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Power and Resistance, Powerlessness and Action in School (preprint)¹

Action research brings to the fore questions regarding both the power over knowledge building and, consequently, questions on the quality of knowledge. Action research makes visible two dimensions that in this regard are significant. Firstly, the outside-inside dimension where action research more than traditional research voice an inside perspective. This means that those on whom research is conducted receive a greater amount of influence on the problems guiding the research and sometimes become participants in the research process. Secondly, there is the top-bottom dimension, where action research is often associated with a perspective from below. This perspective can, in the hierarchies of working life, mean the employees' perspective, but also the client perspective. In both dimensions, power and knowledge are intertwined, as it is understood that those people on whom the research is being done get more influence on the research, thereby one must suppose that the quality of knowledge changes. Action research can then not only be close to practice but also to the client. It is also often associated with change, which implies that at times the researcher takes on a more active and intervening role than in traditional research, which at times may mean that established power arrangements are challenged.

How then are we to understand *action learning* within the framework of a power perspective? This is the theme of the ensuing text². Since action learning primarily seems adapted in educational institutions, the power practiced in these institutions must then be described, and I will focus here on power practices in the obligatory school. In conjunction with the fact that alternatives to going to school have decreased, the upper secondary school has in the meantime also become more like an obligatory school form, and what appears in the following may therefore to a certain degree also be applied to the upper secondary school³.

Power and resistance in school

Power is a contested concept and may therefore be defined in a variety of ways (see for example Engelstad 2005; Lukes 2005). Inspired by Barnes (1988), I define power as the ability of an individual or a collective actor to cause, effect and/or prevent action in others and to achieve desired ends (Persson 1991; 1995). Power is therefore seen as production of action. The definition is a narrow one in that it concentrates completely on the actor practicing power and consciously disregards resistance and anything else that can lead to a difference between desired and actual consequences of the production of action. The definition disregards, in other words, the relational nature of the exercise of power, but only the definition since an analysis of power in actual relationships must be about the dynamics between power and resistance. This dynamics creates the actual exercise of power, as the power-exercising party

¹ Published in: Furu, Eli Moksnes, Lund, Torbjörn & Tiller, Tom (eds.) (2007) *Action Research*. Kristiansand: Höyskoleforlaget/Norwegian Academic Press.

² The source of this text is a lecture I gave for researchers and teachers at the *Nordic Center for Action Research and Action Learning* in Tromsø, Norway. The text still have some of a lecture's features: didactic in the beginning and more discussion-oriented towards the conclusion.

³ I base my writing on Swedish conditions. In Sweden compulsory attendance exists for children and young people from ages 7-16 (primary school), which means that students' parents have the responsibility of making sure their child goes to school during the required time. Upper secondary school (for young people between ages 16-19) is voluntary, but the fact is that practically speaking, everyone continues onto upper secondary school, which indicates that there are few real alternatives to attending school there.

can never cause, effect and/or prevent others' actions on his own. Since the course of events in power relationships is always a result of several parties' acting, the practice of power selfom results in only the desired consequences. However, under certain circumstances it may appear that only one of the actors in the power-relation is acting: on the one hand in power relationships where power is exercised by using coercion, it may seem like only the superior party acts and hence the actions of the subordinated party are made invisible and, on the other hand, in the power relationship based on consent the subordinated party acts and the superior part is made invisible.

The traditional way of stating that both persons in the power relationship act is to describe the relationship as a power-resistance relationship (Foucault 1980). Power relationships can then be seen as relations between actors mutually trying to influence each other. Thereby the power relationship appears more like a process whose force is the different actors' attempts to influence the others' actions. When power is understood in this way, unintended consequences of action are a natural element in understanding.

There are in addition a series of other factors besides resistance that influence and change the intended consequences. Different ways of exercising power shape for instance the abovementioned power relationship in different ways. A series of different factors in turn structure the appearance of the power relationship. Since power relationships are ones between active parties who are trying to influence each other and who are influenced by a series of other factors, it is one thing to possess resources to influence the actors, a completely different case to be able to apply them. The power relationship appears then as a permanent and constant phenomenon as long as the possession of power resources receives focus, but when the actual application of resources is placed in the center, the power relationship appears as a process in continual motion.

One method of capturing this motion is to imagine the power relationship as being a dynamic one. The word dynamics refers to a theory of force and of energy. My power perspective emphasizes exactly the force or, in other words, the ability to cause, effect and/or prevent actions. This ability is not monopolized by the few, but rather dispersed among all actors. That's why the power relationship seldom is permanent, but rather temporary, always in motion. Chaos is therefore a constantly present developmental possibility in power relationships simultaneously as the exercise of power presupposes that some kind of order is created. Against that background one can say that exercise of power is about the fact that in chaos create elements of order. Inside this order actions may be produced

That the ability to produce action is dispersed does not imply that all actors have equally great ability. The degree of variation in ability to produce action depends on a series of other factors and conditions. The power relationship is influenced by outer as well as inner factors and conditions. I am most interested of the inner aspects of power relationships, not primarily its outer conditions such as, for example, power structures or power sources in general. These must naturally be brought in to understand the appearance within the power relationship, but I place most emphasis on the internal dynamics of power. By this it may be predicted how various forces influence one another within the power relationship or, more precisely, how both different actors, factors and conditions work together and contradict one another within the power relationship. The power relationship is, to sum up, a combination of interacting contrasts.

The internal dynamics of power-exercising in schools

The study of the internal dynamics of power in school directs interest towards the school as a unique social and institutional context. School has its own inner dynamic that itself is influenced by outer factors and conditions, but the exercise of educational power is determined to a large degree by the relation between the school institution/teachers and pupils – the actors in the educational power relationship. This is a consequence in part of the relational nature of power-exercising, in part of the fact that the compulsory school is to give all students a fundamental education. The school's goal is therefore to succeed at cause, effect and/or prevent certain actions among all the school's students. In this manner school is per definition a power-exercising institution (see further Persson 1996; 2003[1994]). The exercise of power in school is complex, here I will analytically focus on four aspects: relocation, definition, and change of human beings and definition of knowledge (these may be compared with the transformation technologies that Hasenfeld (1983) feels are found in human service organizations, which apply in order first to change humans into raw material and then change them in various ways).

The internal dynamics of power-exercising in the compulsory school is determined to a large degree by compulsory school attendance. Through this obligation school force all children and adolescents of a certain age to school, an obligation that from an other point of view can be seen as a privilege to be in school, which protects pupils from being exiled from school. Compulsory school attendance determines power-exercising as well as resistance inside school's educational power relationship. Compulsory attendance is power-exercising through human relocating and results in delivery of children and adolescents to school, independent of their will, and in a purely physical manner makes the students available for such power-exercise that in other words are called learning and upbringing. As compulsory attendance is relatively easy to maintain and difficult for students to resist, one of its consequences is that interplay and contradictions between power and resistance are almost completely moved into school. Compulsory attendance is not selective, rather aimed at integrating the pupils in school. It relocates every young person – no matter if they agree to it, are indifferent or are resisting the education that school offers – from the family to the educational power relationship. Compulsory attendance transform children and young people into pupils and makes them available for exercise of educational power aimed at changing them as human beings, but it also supplies school with more or less reluctant children and young people who in many different ways shows that they do not want to be pupils. Compulsory attendance is like a trawler: it takes everything, both wanted and unwanted. But the decisive difference between trawling and schooling is that the latter is prevented from sorting out the unwanted part of the catch. School's sorting of students therefore takes place within the frame of a continued safe-keeping.

Compulsory attendance thereby catches all children and adolescents, both "wanted" and "unwanted". The human defining exercise of power determines, on the other hand, the character of the wanted and unwanted in light of the students' expected and desired development. Thereby a fundamental human defining sorting occurs. It does not need to be that the groups of students are divided into categories according to developmental level or something similar; on the contrary, during the last 40 years this type of sorting has to a large degree been prohibited in the Swedish school system. School's human defining power is practiced to a large extent in relation to what may be called the generalized average pupil, a construction that influences both educational content, organization and resource allocation. The generalized average student comprises the result of the school's examination of the entire student body and arises because school must deal with its student body in a rational manner. It

says something about what is typical of students in different age groups, how long time various activities are expected to take and the like.

However, neither compulsory attendance nor human definition creates consent for education among pupils. The knowledge defining exercise of power, resulting in what I call developmental rationalism, attempts however to do just that by, for example, regarding the individual as an owner of his/her labor power and her/himself as an unrealized developmental potential, that may be good for her as well as society. Developmental rationalism can thereby justify schooling through presenting education as an instrument for realizing the developmental potential in every individual. Through presenting education's economic function and, more precisely, defining useful knowledge and desired skills, developmental rationalism offers students a vicarious or instrumental motivation for schooling. To those students who feel themselves to be educationally dependent, developmental rationalism acts as a confirmation, they will quite simply be rewarded when they accept this rationality. To those students who experience school as coercion – those forced to attend – developmental rationalism is a challenge to change their orientation. Developmental rationalism attempts in other words to transform the category of students forced to attend school to educationally dependent students, to students who see the usefulness of education in light of knowledge's immediate applicability and their own desired careers.

However, developmental rationalism does not just passively justify the current attendance requirement through presenting the sensible aspects of schooling and education. It also contributes to creating conditions that make the individual as well as developmental rationalism in and of itself already in advance presupposes that one is: educationally dependent. It works on a mental level when it tries to get the student to realize the reason of schooling in terms of realizing an inner developmental potential, but in addition works on an economic level through contributing to an educational process of commodification where the students' future are made into a system of necessities, a market of life chances. Through a unique organization of school and of the ties between school, higher education and the labor market, students are forced to be economical with scarce merits and become dependent on them for their future lives. Developmental rationalism contributes thereby to the rationalization away the need for compulsory attendance: educationally dependent students consent to education, they do not need to be forced to go to school. That compulsory attendance still exists illustrates, however, by the fact that school institutions have more purposes than educating students, and that one of them is the safe-keeping of children and adolescents – quite independently of what the students are actually doing in school.

Developmental rationalism contains, to conclude, in part a challenge to the student to change orientation and in part a possibly more revolutionary definition of what the school's knowledge is about. In the world of developmental rationalism, the school's knowledge is above all else the aspects of teaching/learning that can be measured and examined.

The human thirst for existential knowledge is, however, not satisfied by this banal form of rationalism, as motivation for knowledge is significantly larger and more complex than what developmental rationalism supposes. Moreover compulsory attendance results in schooling of all children and adolescents and consequently school has to deal with widely variable motivations. The school is to educate all of these children and adolescents, even the weakly motivated or those who are educationally unmotivated. This motivation problem puts pressure on and becomes a driving force for change of that kind of power that attempts at changing human beings – which is comprised of teaching and upbringing – in school. Pupils' passive

and active, conscious and unconscious, resistance results in an unintended consequence: the gradual change of the exercise of power. This change can be illustrated through distinguishing between two analytically constructed forms of acculturation – surface and deep acculturation respectively – and the distinction between two principally different forms of teaching – authoritarian and participatory teaching.

Surface acculturation requires of the student that he or she become a robot. However, since a human cannot be a robot, he or she must behave as if she or he were a robot, must therefore play the role of a robot. What surface acculturation requires of the student is practically speaking a type of role-playing. The authoritarian educator, who tends to call forth surface acculturation, defines two clear roles: teacher as active knowledge supplier and student as primarily passive knowledge recipient. The role as passive knowledge recipient implies to a large extent no visible activity during the actual educational situation, which means that the teacher cannot know if knowledge reception is actually taking place in the student. Through the fact that this type of student role is so easy to play, it allows the authoritarian educator in principle to leave the weak or otherwise educationally unmotivated students in peace as long as they do not disturb the instruction. Surface acculturation within school's educational power relationship attempts therefore not to transform those required to attend school into motivated pupils, rather confirming instead the categorization of pupils in those being educated and those only being in school, which compulsory attendance bring about through its almost totalitarian demand for physical presence. Surface acculturation leaves thereby those students who feel most forced to be in school to their own destiny. However, this presupposes that there are other alternatives than education after the period of compulsory school, which existed previously but which now in principle does not exist and therefore in the post-modern school it has become nearly impossible and unacceptable to allow those students be left in peace: their problem is individualized and worked on by a number of skilled school staff members; compulsory school attendance is loosened up to make possible a temporary exile to working life; and the educational practice are also changed in order to motivate and involved those students forced to be at school. The latter implies that a participatory educational practice is growing as an alternative to the authoritarian. Participatory education has greater abilities than does the authoritarian to bring out deep acculturation.

Deep acculturation places greater emphasis on the consciousness of the pupil than does surface acculturation, is more interested in the spirit than the ceremony. Deep acculturation aims at the inferior's consciousness under the absolute assumption that it is the key to the action. Thereby the student's possibility of playing the role of the subordinate through merely being passive is obstructed. Deep acculturation aim at entering into the subordinate's personality and influence it deeply. The participatory educational practice, which has greater abilities than the authoritarian to bring out deep acculturation, is characterized by its attempt to involve students and make them participants in the instruction. This involves a change for all students, independent of motivational pattern, but greatest is the effect on the students forced to be in school, who are not left in peace. They are given less opportunity to play the role as reluctant subordinates. Participatory educational practice has gone hand in hand with the modern school and was already in the 1760s given what is still considered to be a modern expression by Rousseau (1977). In conjunction with the fact that various developmental tendencies were growing stronger – for example the marked lack of alternatives to schooling for children and young people, the ever higher demands on the individual to gain entrance to a labor market that does not have room for everyone, and the family's decreasing role in children's upbringing – has the need for deep acculturation, become increasingly greater.

Deep acculturation in the school's educational power relationship is therefore developed to a large degree thanks to compulsory school attendance, but it works as if this did not exist. When deep acculturation works through increased student activity and does not accept any student passivity, as this passivity is connected with failure, does its expressed or unexpressed message that all students wish to be active, which in school is equivalent to want to educate oneself. But if all students truly want to educate themselves, why does then the compulsory school attendance exist? Its unexpressed message is namely the opposite: all students do not want to or realize not the value of educating themselves, therefore methods of relocating them by force to school are needed. The obligatory school institution is thereby a place where inequalities crowd together and inside a power perspective school appears as a mix of compulsory attendance, educational dependency and will for knowledge. How these are mixed is decisive for the internal dynamics of power-exercising in schools.

Powerlessness and action in school

School is often regarded as being an institution relatively isolated from the surrounding world. However, there are always links between school and its surroundings, which a series of educational sociological studies completed during the last 30 years has demonstrated (see e.g. Inglis 2004; Moore 2004). These studies emphasize the relationship between on the one hand school and society on the other, along with the employment market and such variables as class, gender and ethnicity. We can say that such studies make visible various links between school and society. The links made visible have been an important basis for various types of policies directed towards school. During the last 15 years, this visibility has continued within the framework of what is commonly known as *new public management* and the purpose has then not been increased equality in schooling, rather economic rationalisation of schooling.

Making school visible has changed its character as an institution. From having been a more closed institution, and in many ways similar to those institutions that Goffman (1991) called total institutions and characterized precisely as being isolated from the world outside, school is now in many ways open. Individualization has resulted in an increased parent/student influence, goal steering has resulted in an increased influence for politicians and evaluators, the economic rationalization has also moved influence from school and other participants on the inside, and the increasingly frequent application of international school tests, for example OECD's PISA studies, have relocated influence to a kind of international arena. This may be described in different ways depending on the perspective one applies: from a management perspective, the development may be described as increased openness and political goal steering, from a student-parent perspective possibly as democratization and from a teacher perspective surely as deprofessionalization. The single group that loses the most influence from this development might be teachers, which a series of studies of the psychosocial working environment in school indicates (see e.g. Månsson & Persson 2005; Persson 2006).

These changes affect the exercise of power in school in a variety of ways, and I will here discuss two of them: powerlessness and the division of the educational power relationship in two different but related power relationships.

Powerlessness is quite prominent in Norwegian theories of power. Østerberg (1977) criticizes Weber's oversimplified division in legitimate and illegitimate power by referring precisely to the fact that power may be exercised through production of powerlessness. This powerlessness arises because the superior's power is often inherent in what he calls society's material structure, which limits the possibilities for action among those people who have no resources to deal with the structure. Moreover, Mathiesen defines powerlessness as a situation

”...where one can see no way out, means or possibilities to change ones situation” (1982: 83). Briefly stated, Østerberg and Mathiesen see powerlessness as an inability to act. Østerberg takes a more structural position and attempts to show that certain social groups’ inability to act can be embedded in the societal structure and thereby in the exercise of power itself, while Mathiesen adopts more of an actors perspective and focuses on the experience of powerlessness, which have to be broken if power is to be challenged.

Several of today’s societal analyses are based precisely on the understanding that our time is characterized by a kind of inability to act and, for examples, Giddens (1991) describes a late modern society where modernity becomes a blind force that we no longer can control. More specifically, we can think of the globalized network, strong market competition and supranational institutions, which individuals, organization and even states have a difficult time controlling. The most recent Norwegian official power report makes it quite clear that there is a late or post-modern state of powerlessness, and speaks of ”power without responsibility and responsibility without power” (Østerud et al 2003), which is quite a good picture of our time, and which I for instance described 15 years ago and called ”making the exercise of power anonymous” (Persson 1991). This anonymous character is a central aspect, not the least with regard to democratic institutions which have traditionally brought power and responsibility together, but now are squeezed between global development and large supranational networks on the one hand and an increasingly stronger and conscious articulation of individual rights on the other. Democratic political institutions seem accordingly today more than previously occupied with the power they *can*, rather than the power they *want to* exercise. Therefore, new ways of justifying use of power arise, such as referring to economic necessity in a global market society and referring to one or another power practiced on a national level is to regard as merely an adaptation to global forces, in other words a kind of intermediate practice of power where national power practitioners intermediate between global forces and the nation’s citizens and institutions. While earlier powerlessness-perspective mostly was adapted to subordinate groups, it has now become more common and seems adaptable to practically everyone.

Even with regard to describing the social existence in today’s society, powerlessness is a common theme. For example, Bauman writes: ”Our time stands out through tearing down frameworks and dissolving patterns”, and so far he is on the same path as Giddens, but then he continues: ” – all frameworks and all patterns, at random and without previous warning” (Bauman 2002: 153). Precisely this inexorability in combination with unpredictability may be said to be the characteristic that experience of powerlessness as a part of today’s sociologists attach to the post-modern society itself.

The educational and schools’ development in modern societies provide excellent illustrations of these different ways of regarding powerlessness. Global knowledge measurements (e.g. OECD’s PISA studies) seem to control more than do national politics, and at least in Sweden a powerful intermediary power is practiced which continually reminds us that we must adapt to global tendencies. On this point however, I see a difference between Swedish and Norwegian schools. School is in both countries always receiving criticism, is always more or less in a legitimacy crisis, but in Sweden the criticism is more directed to the fact that school has not enough adjusted to the development in society, while criticism in Norway is more often about the fact that school’s development is pulling it away from local society, or away from society as it is. The Norwegian discussion regarding school seems to be based more on what is not changing in society, its constants, while the corresponding discussion in Sweden is based on society’s change, its variables.

The anxiety level among actors in the school system is in the meantime great, which at least in Sweden leads to significant changes that are not always related to conditions in school, but the consequence becomes an illustration of the latter section in the quote from Bauman above. The doubt about some of the changes increases as well when one experiences that the "garbage can" – the school in which political decision-makers place society's unsolvable problems, according to Halsey (1980) – is so full that one begins to recycle ideas from the bottom of it: for example, discipline and moral rearmament. However, at the same time there is another force at work, one which we may call individualization, and both the current school and school decision-makers are squeezed between globalization and individualization. The one pulls influence upwards seen from the government's horizon and the other downwards. One may regard this as an illustration of the political institutions' powerlessness.

It is precisely at this point there is the opportunity to begin working with the educational power relationship described above as a relationship between school institution/teachers and students. Both school and the roles of teachers and students have changed greatly over recent decades. Earlier, one could speak with greater authority about the school institution and teachers as a unit, even if there were differences, but during the last 15 years they have drifting apart. During this period we have among other things experienced a series of attempts to make the teacher more steerable within the framework for at times purely Tayloristic regimes, where politicians issue orders and teachers and principals execute (or are expected to execute) them. This has also been justified with reference to a higher goal, namely that the teacher must contribute more to school improvement and individual salary levels have been applied in order to assure this. An increasing number of researchers concludes that one result of the period is deprofessionalization (see e.g. Borgnakke 2005). At the same time the principal's role has been structurally changed from the "first among equals" to "last among superiors" (Persson et al 2005) as an aspect of the same trend to make schools and teachers more steerable. The principal has quite simply become a middle manager and expected to manage teachers in the direction which educational politics points out, which is not easy as educational politics is pulled in different directions and the school-system has a lot of often contradicting goals, a state which the steering of schools by goals tends to make invisible. This development also influences the educational power relationship as it tends to be divided into two parts: on the one hand a relationship between school and teacher and on the other hand between teacher and pupil.

On the one hand the weakening of the teacher appears as a discipline problem in school. In Sweden and in other countries there has developed a discipline discourse supported by the PISA study's result and the media's reporting on a school system in dissolution. Certain politicians have, based on these reports, stated there is a way back to order and discipline, and that is through the upgrading of the teacher's disciplinary power in the classroom. One can imagine from this a return to an educational power relationship where the school institution and teacher are more of a unit, in other words a power relationship between on the one hand the school institution and teachers and on the other hand pupils, without completing an analysis neither of societal changes, changes in the governing system or of the professional changes which are an important part of the background of the teacher's weakened position.

On the other hand, this weakening may also appear as an opportunity. The French sociologist Touraine attempts to do just this through transforming powerlessness to resistance. He asks: "How can we live together in a society that is becoming more fragmented through networks that make us instrumental and communities that isolate us and prevent us from

communicating with one another?" His answer is that we must build institutions that place the individual at the center and, regarding school, he speaks about "school of subjects", which he describes like this:

"...school should not exist for society's sake. It should not see as its most important task to produce citizens or workers, but rather to strengthening the individual's position as a subject. It should be less directed towards imparting various types of knowledge, norms and attitudes and instead concentrate on the one hand teaching how one handles the instrument and on the other hand supporting the formation of students' personalities and their way of expressing themselves." (Touraine 2003: 380)

In the debate taking place in Sweden regarding increased school discipline, I wonder if not many of those who want stricter discipline consider that Touraine's school already has been accomplished? That's hardly the case. Today's school is rather staggering between the old discipline and a new more individualized role. Touraine wants further steps taken in the individualizing direction.

Through the partial liberation of the teacher from the school institution, which is indicated through the division of the educational power relationship into two different power relationships, there arises a completely new political situation in schools that affect school actors in new ways. The teacher is not by definition allied with the school institution's decision-makers, and can ally himself with the principal against "them up there" or ally herself with the school institution against students or ally himself with students and parents against the school institution in its traditional form. In today's school we find examples of all of these. The institutional arrangements surrounding teachers and students are decisive for their freedom of action.

Power, resistance, powerlessness and action learning

To summarize, I define power as production of action; resistance can in the opposite way be seen as the ability to resist such production; powerlessness may be defined as action paralysis. This power perspective forms the background when now concluding by some reflections upon the nature of action learning.

I do not really know what action learning is about. In his book on action learning, Tiller (1999) quotes Revans (1982), who feels that there are only one way of finding out what action learning is: to practice it. I have not practiced action learning, only read a few texts about it and evaluated a Master's education in action learning, but will in the following in spite of this reflect on action learning and take the obvious risk of being completely wrong.

Let me start with two pictures of the teacher's existence in today's school. Our evaluation of a Master's education in action learning in one of Sweden's larger communities shows that many of the course participants, over 70 teachers in the local school system, is of the opinion that the education produces an enthusiasm that theoretically speaking can improve the teachers professional performance⁴. This is confirmed in Eli Furu's coming thesis (2006), in which teachers who participate in a course in action learning maintain that this education gives power and energy. Compare this with several recent reports on work environment in schools (see Månsson & Persson 2005), where teachers report on stress and exhaustion. Out of these different materials grows forth two opposite pictures of teachers' school existence:

⁴ Pernille Berg and Anders Persson are undertaking this study, and the first results will be published spring 2007.

enthusiasm and exhaustion. There are of course many reasons behind this, but I am convinced that one has to do with teachers' freedom of action. During recent decades teachers' control over and in their own work has diminished (see further Persson 2006), and that can explain teachers' frequent reports on stress and exhaustion. The courses in action learning as mentioned above give on the contrary the chance to open a window of opportunity through which increased freedom of action may be glimpsed. How it is later utilized is another matter.

My perspective on action learning is consequently that of an outsider, a perspective presented as seven statements, which in the following will be briefly commented upon and which I hope can be a starting point for the reader's further contemplation:

1. Action learning is a form of empowerment: aided by action learning, teachers can take control over their work!

As far as I can see, action learning is a form of systematic reflection on the acting teacher's own practice. In this regard the teacher creates conditions in order to control her work, or learn to know the conditions that obstruct his control. Action learning may therefore be seen as a form of *empowerment*, an authorization of the teacher that makes him or her be able to practice greater influence over her or his own work. Tiller claims precisely this: "Action learning helps people out of situations where they are incapable of acting and becomes an aid for taking control of one's situation and making it into a better one." (1999: 63).

2. Action learning is a goal: it is always better to be active than passive and always better to know than not to know!

Within conventional wisdom this is a truth – the question is however which conventions that actually is valid? The French sociologist Baudrillard once problematized the modern democratic system, which is based on the thought that oppressed people rise up and win the right to speak, vote, participate and act. Today, we have won these rights and not only that, but we *expect* to exercise these rights, a situation on which today's political power practice rests – how then is resistance to be organized?, asked Baudrillard (1988). What kind of rights need to be won today? Perhaps the right to be quiet? Or the right not to participate? The right not to act? In the same analytical way we should think of activity and passivity respectively of knowing and not-knowing. We must then be open to the thought that activity and knowing are not always to be preferred.

3. Action learning is an expression of structural powerlessness: because it becomes increasingly difficult to influence the forces that govern school action must take place on the lower levels of school!

As the decreasing freedom of action, which teachers have experienced during the last 15 years, has to do with how their work is structured, it is important to connect the control over the immediate work that can be obtained through for instance action learning to a wider context. It seems important to contextualize action learning and perhaps can it be done through challenging the actual boundaries for teachers' freedom of action, and thereby increase knowledge about the power situation in existence. Otherwise action learning runs the risk to become another improvement strategy within given guidelines.

4. Action learning creates better conditions than does traditional education for an alliance between teachers and students!

I would like to believe this because action learning is building on systematic reflection over one's own teaching practice. On the other hand there is room for doubt, if action learning does not build on a reasonable analysis of the current school situation.

5. *Action learning is a means that may be applied independent of the political goals regarding school!*

My limited experience with action learning tells me that this is the case. There is very little consistency in the political goals and the way schools actually are managed. Goal-conflicts are fundamental in today's school, but everyone speaks of goal steering.

6. *Action learning is a participatory style of education that increases students' desire for knowledge!*

The stated purpose of action learning is as far as I can tell to improve students' learning. Perhaps as well their desire for knowledge?

7. *Action learning implies a conscious risk-taking!*

Even if one does not regard activity always being better than passivity, it is still a truth that action always implies risk-taking. As Goffman once wrote: "...action is to be found wherever the individual knowingly takes consequential chances perceived as avoidable" (Goffman 1967: 194). It is important that those who become involved in action learning are conscious of the risk-taking factor.

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