Institutional and Organizational Perspectives on Dialogue: Lessons Learned from Scandinavian Experiences

Bernd Hofmaier

Abstract The contribution deals with the origins of the Scandinavian dialogue approach which is based partly on attempts to develop working life issues and partly rooted in institutional features of the Swedish labour market relations. Thereafter the practical organization of dialogue conferences is described and some experiences and results for improving the dialogue approach for organizational change and development are given.

Keywords Democratic dialogue • Dialogue-oriented approaches in working life • Workplace programs • Dialogue conferences • Developmental organization

1 Introduction

Dialogue – the exchange of arguments between two or more people is a central narrative, philosophical and didactic device found in the classical Greek culture and other cultures. The literature about dialogues in philosophical or literary form and in practice is extensive. Some of the written sources are well-known like Plato's "Socratic Dialogues" or Martin Buber's "The Dialogical Principles" ("Ich und Du") and are seen as fundamental in education.

Even in more concrete activities, for example, in organizational development and change attempts, dialogues are used as a general principle and in practical measures. Even here examples are manifold. Researchers and consultants like Chris Argyris, Peter Senge, Karl Weick and others are well-known proponents using dialogical elements in their research and praxis.

Seen in a social construction perspective, dialogues are central for shaping not only our social world but are also an important element in the construction of

B. Hofmaier (✉)
School of Business and Engineering, Center for Innovation, Entrepreneurship and Learning Research (CIEL), Halmstad University, Box 823, 301 18 Halmstad, Sweden
e-mail: bernd.hofmaier@hh.se

G. Becke (ed.), *Mindful Change in Times of Permanent Reorganization*,
CSR, Sustainability, Ethics & Governance, DOI 10.1007/978-3-642-38694-7_6,

organizations and institutions. The list can be made from the influential text by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann to neo-institutionalists like Meyer, Rowan, Zucker and others (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Zucker 1977). But how dialogues are organized or used practically can vary quite a lot. It can, for example, be simple advice or an invitation to talk to each other or it can be more or less complex organizational ways for creating opportunities for dialogues.

During the 1980s, developments in the working life in the Nordic countries lead to more and more interest among European researchers, consultants and practitioners. Rumours had been made public that organizational development projects on working life were using a principle called dialogue or more surprisingly "democratic dialogue". For some observers, this sounded idealistic and perhaps also utopian. For others, it was perhaps a typical Scandinavian way of handling changes which one could be sympathetic about, but as some also realized, could be understood as culturally dependent and therefore difficult to disseminate to other countries.

More interesting reactions came from presentations made at conferences and workshops where the practical applications of dialogues were described and discussed. For many participants it was obvious that there were cultural and institutional conditions at work which would perhaps influence the practical use of dialogue concepts in other contexts. But there were other and more problematic issues which disturbed observers and which came to the surface in the discussions. We can call them different scientific or epistemological positions.

The two dominating main paradigms can be described as the modernistic or rational approach with an optimism regarding development and a general progressive view; a strong belief in organizing and organizations; and with marked optimism regarding scientific and knowledge progress. The other one can be labelled a social constructive approach with an overarching understanding of the world as socially constructed, with scepticism against positivistic organizational science, and sceptical towards instrumentalism.

The first one, the modernistic or rational approach seems to be the main line of thinking and one which is also at the centre of education and training. The second one is much more diversified in both theories and methods and, which is important, with blurred border lines to the practical side of developing organizations e.g. action research, consultancy etc.

In the Nordic countries, the use of dialogue-oriented methods and the practical handling of development processes can be seen as an example of the second perspective. Here several other distinctive elements are included, like action research, participating research approaches, but also a constructive scientific approach. And, not to forget, a grounded value base in human development and democracy (see for instance Gustavsen 1992). The last one, to explicitly base scientific conduct on democratic values, was perhaps also mystifying for many and in some cases also irritated some observers. After all, according to the standard definition, science should be objective and neutral. To include so called "democratic dialogue" in scientific endeavours was at least for some contradictory, if not impossible.

The philosopher Stephen Toulmin, who was an interested and sympathetic observer of the development programmes of working life in Scandinavia, saw such programmes based on a social constructive approach, in its overall form as an interesting event which he was fortunate to use for his own thinking (Toulmin 1996). He was in his work always focusing on the social sciences and their status in the academic world. For him, social sciences should not, and cannot formulate universal and timeless theories. Instead social sciences should recognize the timely, local studies of concrete, particular situations which are the sort of studies that provide the empirical basis of all social analysis representing a practical (even clinical) activity; or as Toulmin says "/. . ./ the subject matter of social research is not just practice rather than theory: its focus is also particular not universal, local not general, timely not eternal, and – above all – concrete not abstract" (ibid., p. 3). Therefore, research on industrial organization and management formulated as development research, participatory research or action research in the large programmes of working life in Sweden was an interesting and productive field for him.

The use of dialogical principles and the practical arrangements of dialogues in the development of working life both in Sweden and Norway, have a history partly influenced by cultural but also institutional factors, and therefore observers may be right when pointing to the specific circumstances in the Scandinavian countries. But it is also very clear that the practical arrangements were at their height in specific programmes at a specific time. At least in Sweden the practical use of and arrangements of dialogue, have now declined, although the general conditions are still in favour and dialogue arrangements are nowadays an integrated part of development activities in countries like Norway.

But it should be mentioned that dialogue arrangements were mainly used in the context of workplace reforms and even when such reforms, at least in Sweden, no longer are organised in the form of programs, other opportunities for practicing dialogue formations are used for example in regional (innovation) development projects.

2 The Background of the Dialogue-Oriented Approaches in Scandinavian Working Life

For many observers of the development in the Scandinavian countries it was clear that working life in most of these countries can be characterized by some distinct traits or, as in Sweden even described as a distinct model. The main elements, at least from the observers' point of view, are a stable political and economic development and, concerning Sweden without the involvement in World War II which preserved the Swedish industrial structure. Observers are also united regarding the long-lasting and relatively stable political systems, which, for example, in Sweden included the Social Democratic Party which was in continuous power for

long periods of time. Less known by foreign observers were perhaps some specific characteristics of the Scandinavian and especially the Swedish labour market. Work organization was since the 1930s dominated by Taylorism which was seen as a rational and productive organizational form. In general, the critique against Taylorism was not very noticeable except perhaps from some critical voices within the union movement. But there is reason to believe that such protests were fewer than similar actions by unions in other countries like Great Britain or the U.S. (Edwards 1979). In Sweden, even the social democrats were positive because Taylorism was seen as a productive, rational strategy which raised productivity and contributed hence to a surplus which could be used for creating the future welfare state. Some observers described Sweden as one of the most "taylorized" countries (Johansson 1978).

Another feature which observers and researchers are pointing to is that the whole process in the early stages of industrialization was accompanied by a debate on industrial democracy (Gustavsen 2011b, p. 466; Emery and Thorsrud 1969, 1976). But the main arguments were largely directed at ownership, representation of union members in various bodies and so on which in the political sphere could result in agreements and political platforms for further societal development. One of the central agreements with far-reaching consequences was, for example, in Sweden the so-called "Agreement at Saltsjöbad" from 1938 which not only included the resolution of conflicts, but also created the social norm that the partners on the labour market shall conclude agreements without the interference of the government. The agreement is still in effect and has contributed to a kind of willingness for dialogue and compromise, even if conflicts such as strikes could not be avoided. The most important feature of this political culture was, and still is, the openness of the involved parties to negotiate the outcome of new technology, including the development of labour organisation. The consequence of this positive attitude towards technology was decreased tensions on the labour market and confidence in sharing one's work results in terms of relatively moderate but continuous wage development. Together with the so-called solidary wage policy, improvement of the whole labour market could be guaranteed. As long as the productivity in the industry increased, more resources could be used for the development of the welfare state.

Tayloristic forms of work organizations were questioned in various forms earlier; the Human Relation Movement, one of the most well-known counter movements starting in the U.S. in the 1930s, criticized the physical, medical, and social problems of monotonous work, as well as the underutilizing of social capabilities like taking initiatives, performance of judgement etc. (Roethlisberger and Dickson 1939). Traditional critique against Taylorism came also from workers who saw the risk of losing or destroying the pleasure and contentment in one's work. Not until later was scientific critique formulated by researchers pointing to psychosocial stress, heavy work loads and, as a further consequence, a lack of participation, and the research results were included in reforms by politicians (for an overview see Karasek and Theorell 1990).

Where the impulses for alternatives to Taylorism came from is not clear. But there were on the international scene many signs pointing out the disadvantages of Taylor-inspired organized labour organization. For example, the consequences of specialized work resulting in a breakdown of social relationships in the workplace were discussed in terms of alienation (Blauner 1964). Others discussed the negative effect on the ability to master change and innovative behaviour in the workplace (Burns and Stalker 1961) as a consequence of Taylor-inspired labour organization. Some other issues which obviously in Sweden influenced vital elements of the relation between the partners in the labour market was for example the performance premium wage systems in the Taylor-inspired labour organization which contributed to instability and undermined the central control of the wage development. This was an issue which preoccupied both the unions and the employer federations for many years (Lindholm 1972).

But the question of the possibility of changing the Taylor-inspired system towards alternative forms was first and foremost discussed in the post-war debate in Great Britain when attempts to reform the jobs in the coalmining industry were addressed. The mines had recently been nationalized and heavy investments in new technology resulted in absenteeism and signs of mental illness. Studies at the Tavistock Institute showed that the new technology resulted in the end of traditional work teams in the mines. But contrary to the opinions of the Human Relation Movement, the researchers behind those studies argued that it would not be enough to change the social context of work, but it would need more radical redesign of the work itself (Trist and Bamforth 1951; Emery and Thorsrud 1969). It was the experiences from these redesign approaches combined with learning elements and adaptation to the Scandinavian history of participation and democracy which led to a number of events and later on to programs including dialogical approaches (Emery and Trist 1969, 1976).

The first one was the so-called fieldwork experiments within the Norwegian "Industrial Democracy Programme" which was later on followed by similar projects in Sweden. The initiative was based on the results of the research at the Tavistock Institute, and was influenced by working life researchers from different countries (F. Emery, Australia; E. Trist, UK; and E. Thorsrud, Norway). The idea behind it was not only to try to humanize work, but also to support participation in social matters and thereby increasing democracy both in the workplace and in society. Another feature which in a way was imported from the Tavistock Institute to the Norwegian fieldwork experiments was the influence of the ideas of Kurt Lewin concerning the action potential of social research (Lewin 1943). Action research as a methodological and theoretical approach was since then an integrated part of the activities in developing working life (Toulmin and Gustavsen 1996).

Also in Sweden several initiatives were taken following the Norwegian experiments. Some originated from industrial enterprises together with the labour market partners similar to the Norwegian experiments. Others were more directed towards the promotion of democracy and participation in state run enterprises and supported by both unions and the social democratic government (Sandberg 1982).

At the same time, and perhaps as a reaction to the "socialist" ideas which one could suspect were apparent in those experiments, the Swedish Employers' Confederation started their own programme for the development of work in an industrial context. This programme, the so-called "New Factory Programme" was organized in accordance with the agreements and laws in the labour market but did not involve the unions or workers more than necessary. Even if the Employers' Confederation was acting and supporting the development centrally, most of the work was done by individual companies with the Volvo Kalmar Factory as the flagship. The new labour organisation with the introduction of carriers in the assembling of cars contributed to the international reputation of Sweden in issues about working life (see Lindholm 1979).

After the fieldwork experiments came to a halt and the "New Factory Programme" and companies in Sweden came into contact with new influences, for example, Japanese quality approaches, working life reforms in Sweden were focused more on traditional health issues. During a reform in the labour market in the 1970s, a tripartite fund called the Work Environment Fund was established. As the name of the fund indicates, this also implied a new perspective on the work environment. It changed from issues of health and safety to also include topics of socio-technical character, labour organization, leadership, equality questions and others. Even other Scandinavian countries changed their policies towards "work environment". In the beginning of the 1980s (1982 in Sweden) the labour market partners in Sweden, as well as in Norway, made specific agreements on workplace development. In Denmark a similar agreement towards local co-operation also came into being. These agreements opened up the field for initiatives within areas concerning leadership, development issues, and change of labour organization, among others. This period can be seen as the peak of Swedish reform activities, which were also observed by the international community.

3 From Experiments to Workplace Programs

In the 1980s the Swedish Work Environment Fund was given a substantial increase to its budget (based on an agreement between the labour market partners), which was encouraged to be used for organizing a series of workplace programmes in support of the development agreements. Over the course of the next decade, a dozen programmes were launched, including areas like technology, information technology, organization, participation, learning in the workplace, health and safety, and women's position in working life. Those programmes were seen as progress in comparison with the earlier experiments. They were not only controlled by the labour market partners including researchers, but also offered legitimacy for developmental work; second, it was an opportunity for using the resources and the competence of an organization; and third, and perhaps the most important reason, results could be more easily diffused. The traditional ways of diffusion through examples or pilot cases were not seen as appropriate. Instead the idea of learning, or

learning together, was seen as the right way and programmes were conceived as a more suitable form.

Some of the programmes explicitly included the use of dialogue principles. Those principles were put into operation during conferences and attempts to organize groups and networks of companies were made in order to come to grips with the failing concerning diffusion and learning which earlier attempts showed. Those programmes meant a new direction compared with earlier attempts. As one of the central actors at this time, Bjørn Gustavsen describes this (Gustavsen 2011b, p. 473), it was a transformation which simplified can be formulated as follows:

- From the implementation of more or less ready-made models to localized learning
- From single organizations to various configurations as the prime unit of change
- From single source to multi-source learning
- From "leading spearhead cases" to an emphasis on promoting the average companies

It was in such programmes that the dialogue concept was used. The most important programme with dialogue as a central feature was the programme "Leadership, Organization and Co-determination" (LOM-programme) (Gustavsen 1992). The second programme, which also used the ideas of dialogue including some other elements from the LOM-programme, was the "Working Life Fund" (Arbetslivsfonden ALF) running between 1990 and 1995 (Gustavsen et al. 1996).

3.1 The LOM-Programme

The LOM-programme was organized within the Work Environment Fund and had its own board consisting of the partners in the labour market, the fund and the researchers. The purpose of the programme was, firstly, to initiate and support the development of new forms of labour- and business organization which should be done by the workforce and the management jointly. The second main purpose was to develop a role for research in this type of context (Gustavsen 1992; Naschold 1992).

The programme had a duration of 5 years and came to encompass around 150 companies and public institutions. About 60 researchers spread out in different institutions came to be working within the programme.

The central concept in the programme was the so-called democratic dialogue which is described later. This dialogue approach had to be converted into a specific set of means fitting a development strategy. The main action parameters of the programme are described as (Gustavsen 1992, p. 4):

- Clustering companies
- Use of a certain type of conferences

– Broad-based and deep slice projects which covered the main levels and areas of the company
– Building of broader networks

In line with experiences from earlier changes and development projects the basic unit of change should not be the individual firm but a group or cluster of four companies. In that way they provide a foundation for learning and an opportunity for performing dialogues. The conferences were organized according to certain principles but the topics for discussions varied and were dependent on the joint decisions made by the participating actors. The action parameter of broad-based and deep slice projects has to do with the specific idea of involving all major arenas of the company e.g. production, supervision, staff functions, higher-level management, etc. Projects could be of many different types but it was expected that the various efforts should be co-ordinated and the experience should be exchanged within and between the companies, etc. The developmental logic was therefore interactive in contrast to an approach which is based on events in sequence (Gustavsen et al. 1991). Organizing networks of companies and other institutions like universities and others was seen as important for the dissemination of results and experiences and should at the same time guarantee the inflow of new ideas and impulses. But network building was also seen as a task that would take many years to build.

3.2 The ALF Programme

In 1990 the Swedish parliament established the so-called "Working Life Fund" (ALF) financed by the Health and Safety Charges Act with a special contribution of 11 billion SEK. The aims of this contribution were mainly to combat inflationary tendencies in Sweden's economy in the 1980s and it was decided to funnel back the money to firms in order to promote improvement and change in the workplace. The contribution was meant for rehabilitation measures for employees; measures to reduce the amount of sick leave taken by employees; and an investment to improve the work environment in areas where the employer is not obliged by law to make such investments.

The fund supported about 25,000 projects covering about half of the total labour market. An evaluation of the Swedish Working Life Fund showed that 85 % of the users of the fund reported progress in additional areas covered by the aims of the fund (Gustavsen et al. 1996). Even if the intention was to use the dialogue approach and different conferences, the total amount of such conferences was limited. The evaluation also revealed several distinct attempts for development activities in which expert-driven and concept-driven processes were identified. In the latter one, a variety of dialogue-oriented activities were organized.

Interestingly enough, the failings following the organization of conferences and its integration in developing activities in general, which could be observed in other

programmes, could also be seen in the Working Life Fund programme. Dialogue-oriented measures; especially conferences were constructive events and offered a possibility of mobilizing personnel in the companies and, in conferences together with other firms, also stimulating and contributing to learning, which should be integrated into a "development organization". According to the evaluation it was clear that in many cases such a development organization could be identified (Gustavsen et al. 1996). In general the development organization consisted of the resources involved in initiating and sustaining the process of development and the way in which these resources are organized. This development organization is not a ready-made model which could be implemented like other such organizational change models, but a combination of a number of things e.g., in terms of number of people, their competence, time spent on development tasks, their costs, and so on (ibid., p. 105).

4 Dialogue and the Organization of Conferences

The operationalization of dialogue can be traced back to the seventies when conferences called mapping conferences and later on dialogue conferences were organized (Emery and Purser 1996). A general term seems to have been "search conference" which was created in its first form in 1960 as part of an organizational development project in a merger of two British aero-engine companies, undertaken by the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations. Eric Trist and Fred Emery who were responsible for the design of the conference – called the Barford Conference – had to meet demands on an effective discourse when at the same time they had to cope with a high level of emotional engagement since the participants came from different companies with different knowledge and cultural background. The outcome of the discussions was also expected to be a mission statement which was to be valid for at least 10 years. Today, when reading the interview with one of the originators of the first conference it sounds a bit odd to read "The immense energy and enthusiasm on the part of participants during a Search Conference has been a common observation" (ibid., p. 296). This is perhaps to a certain degree understandable, but also questionable, since the duration of the first conference was 6 days in more or less isolated surroundings. This duration was in the following years limited by practical and group-dynamic reasons to 2 days including the evening. Another important feature which was new and contributed to this energy was that there were no invited guest speakers which could distort the participants' discussions of their problems.

Why was it called "Search Conference"? According to the originators the primary function was to allow "mere possibilities" to surface (Emery and Purser 1996, p. 296). As Fred Emery explains: "In searching for meaning in these emerging possibilities, the participants are usually confronted with unexpected new directions and new ways of approaching old issues" (ibid., p. 296). Even if the conferences later on sometimes got new labels like start conferences, dialogue

conferences and others, the characteristics of the original conferences were persistent. Participants from one or two organizations, mostly companies, met during a limited period of time, often between 2 and 3 days, usually at a venue outside the ordinary workplace. The purpose of the meeting is to discuss and explore problems and at the end of the conference agree on a statement for further action.

The further use of search conferences took several directions. One important variant was the use of conferences as a developing and planning tool in community work and on a national level. Since both Fred and Merrelyn Emery were Australians, many conferences were organized in Australia. One of the largest ones was organized in Melbourne in 1991 with more than 700 participants including many European researchers (Thomson and Nash 1991). This conference was a kind of hybrid conference since it was an event with a mixture of search conference, traditional conference presentations, discussion groups and workplace visits in advance for foreign participants.

The previously described agreements between the labour market partners, demanded conferences which were different from traditional conferences in their co-operative atmosphere, direct participation and openness in dealing with different issues (Gustavsen 2011a, p. 82). The most prominent characteristics were:

- People from all levels of the organization, with the greatest number from the lower level, were selected (the inverted T).
- Discussions took place in groups of up to ten participants.
- Groups could be composed differentially depending on the themes which were discussed. Both homogeneous and heterogeneous (e.g. management discussing with employees from other departments)
- The themes were usually about ideas concerning the future, obstacles and challenges to be met, how to deal with this and how to follow up the conclusions of the conference.
- The time frame was between half a day (which turned out to be too short) and up to 3 days. The normal duration was and still is from lunch to lunch with an overnight stay.
- The number of participants varies from around 40 to 100 which allows for a god mix for discussions. (see Gustavsen 1992; 2011a)

A record from the Norwegian fieldwork with attempts to develop working life shows that between 1983 and 1990 more than 400 such conferences were organized. The total amount of companies involved is not clear but it seems to be around 600 companies. But as Gustavsen also noted, the in-depth effects were, however, modest. Only a few of the participating companies went on to implement change (see Gustavsen 2011a, p. 83; Gustavsen 1993).

In the Swedish LOM-programme the central element was the so-called "democratic dialogue" used as a general principle and applied in conferences. The democratic dialogue was operationalized in 13 criteria or "operational directives" (Gustavsen 1992, pp. 3–4):

1. Dialogue is a process of exchange: ideas and arguments move back and forth between the participants.
2. It must be possible for all concerned to participate.
3. Everybody should be active. Each participant has an obligation not only to put forth his or her own ideas but also to help others contribute their ideas.
4. All participants are equal.
5. Work experience is the basis for participation. This is the only type of experience which, by definition, all participants have.
6. At least some of the experience which each participant has when entering the dialogue must be considered legitimate.
7. It must be possible for everybody to develop an understanding of the issues at stake.
8. All arguments which pertain to the issues under discussion are legitimate. No argument should be rejected on the grounds that it emerges from an illegitimate source.
9. The points, arguments, etc. which are to be entered into the dialogue must be made by a participating actor. Nobody can participate "on paper" only.
10. Each participant must accept that other participants can have better arguments.
11. The work role, authority, etc. of all the participants can be made subject to a discussion – no participant is exempt in this respect.
12. The participants should be able to tolerate an increasing degree of difference of opinion.
13. The dialogue must continuously produce agreements which can provide platforms for practical action.

The last two criteria are also specially commented "Note that there is no contradiction between this criterion and the previous one. The major strength of a democratic system compared to all other ones is that it has the benefit of drawing upon a broad range of opinions and ideas which inform practice, while at the same time being able to make decisions which can gain the support of all participants" (ibid., p. 4).

The criteria formulated above were seen as orientational directives rather than theoretically grounded. According to Gustavsen, they had their roots in the Norwegian workplace experiments and the discussions with the workplace actors. But there were of course, given the time and context also a theoretical confrontation with Habermas' theory of communicative action. This was also one of the critical issues discussed when presenting the programme and its organization at different conferences and workshops.

One issue which caused discussions already from the beginning of the dialogue-oriented approaches was the question of its theoretical basis. Especially the sometimes extensive reference to Jürgen Habermas' "Theory of communicative action" resulted in critique coming from researchers more or less specialized in Habermas' way of thinking (Habermas 1981). The arguments were usually that dialogue in, for example, working life is always impregnated with power claims and should therefore be seen as idealistic.

But such criticism is, as mentioned earlier, part of a traditional vision of what theoretical knowledge is and how it should be used. The criteria used in the conferences are not of a theoretical derivation; rather they emerged out of practice. But this does not imply that theory is absent. Instead the criteria, as other elements of the dialogue-oriented approach, are as Gustavsen and Shotter explain confronted with theory (Shotter and Gustavsen 1999, p. 24). According to Shotter (1993, pp. 56–59) theory can have many other purposes other than establishing a "true" or "valid" interpretation of practices, theory could instead offer a useful orientation.

This is also consistent with the pragmatic and constructive approach which is used and practiced by the main actors of the dialogue-oriented movement. The dialogue criteria, but also other attempts of organizing development approaches were results of trial-and-error experiences. Conferences and other events were carefully analyzed and discussed among both researchers and the main participants and others involved, and other conferences were sometimes adapted to new circumstances. But dialogue conferences are also establishing their own life where, depending on the participants' background, the internal and external situation of the companies etc. This is especially the case when conferences are organized continuously over a longer period of developing work.

This pragmatic attitude, embedded in a strategy for developing a whole movement in work reform can also be observed in other cases. The main dissemination of experiences from the different projects was through meetings and the sharing of information with practitioners and in local workshops. But researchers and practitioners also need to reflect on and discuss their experiences with others. The usual way to do this is to publish academic papers or articles in scientific journals, often at the end of a project. This was done as part of the LOM-project, the ALF project and others, and resulted for example in about 10 Ph.D. theses and more than 15 contributions to journals and a variety of other publications.

More important was perhaps the establishment of a book series "Dialogues on Work and Innovation" consisting of more than 10 volumes, and support for the establishment of an international journal "Concepts and Transformation" which was oriented towards action research, the other important element in the programmes.

As a kind of organized reflexive activities several conferences were organized to which working life researchers and practitioners, but also researchers with a theoretical interest, were invited e.g. Stephen Toulmin, Axel Honneth, Thomas McCarthy as well as researchers specialized in action research.

This deliberately searches for an inclusion of experts, and philosophers and others were an important part of the programme, and also for the development of new knowledge in the organization of change programmes. As Thomas McCarthy in a commentary to the discussion about the LOM-programme explains "For those of us working in the theory of science, the LOM Programme presents a singular opportunity to sharpen our understanding of methodological issues that have surrounded social inquiry since the break-up of the post-War positivist consensus" (McCarthy 1996, p. 159). He also points out that the programme deals with ". . .the lessons we have learned concerning (a) the linguistically mediated character of

social reality and hence the inadequacy of objective conceptions of social science, (b) the reflexivity of social research, and hence the inadequacy of merely descriptivist conceptions of social theory, and (c) the normative and evaluative import of social thought, and hence the inadequacy of strictly value-neutral conceptions of social inquiry" (ibid.).

His description of the LOM-programme is also very clear and informative. In referring to the book by Gustavsen "Dialogue and development" (page references in original to Gustavsen 1992 are omitted) McCarthy writes: "The LOM-programme has been consistently clear about (a) its 'need for a concept of communication to function as the key theoretical underpinning'. This need derives not only from its recognition of the linguistically mediated nature of social relations generally, but from its specific developmental aim to change patterns of communication in ways that lead to changes in organizational structure. As a developmental programme employing action research to restructure working and organizational life, the LOM-programme indissolubly links research with development and development with research. The type of research in question is thus (b) reflexive: it seeks to understand a practice in which it is itself involved. Although this reflexive structure is typical of practically oriented research in a number of other fields, from clinical medicine and psychotherapy to education and management, the LOM-programme is distinctive in important ways, for instance in its treatment of research and development subjects as 'strong subjects'. The reflexive, practical knowledge that is gained from, and in turn informs, development praxis is (c) oriented to a normative conception of 'democratic dialogue'. This conception is, on the one hand, derived from a shared political culture: it is 'a reasonable, albeit preliminary, interpretation of the discourse side of democracy as ...defined in Scandinavia'. That common understanding requires, on the other hand, further conceptual and normative elaboration if it is to function as a regulative idea guiding research and development. It is here that Habermas enters the picture: his theory of communicative reason offers the most differentiated account of democratic discourse available to social scientists today. In order to make proper use of it, however, LOM researchers have had to adapt it to the specific context of working life. Thus their criteria for democratic dialogue in the workplace represent a 'contextual interpretation' of democratic discourse. It is just this regulative, critical, normative 'surplus' of the idea of democratic dialogue that has made Habermas's explication of it in terms of ideally rational discourse so attractive. On the other hand, it is just the need for that idea to guide concrete processes of research and development in the workplace that has made this explication seem overly idealized. What the LOM programme requires, then, is a 'scaled down' notion of democratic discourse, something between Habermas's universal reason and the deconstructionist's contextual scepticism" (McCarthy 1996, p. 159).

Also a large international network of researchers, consultants and other interested parties was maintained. The development and maintaining of the network was one of the strategic measures across the Nordic countries which still exists and which has also functioned as a learning network with several comparative projects (see Ekman et al. 2011)

In all and seen from a distance, the endeavour to change and improve working life in those programmes can be seen as a coherent strategy. By connecting different actors, practitioners, researchers, some politicians and organizations like companies, universities and R&D organizations, employer organizations and unions, the intention was to contribute to the "construction of the working life" (Gustavsen 2011c).

5 The Programmes Came to an End – At Least in Sweden

In retrospect, the period from 1970 to 1995 is characterized by great efforts to improve work and the working environment in a broad sense. But times are changing and the decline of the dominance of the Social Democratic Party and the rise of the center-conservative parties in Sweden, which were elected in 2006, in combination with two economic crises, brought about another focus. A contributing factor was the diminishing influence of the labour unions both on the local and on the national level. In the 1980s, the unions offered many resources both in regard to strategic competence and to personal competence centrally, regionally and in the workplaces to be a partner in the programmes.

In general, the conservative government has not acted against unions, but has contributed to limit worker-oriented activities. In 2007, as the first action in power, the government decided to close down the Working Life Institute which was a central research organization and a national centre for working life issues in Sweden. Many researchers who had been part of the institute and participated in working life programmes were scattered around in Sweden, at the same time as financial means were cut. What remained were several attempts to use dialogue-oriented measures and events in regional development programmes. In some organizations with dedicated researchers, dialogue conferences continued (Eriksson et al. 2011).

The development in Norway was different. The influence of network and cluster thinking which also reached Sweden resulted in 1994 in a workplace development programme called "Enterprise Development 2000" (ED 2000). The programme was organized around clusters of companies with a number of so-called modules where each module consisted of a combination of companies and researchers. The main element in the development activities was different forms of dialogue conferences (Gustavsen et al. 1997). ED 2000 was followed in 2000 by a new programme "Value Creation 2010" with a wider focus on regional economic development. Even in this programme's activities, the main element was conferences. In 2007 the programme was merged with two other programmes and is now called "Measures for Regional R&D and Innovation" which will continue until 2017. Different conferences based on dialogical principles are still important and integrated elements in regional and organizational development activities.

The differences regarding the practical use of dialogue measures in Sweden and Norway respectively is an interesting question and could be elaborated more.

But such a research attempt would be quite complex and empirical data would not be simple to gather. Institutional changes in Sweden as a consequence of the liberal politics of the conservative government are one important element. Research on the radical changes regarding market-orientation, outsourcing and other measures which are going under the umbrella of NPM (New Public Management), including the change from a collective orientation prevailing earlier to a more individualistic culture, would contribute to an understanding of such differences. But also cultural differences based on social and geographical elements can here play a role. The use of dialogue formations seems to be integrated in the Norwegian regional development politics with an outspoken aim to make the whole country a good place for living. Finally, one can not ignore the role played by influential and dedicated Norwegian researchers like Bjørn Gustavsen and others which acted also as genuine action researcher, organizing and promoting dialogue-based change and development programmes.

6 From Dialogue Conferences to Developmental Organization

To sum up, the practice of using dialogue arrangements can be described as follows. From the beginning, dialogue conferences were first applied in individual organizations in connection with organizational change projects. The next step was conferences in which groups of companies were organized. Another step was to organize dialogue events in programmes and networks and, after the end of the programmes, dialogue processes were arranged in connection with regional development or regional innovation processes.

One of the experiences of organizing dialogue events in the big programmes was an obvious flaw in the dialogue approach in organizational development projects, even if the mobilization of people and development of new concepts as an outcome of conferences was important. What was missing was an integration of dialogue conferences with more or less structured measures for organizational development (organizational change attempts or others, e.g. connection with a business plan of an organization). The programmes were structured by groups of companies joining conferences which, after discussions and exploration of ideas, resulted in preliminary action plans and formal/informal agreements. Since there were clusters of companies, conferences were expected to be a vehicle for diffusing experiences, ideas and, perhaps most important, motivation and engagement for continuing development projects in the single organization. In this continuing development work, there were also discussions about the need of other participating actors' e.g. different experts or researchers. Since the outcome of the dialogue conference also implied a commitment from the participants, including the higher ranks of a company's organization, all participants were expected to continue the projects with reports to everyone involved afterwards.

When the programmes came to an end, at least in Sweden other impulses came from researchers and consultants to stimulate the establishment of clusters of companies. Even if it was not clear how such clusters could be organized – after all, most of the research was done on more or less organically grown clusters – also Swedish authorities recommended and stimulated cluster development. In this context, together with a focus on regional development, and the insight that the process of development in and between firms is embedded in a regional context, the idea of "development coalitions" came up (Gustavsen et al. 1996; Ennals and Gustavsen 1999; Asheim 2001).

As Asheim describes, a development coalition can be understood as bottom-up, horizontal co-operation involving the participation of a wide range of actors in a local or regional setting (Asheim 2011, p. 44). A development coalition can include a labour organization inside individual firms, inter-firm networks, and different stakeholders at the regional level who initiate and promote learning-based processes of change, innovation and improvement (Ennals and Gustavsen 1991). Development coalitions are thus, very similar to the description of regional innovation systems and the learning region concept which appeared at the same time (Asheim 2001; Rutten and Boekema 2007). As with other concepts, like the previously discussed criteria for the democratic dialogue, a development coalition is, as the earlier formulated concept of development organization, pragmatically formulated.

In a way, development coalitions can be seen as a measure for active, committed subjects who are willing to co-operate which each other. This is in line with the short-comings of dialogue-based development where a kind of "project organization" was demanded. The two concepts used at this time – cluster and networks – demanded new organizational ideas. According to Gustavsen, cluster development was seen as "too strongly oriented towards objectified, semi-naturalistic characteristics, at the same time as it underplayed the need for human initiatives and commitments inherent in the task of development" (Gustavsen 2011a, p. 87). The other important concept appearing at the same time was network, which is described as a more social concept and could be seen as overplaying the need for active human initiative.

The idea of development organization or development coalition was, at least in Sweden, indeed explicitly used in some projects. One of the few examples of implementing such a measure is part of the development project in the health sector in a county in south-western Sweden. This project started as part of a programme and continued with various measures after the programme had ended. In this case the development coalition is understood as a social infrastructure for communication and reflection first and foremost for the articulation of practical knowledge but also for obtaining knowledge from outside the field of activity (Ekman and Ahlberg 2011). The development coalition is constituted of different arenas and organized around it (ibid. p.109):

- A political steering committee with representatives from the Regional Health Board, the executive boards of the hospitals, and the local governments;
- An administrative executive committee linked to the steering forum;

- A steering forum/leadership network with representatives from the local health care organizations and the local authorities;
- Networks consisting of various professional and occupational categories;
- A special group comprising of trade unions and patient organization representatives;
- The research team.

It is evident that a development organization/coalition is not very different from arrangements in some other project organizations. One difference is perhaps the emphasis on dialogue principles, communication and learning and broad participation. The networks are for example eight learning networks including palliative care, rehabilitation, psychiatry, networks in personnel departments, and others.

Such development coalitions combined with dialogue-stimulating measures can be different which, for example, a comparison between two Norwegian and Swedish regional attempts are showing (Eriksson et al. 2011). In both cases a regional university college is involved which resulted in successful co-operation with companies. Since at least one region is dominated by SMEs with a reputation of co-operation between the companies, but also with some reluctance for co-operation with researchers, the development coalition can take different forms. Contributing to a much closer co-operation between different actors in the Norwegian region is also the integration of dialogical elements including a structured development coalition as part of a programme.

7 What Can be Learned from the Nordic Examples?

The readiness for dialogical processes and participation in discourses is perhaps similar in all cultures; in Scandinavia the social proximity with a low degree of social distance and a low degree of hierarchy is perhaps promoting such processes (Hofstede 1997). Historical events in the working life in Sweden and a culture of more or less equal communication in the working life including a long-lasting system of agreements on the labour market of which some are directly connected with the development of the welfare state, seems to have contributed to this readiness. The globalization of working life, which also affects the internal life and leadership in Swedish organizations, has today resulted in tensions which illustrate some of the differences compared with other cultures. There are, for example, differences regarding the decision-making which foreign managers in Swedish companies are surprised about, for example, the need to inform all and discuss issues before any decision can be made.

How to organize such dialogical processes in practice can vary. Since discussions and the exchange of arguments are employed in all activities, more elaborate and organized events are normally arranged in groups of actors like networks, programmes etc. Such attempts should be anchored in an overarching

strategy being a company or region or other formations e.g. clusters. The concept of the "development coalition" is here a way of organizing and acting in such a way.

Dialogue also creates language and is therefore important for the construction of an organization, the individual's work context but also, as many of the proponents for dialogue are claiming, for the construction of the future society (Shotter 1993). The question is also if dialogue should have a basis of values which in an overarching way is bridging the different actors' interests. In the working life programmes such bases of values were democracy and participation. Nowadays dialogues seem to be defined instrumentally; they are a means to an end. Dialogue activities are on one hand organized for the purpose of involving people, sometimes more for the purpose of legitimacy and confirming already made decisions. On the other hand there are activities with dialogues organized as a means for gathering facts in line with today's recognition of knowledge management. Dialogue activities should mean real changes for participants to contribute and influence organizational development and the conditions of working life. As experiences from the various working life programmes also show, agreements between the partners on the labour market are important. The Scandinavian model is built on co-operation which demands trust between those involved. There are many examples when trusting relationships built up and maintained over a long period of time were ruined in a short time when, for example the management of a company was replaced.

Experiences with the described projects also open up for further development and new perspectives. When organizing regional developmental processes one can clearly see a pattern which also can be observed in other contexts. In general, it can be described in the following way (Eriksson et al. 2011, p.167); at the core of development activities in which the various organizational bodies, arenas and roles are used, lies the need to establish and run two processes: first, the process of creating an apparatus where broadly framed issues of strategy can be discussed and decided upon; second, the process of creating an apparatus for the development and running of specific projects. Both are needed, but while they are different, at the same time they need to interact with each other.

The broad strategic process encompasses an unbound "strategic discourse" which can be organized like the previously discussed democratic dialogue conferences. Even when organizing regionally embedded innovation developmental processes, the methods are similar. For example, it is important for the apparatus for innovation not to lose the link to this environment. An interpretation of this environment consequently emerges as a major task at the strategic level. Business strategies for individual companies can often neglect the regional environment. This is not possible for a broadly framed development coalition. Therefore broad strategic discourses are also important for the development of clusters which is advocated now. Various forms of conferences built on dialogical principles are important here.

In this context of strategic concerns, the other type of project or task-oriented processes emerges. Such processes normally have a distinct aim or goal; they have

limited financial resources, often need specific competence and have limited time frames. Here, a traditional project organization is needed.

The two processes are different in other aspects as well, for example regarding leadership. The strategic process requires an ability to organize broad processes where a number of different types of actors can participate, some of them more directly interested and engaged and others more indirectly involved. The second, more task-oriented processes require a more traditional project leader capability. They also generally demand competence in more specific fields. Typical examples are product development processes, where scientific qualifications can be needed, but also projects as parts of organizational development activities fall under this category. Leadership of this kind of activity is much more directed towards organizing the team, acquiring financial and other resources, and organizing the work process according to time schedules, deadlines and expected outcomes. The challenge is to combine the two processes. If only the strategic process is organized, participants will complain that there is "too much talk and no action". On the other hand, if only project activities are organized, results may emerge but they are not linked to any broader framework.

As one can see, dialogical principles are still used even if organized programmes no longer are seen as appropriate in the development of working life. But the basic need of communication, exchanging arguments, participation and the experience of being part of a common development is still important. Therefore the use of dialogues in one form or other will continue.

References

Asheim BT (2001) Learning regions as development coalitions: partnership as governance in European workfare states? Concept Dev 6(1):73–101

Asheim Bjørn T (2011) Learning, innovation and participation: Nordic experiences in a global context with a focus on innovation systems and work organization. In: Ekman M, Gustavsen B, Asheim BT, Pålshaugen Ø (eds) Learning regional innovation. Scandinavian models. PalgraveMacMillan, Basingstoke

Berger P, Luckmann T (1966) The social construction of reality. Penguin, London

Blauner R (1964) Alienation and freedom. University of Chicago Press, Chicago

Burns T, Stalker GM (1961) Management of innovations. Tavistock, London

Edwards R (1979) Contested terrain: the transformation of the workplace in the twentieth century. Basic Books, New York

Ekman M, Ahlberg BM (2011) Incremental innovations in organizational performance in health care. In: Ekman M, Gustavsen B, Asheim BT, Pålshaugen Ø (eds) Learning regional innovation. Scandinavian models. PalgraveMacMillan, Basingstoke

Ekman M, Gustavsen B, Asheim BT, Pålshaugen Ö (eds) (2011) Learning regional innovation. Scandinavian models. PalgraveMacMillan, Basingstoke

Emery F, Thorsrud E (1969) Form and content in industrial democracy. Tavistock, London

Emery F, Thorsrud E (1976) Democracy at work. Nijhoff, Leiden

Emery M, Purser RE (1996) The search conference. A powerful method for planning organizational change and community action. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco

Ennals R, Gustavsen B (1999) Work organization and Europe as a development coalition. John Benjamins, Amsterdam
Eriksson H, Haga T, Hofmaier B (2011) The initiation and organisation of regional innovation processes. In: Ekman M, Gustavsen B, Asheim BT, Pålshaugen Ø (eds) Learning regional innovation. Scandinavian models. PalgraveMacMillan, Basingstoke
Gustavsen B (1992) Dialogue and development: theory of communication, action research and the restructuring of working life. Van Gorcum, Assen
Gustavsen B (1993) Creating productive structures: the role of research and development. In: Frieder N (ed) Constructing the new industrial society. Van Gorcum, Assen
Gustavsen B (2011a) Promoting innovative organization. In: Ekman M, Gustavsen B, Asheim BT, Pålshaugen Ø (eds) Learning regional innovation. Scandinavian models. PalgraveMacMillan, Basingstoke
Gustavsen B (2011b) The Nordic model of work organization. J Knowl Econ 2(4):463–480
Gustavsen B (2011c) Innovation, participation and constructivist society. In: Ekman M, Gustavsen B, Asheim BT, Pålshaugen Ø (eds) Learning regional innovation Scandinavian models. PalgraveMacMillan, Basingstoke
Gustavsen B, Colbjørnsen T, Pålshaugen O (1997) Development coalitions in working life. The 'Enterprise Development 2000' program in Norway. John Benjamins, Amsterdam
Gustavsen B, Hart H, Hofmaier B (1991) From linear to interactive logics: characteristics of workplace development as illustrated by projects in large mail centers. Hum Relation 44(4): 309–332
Gustavsen B, Hofmaier B, Ekman P, Marianne and Wikman A (1996) Concept-driven development and the organization of the process of change. An evaluation of the Swedish working life fund. John Benjamins, Amsterdam
Habermas J (1997/1981) Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns. (The theory of communicative action: reason and the realization of society) (trans: Thomas McCarthy). vol 1 Polity Press, London
Hofstede G (1997) Cultures and organizations. McGraw-Hill, New York
Johansson A (1978) Tillväxt och klassamarbete. Tiden, Stockholm
Karasek R, Theorell T (1990) Healthy work. Stress, productivity, and the reconstruction of working life. Basic Books, New York
Lewin K (1943) Forces behind food habits and methods of change. National Res Council NRC-B (108): 35–64
Lindholm R (1979) Towards a new world of work – Swedish development of work organization, production engineering and co-determination. Int J Prod Res 17(5):433–445
Lindholm R (1972) De fördömda ackorderna. SAF, Stockholm
McCarthy T (1996) Pragmatizing communicative reason. In: Toulmin S, Gustavsen B (eds) Beyond theory: changing organizations through participation. John Benjamins, Amsterdam
Meyer JW, Rowan B (1977) Institutional organizations: formal structure as a myth and ceremony. Am J Sociol 83:340–363
Naschold F (1992) Evaluation report. Commissioned by the board of the LOM programme. Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin, Berlin
Roethlisberger F, Dickson WJ (1939) Management and the worker. Harvard University Press, Cambridge
Rutten R, Boekema F (eds) (2007) The learning region. Foundations, state of the art, future. Edward Elgar, Cheltenham
Sandberg T (1982) Work organization and autonomous groups. Liber, Lund
Shotter J (1993) Conversational realities. Constructing life through language. SAGE, London
Shotter J, Gustavsen B (1999) The role of "dialogue conferences" in the development of "learning regions": doing "from within" our lives together what we cannot do apart. Stockholm School of Economics/CASL, Stockholm
Thomson P, Nash K (eds) (1991) Designing the future – workplace reform in Australia. Workplace Australia, Melbourne

Toulmin S, Gustavsen B (eds) (1996) Beyond theory: changing organizations through participation. John Benjamins, Amsterdam

Trist E, Bamforth K (1951) Some social and psychological consequences of the longwall method of coal-getting. Hum Relation 4(1):3–38

Zucker LG (1977) Role of institutionalization in cultural persistence. Am Sociol Rev 42(5): 726–243