I had hoped we could use TAMs for reporting back and knowledge sharing: what has been superb, what has been bad.

Tine seems to problematize team criteria for good and bad estimation questioning assumptions of estimation measured only by hours spent on a change ("Sometimes, it may be more complex ..."). She might be said to speak from a participatory learning discourse position, like Pia and Mette did in relation to following up. She, too, is supported by Hans Peter ("I agree ..."). Flemming's criterion turns out to be about time and money. Earlier, he suggested a small group consisting of change developers, Hans-Peter and/or himself who reported back and shared knowledge at TAMs, because he wanted to save time and money ("Time is money, and only the customer can pay"). By arguing this way, he might be said to speak from an economic learning discourse position. It differs from the participatory position advocated by Pia, Mette, and Tine and, finally, by Hans-Peter.

The participatory discourse can be characterized as shared sensemaking, whereas the economic discourse can be characterized as sensemaking followed by sensegiving thus indicating a different enactment of power (Huzzard, 2004).

It is our interpretation that the team handles internal team difference by practicing dialogue. Elsewhere, we have defined dialogues as special qualities in conversations characterized by share, dare, and care (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2005). We think the team can be said to dare question basic assumptions of who is going to participate in the estimation follow up session and of what the estimation criteria are. By doing this, they share different knowledge interests, apparently in a caring way where they listen to and include each other. Their dialogue shows participation as enactment of power between two discourses, where the team positions themselves and each other differently throughout the conversation. Thus, dialogue is not only about relations and one common discourse, but also about different, competing discourses inquiring into if it is possible to produce an actionable result as, e.g., a new estimation routine. Can it be based on reaching robust consensus through including differences in a dialogic dissensus approach?

### *Are we to estimate our fiascoes?*

Due to several changes of topics, we start to lose the big picture and begin meta-communicating about what the team might eventually decide:

Marianne: The issues you are talking about now, do you intend to make some decisions? This is not clear to me.

Pia: I am confused, too.

Tine: I have a question: Do you demand, Flemming, that all of us are going to stand up and speak openly about what we did well and where we failed? I mean, ugh ...

It seems as if Tine's earlier question about quality criteria includes unpleasant feelings of openly sharing failures in the team. She questions if this is a managerial demand made by Flemming. In this way, she contributes to addressing discursive power in the team as well as Flemming's power over the team as a manager. It might be said, too, that the participatory learning discourse is widened to include social-psychological issues within the team.

### *Going round the table*

We have noticed that it is the same team members, Flemming, and us who have spoken so far. Accordingly, Jørgen suggests a round where everybody speaks up:

Peter: I agree with Hans Peter who suggested a "simple basic implementation".

Henning: I think we should find the reason why something turned out well and something badly.

Tine: I agree.

Pia: I think we should include the estimation group and discuss three good and three bad things.

Eva: I suggest we keep it simple, now.

Hans Peter: I propose three criteria: Time [observing deadlines], economy [estimated and used resources], and quality.

Torben: I agree.

Mette: I suggest we do it slowly including all the people who have been involved. Then, maybe, we will move to a more mature level where we are able to learn from discussing things at TAMs. Let us do it gently, because we are not used to processes like these.

Tine: I think, too, this is the way to do it. You have to do it stepwise in order to create a caring and secure atmosphere.

Henning: I agree with you.

Eva: So do I.

There seems to be two positions, too, in this round. The first is represented by Peter, Hans-Peter, and Torben advocating a simple basic implementation. The second is represented by Henning, Pia, Mette, Tine, and Eva talking in favor of including all the people involved in estimation and of developing the team slowly over a period of time. We interpret the two positions as examples of the two discourses. The economic discourse is in line with the logic of production advocating time, economy, and quality; the participatory discourse is in line with the logic of development (Ellstrøm, 2005). It argues to include everybody involved in estimation and to follow Mette's strategy of moving "slowly ... towards a more mature level" by creating a secure basis of learning before sharing failures.

### *What was decided?*

A little later, we meta-communicate about the process again:

Marianne: It sounds to me as if some consensus is emerging right now?

Tine: I think we are close

Hans-Peter: I think so, too.

Meta-communication seems to contribute to keeping the team on track. Before closing the meeting, the team reaches this decision:

- the follow up process will take place the week after the release
- the process will include the estimation and the developer group
- the process will start with a simple basic implementation focusing on the criteria of time, economy, and quality as an initial step towards sharing failures openly.

In this way, Team Airline Delivery agrees on a new work routine they intend to test before the final DHTM. At the final meeting a couple of months later, the team evaluated their new routine:

Flemming: We have worked very hard on the following up process on estimation since our last meeting.

Pia: I agree.

Flemming: I think we have gone far achieving our purpose.

Tine: I really think it works superbly ... I think all of us will improve our work through this follow up process.

Mette: I must say it is very positive. It is beneficial, really.

Pia: We have improved the quality of our work ...

Mette: I suggest we give a big, red heart to this effort.

The second but last meeting is an example of participation enacted as power between two different discourses. We understand the new routine as an integration of them. The ones who argued in favor of a participatory learning discourse reached a proposal which included customer expectations and both change developers and the estimation group. The ones who argued in favor of an economic learning discourse reached a proposal starting with a simple basic implementation based on time, economy, and quality.

### ***Handling participation enacted as tensions between different discourses***

The DHMTs in Team Airline Delivery indicates that developing a new organizational work routine can be a complex dialogue between different discourses where team members and managers position themselves differently in changing positions.<sup>5</sup> The two discourses might have been enacted as a polarized power struggle. We think this did not happen, because differences were handled in several ways that seemed to contribute to build bridges across tensions and to co-produce a new work routine:

At the beginning of the meeting, the team and we questioned the scope of dialogue. Was Team Airline Division empowered to develop a new routine or had Flemming, the manager decided in

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<sup>5</sup> In different teams, we have experienced different discourses, e.g., between young and elderly employees and between production and development team members (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2010).

advance what to do. When it turned out that he had not, this meant that we might cooperate in developing EDIT. This differed from the situation with the Sales Team at DSI where we did not balance expectations, initially.

During the meeting, we meta-communicate about a possible tacit, managerial agenda and about the process. Phrased differently, there seemed to be a discourse of silence addressed by Tine and the two of us who questioned the scope of managerial power (Have everybody been informed about the new managerial decision? Are the team empowered to make a new work routine? Must we share our failures openly at meetings? Have everybody spoken so far?). We think this 2<sup>nd</sup> person action research perspective contributed to make participation as enactment of power more transparent, because it addressed enactment of tacit power. However, this 2<sup>nd</sup> person perspective did not in itself make the process actionable.

Finally, we observed that the team practiced dialogue by inquiring into differences and basic assumptions. The ones who spoke from a participatory discourse position critically questioned the economic discourse without blaming their colleagues and vice versa. We saw, too, that Hans-Peter included the criticism raised by his colleagues. In different teams, we have been the only ones questioning basic assumptions of different discourses. This was not the case in Team Airline Delivery who did the critical questioning themselves. Finally, we tried to include all voices by organizing a round.

Our cooperation with Team Airline Delivery and other teams indicates that it is important to observe and address participation as enactment of power if the team is to reach a robust decision on a new organizational work routine, because dialogue is often practiced as competing discourses in a team. Facilitating EDIT and organizing DTHMs are about making space for differences and handling tensions between different discourses, because EDIT and DHTMs are situated within organizational contexts where team members position themselves and each other differently and power struggles about defining the agenda can emerge between team members, between them and their manager or between them and us as action researchers. This was not the case in Team Airline Delivery as it was in the Sales Team at DSI.

Making space for differences includes, too, taking social-psychological team processes into consideration. The dialogue above resulting in EDIT did not only deal with following up processes of estimation, but also with social-psychological team processes. Do we, e.g., dare to share our failures at meetings? This question was raised in Team Airline Delivery at our second but last meeting. Similar questions were raised in different teams towards the end of the process after a fairly long period of cooperation. This conclusion is in line with other research results. European research on innovative teams has demonstrated that focusing on social processes and team development seems to have an important impact on teams becoming innovative (Hohn, 2000).

### **Critical reflections on participation: To participate, to be involved, to co-influence, to co-determine, to enact power**

In this section, we situate and discuss the cases from DSI and CSC within a larger action research context by reflecting critically on different ways of understanding and handling participation in action research including our own.

#### ***To participate***



Within theories of learning, at least two paradigms are competing (Fenwick, 2008; Huzzard, 2004). A dominant, classical teaching paradigm understands the learner as a passive recipient, audience or object. Here knowledge is conceptualized like a thing to be transmitted from the more knowledgeable (researcher or teacher) to the less knowledgeable other (participant or practitioner). A new participatory paradigm understands the other as a co-learner, where he/she is conceived as a subject participating in joint meaning making processes. This approach is expressed in theories of workplace learning (Evans, Hodkinson, Rainbird & Unwin, 2006), situated learning (Wenger, 2000), organizational learning (Rothmann & Friedman, 2001), practice-based theorizing of learning in general (Gherardi, 2000), etc.

Interactive research refers to action science by Argyris, Putnam & Smith (1985) as an example of collaborative inquiry characterized by “equitable and mutual relationships” between researchers and their partners (Svensson, Ellström & Brulin, 2007, p. 238). We, too, find a dialogic intention in Argyris, Putnam & Smith (1985). However, when reading sequences of the conversations between the action scientists, characterized as “the instructor”, and the participants, we think these come closer to a discussion aiming at convincing than to a dialogue aiming at co-inquiring (Bohm, 1996). We will give an example of this based on our reading of a case describing the participant, George:

In response to the instructor’s critique, George mobilized several lines of defense, each one deflecting his responsibility for the actions and outcomes that the instructor had described. Yet each time George brought forth a new line of defense, the instructor rendered his new position unacceptable by George’s own standards. (Argyris, Putnam & Smith, 1985, p.128)

Here, the authors read George’s reactions as defense mechanisms in accordance with their own interpretations (“mobilized several lines of defense ... a new line of defense”). We wonder what George replied and observe that the authors do not seem to question the basic assumptions of their own interpretations, e.g., in a dialogue with George. Thus, it is our interpretation that here the action scientists discuss with participants like George by trying to convince them about problems and inadequacies in their mindsets. They seem to act as instructors educating their partners.

Generally speaking, we ask if the action science approach of Argyris, Putnam & Smiths (1985) can be conceptualized as a classical researcher-practitioner-hierarchy within the dominant information-transmission-paradigm. They use a doctor-patient-metaphor to describe the relation between researcher and practitioner. Moreover, the practitioners are interpreted as practicing “organizational defence mechanisms”. This includes “fancy footwork” inhibiting learning (Argyris, 1990). Alternatively, the practitioners are presented as co-learners and co-researchers (Argyris & Schön, 1996).

By doing this, we think the action scientists seem to practice an othering or self-referential interpretation of George reducing him to an object of their interpretations (Pedersen & Olesen, 2012; Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2004).

Thus, it seems to us as if participation and collaborative inquiry is their espoused value, while their theory-in-use is characterized by a discussion oriented, Socratic practice of pointing at inconsistencies between espoused values and theories-in-use in the client system and at the expert, instructor, or doctor metaphor. Is this an example of participation enacted as constraining power privileging researcher interpretations with a consequence of othering partners?

In an earlier project at Bang & Olufsen, 1995-2000, we, too, faced a discrepancy between our espoused values of dialogue and participation and our theory-in-use. Here, we privileged our own researcher interpretations when understanding and analyzing, e.g., a mentoring conversation between a young employee and his manager. Without knowing, we practiced participation as othering of our partner by interpreting him according to our own knowledge interests. In order to understand this process, we developed the concept of self-referentiality later (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2004). It means imposing apriori categories and relations on the other without knowing it.

We think it is important that as action researchers, we reflect critically on our own categories and ways of entering into relations with partners. We fear that if this is not done, then researchers might practice participation as enactment of interpretative power and education as seemed to be done above. When we start reflecting critically, we must be willing to discard taken for granted theories and ways of handling our partners' reactions as faults to be educated. As mentioned above, 1<sup>st</sup> person action research does not in itself make projects more actionable, but it might contribute to guarantee a democratic practice.

### ***To be involved***

Within theories of organizational development, a distinction has emerged between involvement and participation (Nielsen, 2004). Involvement means that management has decided the goals of development processes in advance and that employees are involved in finding and implementing the best means of fulfilling these goals. Within this context, involvement becomes a managerial tool. We think the case from DSI might be understood as an example of action researchers being involved in the Vice Presidents and the CEOs plans with the research project. When balancing expectations it became clear that they and we had different interests.

As mentioned earlier, we define participation as co-determination. It is our experience that the distinction between involvement and participation presents a dilemma for many organizational action research projects dealing with who decide the goals, design the process, evaluate and communicate the results. Is it management and/or employees and/or action researchers (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2005)? We experienced aspects of this dilemma at DSI when we did not balance expectations at the beginning of the process.

### ***To co-influence***

In Scandinavian Democratic Dialogues, participation means that employees and managers are involved in the so-called development organization in order to qualify the background for decisions of development processes. Decisions are afterwards made in the regular decision making fora in the company (Pålshaugen, 1998). We understand this endeavor as co-influence rather than as participation.

### ***To co-determine***

As mentioned earlier, in our dialogic, organizational action research projects, we have developed an understanding of participation based on differences and joint project work within a dialogic dissensus approach (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2010). We conceptualize participants - employees, managers, and action researchers - as different groups of professionals. Ideally as professionals, we have different, but compatible as well as shared goals. We co-produce three kinds of results: concrete improvements or practical results as, e.g., the new estimation process at Team Airline Delivery at CSC; a better way of organizing processes and improving dialogues as, e.g.,

Dialogic Helicopter Team Meetings; and new conceptual understanding as, e.g., dialogues as tensions between conflicting knowledge interests and discourses.

Ideally, these three kinds of results or goals are not separated, but integrated as well as equally important. As mentioned, this was not the case at DSI where the Sales Team and their VP and we began competing about the agenda, because we had different interests. When cooperating with Team Airline Delivery at CSC, we think the three kinds of results became integrated. They managed to produce a new routine. Together, we examined and developed new ways of organizing DHTMs. In retrospect, we developed a new understanding of participation as enactment of power.

### *To enact power*

The paradox of participation is the focus of an article written by Arieli, Friedman & Agbaria (2009). It is described this way:

... 'the paradox of participation' which we define as *a situation in which action researchers, acting to actualize participatory and democratic values, unintentionally impose participatory methods upon partners who are either unwilling or unable to acts as researchers* (p. 275).

Arieli, Friedman & Agbaria (2009) disclose how they let participation function as a patronizing device. The experienced action researcher, Friedman, systematically chose to neglect the expectations of the participating communities represented by Agbaria. Agbaria wanted action and practical results here and now. Friedman's first priority was to involve the practitioners as co-researchers before they collaboratively produced practical results. Before the reflection process that constitutes the article, his espoused value is described in this way:

Participation is essential for action research: the more the better (p. 276)

In this example, participation means that the practitioners cooperate as co-researchers. In the learning process presented in the article, participation is maintained as a critical value, but the authors conclude that it is necessary to inquire into whether participation is in line with the expectations of the practitioners:

Testing the assumption that community members are willing and able to participate as researchers? ... Being prepared to place action before research (p. 284).

The researchers conclude by proposing that participation is made a subject of negotiation:

In any case, the level of participation ought to be freely and openly negotiated between action researchers and community members (p. 283).

We think this paradox or dilemma points at participation as enactment of power. In his libertarian, participatory work, Freire (1972) is clear in his distinction between the pedagogy *for* and *of* the oppressed. He is in favor of the last understanding. Yet, he uses a Marxian concept like alienation. We think it is a principal question if you can have a dialogue with people whom you consider alienated. We read "The pedagogy of the oppressed" as an ongoing illustration of a participatory dilemma oscillating between the researcher/teacher as uppers and the practitioner as lowers (Chambers, 1997) vs. dialogues between them on an equal footing.

Based on our analysis above, we think participation enacted as power will always take place between employees, managers, and action researchers, because organizational action researchers are situated within a changing field of tensions that do not only include dialogue and discussions, but many conflicting contexts and interests, also economic and political ones. Do we enter into a dialogue or a discussion? Do we participate in their project, do they participate in our project, or do different professionals participate in joint projects? The answers to these questions are not simple, because they depend, too, on changing contexts and processes. Thus, we understand participation as enactment of power in a field of tension between empowerment and constraint.

Our research results indicate that we cannot eliminate participation as enactment of power between researchers, managers, and employees. Action research can try to handle power by combining 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> person approaches. These can contribute to make enactment of power more transparent. This is especially needed when constraints take place in the name of participation and are practiced as privileging researcher positions as interpretators and educators, when they are not asked to educate. However, these means are not sufficient to deal with economic, political and societal power.

## **Perspectives**

### ***Towards a participatory epistemology?***

We think the participatory paradox (Arieli, Friedman and Agbaria, 2009) pertains to a broader context. As far as we can see the following statement made by Hall (2001) is relevant for all organizational action researchers:

The case study points to the real danger that the use of concepts like ‘participatory’ may mask the influence of power relations on what people think, hear, and do ... Thus the researchers and the community produced the kind of dominant-submissive, powerful-powerless relationship that they wanted to change (pp. 281, 283).

We consider it necessary to co-create a participatory epistemology to shed light on how different groups of professionals contribute to different results and knowledge production, as well as to self-critically inquire into how participation is enacted as power in the specter between empowerment and constraint. We think this must be done in concrete ways in concrete projects including all the participants’ observations, reasoning, intuition, feelings, and actions.

Maybe, it is time, too, to reconsider concepts like communicative space (Kemmis, 2008), caring container (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2005), future lab workshop (Jungk & Müllert, 1981), etc. as power free spaces and possible arenas for participatory processes?

### ***Has the concept of participation been usurped by repressive tolerance?***

We fear there is a danger if the concept of participation does not include co-determination. If it is enlarged to become the antithesis to a passive audience; or phrased differently, if it reduced to simply meaning to participate, i.e., partaking in any kind of activity or community where the purpose is decided by somebody else, or to join researchers’ projects, then we claim action researchers open the gate to letting mode-II research pervade and encapsulate action research, eliminating its critical potency in the name of participation. In this case, participation will work as a buzz word meaning either branding or misuse (Nielsen & Svensson, 2006). This might be called

”functional participation” (Baker Collins, 2005) indicating partaking in processes where the objectives is given in advance, or ”participatory conformity” suppressing itself to the demands of the systems world for efficiency, predictability and control (Wicks & Reason, 2009). Gaventa & Cornwall (2001) raises the question of what happens when, e.g., the World Bank starts participatory projects. Is it cooptation or a new possibility? Jørgensen (2008) poses the question this way:

Are we able to avoid that research will be subsumed to interests it is not able to control if you accept the demands from the knowledge society about closer and interdependent relations between research and society ... Will the ambition about society relevant research and social change end up in “consultancy” at the cost of theory development and philosophical reflections? ... Knowledge production in ”the participatory turn” addresses another risk that the brilliant ideals of participation, dialogue, and democracy will deteriorate into empty rhetoric disguising a continued researcher monopoly of truth as well as other existing power imbalances (p. 363 [our translation from Swedish]).

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