

Practical discourse and the notion of democratic dialogue

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Abstract

The notion of democratic dialogue made its entrance in Scandinavian workplace development in the 1980s. One reason was the need, recognised by the labour market parties, for replacing negotiations with more evolutionary forms of communication in local development contexts. The article traces the emergence of the concept, its content and its fate as a moving force in development processes. The movement towards dialogue has been successful in the sense that dialogue has become common in workplace conversations. The development also raises new challenges.

Keywords: Democratic dialogue, autonomy, participation, innovation

Introduction

“Democratic dialogue” is a concept that dates, within the framework of workplace development in Scandinavia, from the 1980s (Gustavsen and Engelstad 1986). It appeared in rudimentary form in the wake of the agreement on development made between the Confederation of Norwegian Business and Industry and the Confederation of Norwegian Trade Unions, in 1982. The possibility of a research-based development of the concept appeared in 1985 with the LOM-programme in Sweden (Naschold 1993). This programme was later followed by other initiatives in Norway, Sweden and Finland, where the concept was made subject to further development but also to differentiation, and various forms of merger with other concepts. The purpose of this contribution is to look into the origins of the concept, the way in which it was originally expressed and its later fate as a mover in workplace development.

Broad implementation of autonomy in work

As described in other contexts (i.e. Gustavsen 1992, 2001, 2011) the notion of democratic dialogue emerged out of a long history of efforts to promote autonomy in work in the Scandinavian countries. While the initial focus in these efforts was mainly on how to express autonomy in terms of job design, much experience pointed at the significance of a number of other, but related, issues: in particular the degree of trust between the actors involved, their willingness and ability to co-operate with each other and with research, and their possibility of experiencing ownership of the new patterns. Central among these issues was the way in which the co-operation between the actors involved actually occurred: Did this way build on, and further promote, trust; did it ensure adequate possibilities for participation from all concerned, did it make all actors experience that having a share in the new forms of organisation? Throughout the 1970s more and more attention was given to issues of this kind, and when the labour market parties in Norway as well as in Sweden decided to make agreements on workplace development, these were the issues that were placed in focus. Forms of organisation that could ensure autonomy for all concerned were expected to emerge as a consequence of egalitarian, innovative and trust promoting patterns of communication.

What should these patterns look like? Between the labour market parties, the traditional form of communication was negotiations. In negotiations, the parties relate to each other in conflictual terms, through representatives, in disputes over quantifiable issues, primarily money and time. In looking for forms of communication that could promote co-operation and participation, they started by reversing the patterns characterising negotiations: Instead of a setting characterised by conflict, the setting should reflect co-operation; instead of communication through representatives broad participation should be promoted; instead of a focus on time and money it should be possible to discuss all sorts of topics. How can one give more specific, practical expressions of these perspectives?

This was the point where research was invited to take part. Over the ensuing years research developed, in co-operation with the labour market parties, a set of more specific criteria for the conduct of the encounters that took place under the umbrella of the agreements. The criteria pertained to two issues: the nature of the conversations and the design of the settings:

As far as the nature of the conversations is concerned, the criteria to emerge were as follows (Gustavsen 1992):

- Dialogue is based on a principle of give and take, not one way communication.
- All concerned by the issue under discussion should have the possibility of participating
- All participants have the same status on the dialogue arenas
- Some of the experiences the participant has when entering the dialogue must be relevant.
- Work experience is the point of departure for participation
- Participants are under the obligation to help other participants be active in the dialogue
- It must be possible for all participants to gain an understanding of the topics under discussion.
- An argument can be rejected only after an investigation (and not, for instance, on the grounds that it emanates from a source with limited legitimacy)
- All arguments that are to enter the dialogue must be represented by actors present
- All participants are obliged to accept that other participants may have arguments better than their own
- Among the issues that can be made subject to discussion are the work roles of the participants: no one is exempt from such a discussion
- The dialogue should be able to overcome a continuous radicalisation of the arguments
- The dialogue should continuously generate platforms for joint action

Many of the concepts appearing on this list are subject to a broad range of interpretations. It can, consequently, be argued that they demand further definitions and clarifications, and that the list as such does not provide much help. Who are, for instance, “all concerned”? Questions of this kind are, however, not to be made subject to abstract answers, but to a continuous consideration as the practices unfold. While it is possible to reconsider and expand the definition of who are concerned, as the practical needs become apparent, what is actually impossible is to give an unequivocal definition before the process starts.

Relevant encounters could be of different kinds, ranging from conferences to project groups, from general meetings to meetings in the various bipartite bodies that were already introduced in laws and agreements. The above criteria were made subject to their most pregnant expression in the dialogue conference, where an ideal number of about 40 participants worked themselves through a series of issues in terms mainly of group work, but with plenaries in between to summarise and present points and arguments. The learning of the criteria was based on participation in dialogically structured events, not on lecturing or similar forms of transmission. The more specific organisation of dialogue conferences, together with practical examples, can be found in a number of publications, such as Gustavsen (1992, 2001); Engelstad (1996)

Questions and issues

A list of points, or criteria, like the one presented above, can be made subject to a number of questions: From where do they come? How do they relate to the substantial number of theories and other reflections on dialogue and communication that already existed? Is dialogue at all possible between workers and managers? How are the criteria validated? Do they call for specific, historically given contexts, or can they be seen as universal? Other questions could be added. They all open the doors to several layers of discourses. In discussing criteria, one may, for instance, start with discussing to what extent criteria are at all possible (i.e. Schwandt

1996), and only when this issue is settled will it be relevant to turn to any set of specific criteria, just to mention one example.

Without having the possibility, in this context, of going into depth within all the areas that can appear as relevant, an important point is that the above criteria are criteria for practical discourse. In ideal type terms, practical discourse is different from theoretical discourse. The discourses can, and should, mutually inform each other but they are not identical. In theoretical discourse, one may very well with, for instance, Bohm (2004) argues that the purpose is not to solve practical problems, but to identify and experience the nature of dialogue as such. However, when the context is workplace development, it is hardly possible to ignore practical challenges, and there is an obvious need for expressions that are practically applicable.

The above criteria were mainly built on experience. The design projects of the 1960s and 70s had implied a large number of meetings and other encounters, and research as well as the labour market parties had a broad experience with “what works” in terms of ability to generate specific forms of workplace change. Although practical experiences was the main driving force, it was a task for research to continuously confront the practical development with points from theoretical discourse, to see to what extent the practical discourse could be enriched. Even for research, however, the main contribution was to participate in a number of conferences, record what happened and perform a continuous development of criteria in terms of practical redesign of the conferences. During the 1980s the Norwegian agreement attracted altogether about 500 enterprises as users (Gustavsen 1993) and a fairly broad selection of these users were followed up, to check to what extent they carried through the programmes that they had agreed on in conferences or other encounters. In Sweden the number of users of the parallel agreement was probably higher even in relative terms, but in Sweden much of the implementation took place via the various programmes of the Work Environment Fund (Oscarsson 1996) and it is hard, because of differences between the programmes, to give one single gross figure. The LOM programme alone attracted approximately 140 users, of which practically all participated in at least one dialogue conference and about half developed and carried through viable projects (Naschold 1993). This was, however, the only programme with a clear focus on dialogue as such; in the other programmes it was more of a tacit assumption.

In a discussion organised in the wake of the LOM programme, the role and status of democratic dialogue was at the centre (Gustavsen 1992). Representatives of some of the main schools of thought in philosophy and theory of science participated, such as Stephen Toulmin, Allan Janik and Kjell S. Johannessen, whose positions were strongly influenced by Wittgenstein, and Thomas McCarthy, Peter Bachmaier, Margareta Bertilsson and Axel Honneth, who could be located within the Habermas camp. Most of the discourses came to rotate around the possibility of dialogue in working life.

This can be approached as a purely theoretical issue, for instance through applying the distinction between work and interaction, originally ascribed to Hegel, in such a way that work does not only refer to an activity, but to the whole “place” where the activity occurs. In this interpretation, all communication associated with work will be strategic-instrumental, while all discourses on truth, justice and fairness will have to occur elsewhere. This is only one of a number of theoretical/philosophical arguments that reject the possibility of dialogue in working life. They are all open to counterarguments (see, for instance, Giddens 1982), but for the kind of work research recounted here, the decisive argument appears out of the substantial number of empirical investigations performed on the relationship between work and life. These studies provide ample evidence for the point that “the long arm of the job” (Meissner 1971) reaches far into private, civil and democratic life: constraints confronted in work correlate strongly with

constraints operative in situations outside work. Karasek and Theorell (1990) give a broad presentation and discussion of research in this area. Unless work relationships can function as levers in emancipation, there will be no emancipation. This, however, was not the main point of focus in the discussions at the LOM conference. This concentrated much more on what the participants thought about the practical possibilities. Although many problems and challenges were pointed out, there was a broad agreement that dialogue was possible in a workplace context. In an article to appear out of this discussion, McCarthy (1996) even argued a need for a pragmatism of communicative reason to bring theoretical discourse closer to practical issues. There was, furthermore, agreement that even though dialogue might be difficult in working life, its potential could be tested only through organising dialogue events and seeing what happened. Limitations to dialogue could be unraveled only through dialogue. Dialogue in the form promoted in the LOM programme was, however, clearly seen as exceptionalism.

These discussions occurred more than 20 years ago. What perspective would a similar audience express today? It is obviously difficult to speculate on behalf of others. However, some aspects seem to be fairly clear. When the agreements on development and associated activities emerged in the 1980s, the social shadows of early industrialisation were still present. They were slowly sinking lower in the sky, but the danger of major conflicts, of a huge growth in social differences, and an exploding pressure on the welfare system were still major realities. The prevailing notions of working life and its main actors were still the same as those that had prevailed in earlier periods: “The worker” was dressed in blue, and faced management not as an individual, but as part of a mass of people whose strength were mainly decided by the strength of the collectivity. On the other side of a gulf stood management, with its mandate from the owners and a role defined by the market. It was hard to see how these parties could talk to each other, and anything even remotely resembling dialogue seemed to call for positive reasons and arguments and to appear as exceptionalism. Today, working life in most Western countries seems almost free of conflicts and those that occur are directed more at “society” than at the counterparts in working life. When such proponents of critical theory as Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse argued that the working class had lost its role as a revolutionary force, the argument is far more valid today. Compared even to the middle of the previous century, working life seems to have reached a kind of “stable state”; the various forces and interest groups have developed relationships to each other that imply some kind of balance and a potential for working together. What may be hidden under this surface in terms of pressures and frustrations that live on, is hard to say. The picture varies from country to country. It seems, however, as if the balance points are more strongly in favour of the workers in the Scandinavian countries than is the case in most other parts of Europe, or even the world. In the European studies of working conditions, the Scandinavian countries appear, of all the countries in Europe, with the highest scores on autonomy and learning (Lorenz and Lundvall 2011). Excepting a few issues, mainly those that have an impact on welfare budgets and state economy, such as compensation for unemployment or absenteeism, there are no “reform debates” comparable to those of the previous century.

When a stable state is reached, it implies that all parties involved refrain from (major) conflicts, struggles, revolutions and similar to change the situation in their favour. The only approach to dynamism and change left, is dialogue and co-operation. In this sense conditions for dialogue have not only improved, but improved radically, and in most countries, not only Scandinavia. “Dialogues” are no longer exceptionalism, but mainstream. Yesterday’s directives, orders and information campaigns may still occur, but few will admit to these as constituting the main way of developing relationships in the workplace.

What are the challenges? While open dialogues may have lived a crypto life during the reign of commands, authoritarian-technocratic, or even charismatic, leadership, it is reason to believe that various forms of non-dialogic forms of communication still live on, but largely under the surface. The challenge is to identify their interference and counteract their impact. This can be done only through participating in dialogic processes and seeing what happens. So far, the approach developed in the 1980s is valid. There is, however, one major difference. As long as dialogic relationships were exceptions, promoted through specific measures, and accompanied by follow-up procedures from the labour market parties as well as from research, it was possible to identify the arenas of (actual or potential) dialogue and the quality of these dialogues. When dialogue becomes the mainstream, there is no way in which agents like the labour market parties or research can overlook working life as a whole, and assess the real qualities of the various processes that are associated with the notion of dialogue.

Development after 1990

In Norway, the agreement on development continued to attract users until, around 2010, the estimate of the joint union-employer secretariat was that about 2000 enterprises had used the agreement. "Use" had, however, come to mean a growing number of different activities. While the dialogue concept to some extent penetrated a number of other arenas, such as the bipartite committees set down in laws and agreements (Bakke 2001), the concept was also merged with other concepts to form new kinds of discourse formations. Dialogue was linked to the notion of SWOT analysis (Claussen 2004), to discourses on best practices (Arnkil and Spangar 2011) and a number of other discourses already established, but where there was a need to strengthen the way in which the discourses were performed. With basis in a project in a chemical plant, Johnsen (2011) demonstrates that change can demand a multitude of different arenas, bodies and events, where the notion of dialogue informs the participants about the way in which the discourses are to be conducted, but not about their content. From as early as the late 1980s a relative fall in the use of conferences could be seen, in favour of other development measures, in particular projects and project co-ordinators (Ennals and Gustavsen 1999). While conferences seemed to be important in the opening phases of development, they were, as the development gained momentum, mixed with or replaced by other measures, in particular measures related to the carrying through of projects.

The point that the notion of dialogue lost its position as a definable, specific form of activity, to become part of broader packages of composite activities appears more clearly when looking at the Scandinavian development in general. In Sweden, there was no direct follow-up of the LOM programme. Instead, the programmes of the Work Environment Fund in general petered out. The 1990s saw, however, a major new initiative: The Work Life Fund. Financed through a special tax introduced to counter inflationary tendencies in the economy, this Fund generated, in the period 1990 to 1995, about 25,000 development projects, reaching about half of the total labour market. The projects had various goals and applied a number of measures, but labour-management co-operation was a prerequisite in all. The most important of the development measures supported by the Fund were measures to promote freedom, autonomy and learning in work (Gustavsen et al 1996: 100 - 105). During the same decade, Denmark saw two major programmes: one to counteract the negative effects of one-sided, monotonous work, one to promote the potential of work as a force in human development (Hvid 2000). Both came to reach substantial slices of working life. In Finland, a new programme on workplace development appeared, as part of new policies in support of innovation (Alasoini 2004).

When confronted with a multitude of developments and associated concepts among their own members, it turned out to be difficult for the labour market parties centrally to promote one specific notion of development and keep up an apparatus for the support of this version. In Norway, the labour market parties started, around the year 2000, to renounce some of their position as engines in, and organisers of, workplace development. In Sweden, the co-operation between the labour market parties centrally disappeared altogether, although for a number of reasons, in particular the aftermaths of political struggles and frustrations dating back to the 1970s, such as the controversies over the wage earners funds. In Finland, on the other hand, the co-operation linked to the new programme on workplace development continued to grow. In Denmark, central co-operation had never been as intense as it was in Sweden and Norway in its peak period, but it seems to have been kept stable up until the present.

Around the turn of the century there may also have been a fairly widespread feeling that the Scandinavian countries had come as far in the direction of meeting the challenges of work as it was possible to come. Nobody argued that all challenges were fully met, but investigations, such as the European working conditions surveys, indicated that the Scandinavian countries had moved further towards the creation of autonomy and learning in work than any other part of Europe, and that there was little point in pushing the Scandinavian countries even further ahead of the European average. The whole development occurring during the twentieth century could be seen as different phases in a full development cycle: In the period from the beginning of the century and up until, say, the 1970s, the major challenges posed by industrialisation were identified. From the 1950s and until the end of the 1970s new forms of work organisation that could promote autonomy and learning were identified and pilot projects, such as the Norsk Hydro fertiliser plant in Norway (Emery and Thorsrud 1976) and the Volvo Kalmar plant in Sweden (Agurèn et al 1976) occurred. During the 1970s, legal and other institutional conditions surrounding working life were reconstructed, to express an orientation consistent with the emergent new patterns. From the latter 1970s focus shifted from exemplary cases to broad diffusion, a period that reached its peak with the large programmes and related initiatives during the 1990s. All the elements of a conventional problem solving cycle, from problem identification to broadly framed action, seemed to be present and the time seemed ripe for turning the attention to other issues and challenges.

The new agenda

If the working life agenda of the twentieth century is disappearing, can a new agenda be expected to emerge and, if so, what will it look like? In spite of a plurality of themes and discourses on the level of practices, the twentieth century was characterised by a strong belief in generalisations and abstractions. Concepts like “division of work”, “power”, “hierarchy”, “autonomy”, “participation” and “job satisfaction” seemed to be relevant to working life everywhere and to be able to function as links between discourses in a vast number of different settings. Can we expect general concepts to structure future discourses at all? Will it be possible to identify the agenda of the future simply by finding some other themes to put in instead of those of yesterday? Only the future will show, but there are forces pointing in both directions. On the one hand there is a growing recognition of local, regional and national aspects of work and working life, and a corresponding increase in the interest in exploring those assets that can be characterised as unique. It is reasonable to assume that the exploration of the unique will demand concepts that can be seen as unique as well. On the other hand, the growing practice of dialogue increases the capacity for discourses across organisational, geographical and cultural boundaries. Together with Richard Ennals this author argued for the potential of Europe as a

development coalition just on this basis (Ennals and Gustavsen 1999). It is obvious that societies with a growing number of actors schooled in dialogic forms of communication represent a much greater potential for learning from each other than a series of rigidly structured, centrally managed organisations where practically all members constitute a “silent majority”. This potential cannot be released, however, unless it is recognised that the learning has to emerge from differences, not identities. The strength of Europe is just its many regions, societies and states, and the vast resources of different experiences existing within all these units.

For Europe, as indeed for any other part of the world, to become dialogic communities driving themselves forwards through learning from differences, each unit has to have certain resources within its own boundaries. As demonstrated by the mushrooming literature on regional development, this is an area where a lot has happened during recent decades. One example is the development of regional resources within research and education (Brulin 2001). For a region to understand itself and to engage in dialogue with other regions, there is a need for intellectual resources that can help synthesise experience, conceptualise local phenomena, highlight history, help structure the dialogues and develop knowledge for operational use in innovation processes at enterprise level. Notions like “learning regions” and “innovative regions” are, today, to an increasing degree associated with regions where a plurality of actors and institutions are working together, and support each other in joint learning processes (Asheim 2001).

One paradox is that most processes of regional development occur within the framework of policies emanating from the nation states rather than from, say, the European Community. In the development of the ability to handle processes across social boundaries, and hence to increase the ability to learn from differences, there are new differences emerging, namely in the way in which learning from differences is organised. Although it will be possible to learn also from these differences, there should, even in this kind of learning, be a limit to how many differences are involved.

The Nordic, or Scandinavian, countries constitute a set of countries where a fairly high degree of learning has taken place across national boundaries, not least as working life is concerned. This mutual learning has even resulted in the phenomenon called “the Scandinavian/Nordic model” which today, with its (relatively) high degree of participation and learning in work, in combination with a fairly egalitarian income structure, to many appears as the most attractive model of economic organization even in a world perspective. What can be learnt from this model?

In the beginning of the 20th century, the discourse on work was strongly linked to general theories and the conflicts expressed as a struggle between, in particular, market liberalism and more or less radical socialism (Gustavsen 2011). Although opposing each other, these theories had, on the level of political practices, one major point in common: a belief in general theory as such. To solve the problems of economic and working life, there was a need to make one or the other of these theories come real, not to attack a broad range of challenges in concrete terms. A major characteristic of the founders of “the Scandinavian model” was a rejection of general theories of this kind, in favour of a kind of local constructivism based on the belief that it is up to the members of each society to create their own future. On this basis they came to start a process based on learning from one’s own experiences, as well as from those of one’s neighbors. “The Scandinavian model” is a product of mutual learning over a century and it is not a “model” in the strict sense of the term. As mentioned above, the current situation regarding public backing of workplace development varies radically between the countries; something

similar applies to many other issues. As indicated above, while in particular Sweden, but to some extent also Norway, show a decline in public support for workplace development, there is a growth in Finland. In this way, Finland ensures a strong continuation in the learning associated with this theme, from which the other countries can benefit, when they decide to give it new priority, which they will eventually have to do. This is the kind of mutual influence that constitutes the core of the Scandinavian model, not structural identities.

Although the new agenda is likely to build on another balance, between the general and the more or less local, than the one prevailing in the previous century, there are some concepts that appear sufficiently often to ensure a place for themselves on a general agenda. One is dialogue, the other is innovation. In combination with each other and with various other concepts, they are certain to play key roles during the coming decades. This does not constitute a complete break with the agenda of the previous century, but rather a seamless transition where the point is a shift in what constitutes the main concern. Even when this is innovation, there is a substantial number of studies that show a negative interference in innovation processes on enterprise level from factors like insufficient communication, rigid boundaries, excess division of work, integration through power rather than dialogue, and so on.

Concluding remarks

Dialogue is one of the most common concepts in our linguistic universe. Today, almost no-one expects “communication” to ensure understanding of a message, or orders to ensure commitment and loyalty to a cause. Instead, dialogue is generally accepted as necessary. This implies, however, that any effort at a specific definition of the concept is bound to fail. To be applicable in different cultures, societies and practical contexts, the concept needs to be open, flexible and dynamic. Only then can it perform its role of creating new relationships, new links, new communities and new solidarities. Universal theory can inform the various dialogue processes through pointing at issues that need to be considered, but cannot be in general control of the concept and its evolution. The notion of democratic dialogue, as appearing in Scandinavian workplace development in the 1980s, is one example of the many dialogue concepts that appeared towards the end of the previous century. It makes no claims to be superior to any other notion of dialogue, but it does claim to be fruitful and valid within its own domain: workplace development within the framework of agreements between the labour market parties where it appears as radically different from traditional negotiations. Within this context, the concept needs to be expressed in specific criteria that can be understood and implemented by a large number of actors, and the implementation supervised by the labour market parties centrally. It is obvious that this presupposes an anchoring in the history and experiences of the actors concerned themselves, is obvious. In this kind of context theory in various forms can be played in, but only when the discourse provides an opening, and such conditions are present to make it possible for the participants to understand and see the relevance of whatever points and arguments are made.

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