



UNIVERSITY
OF TAMPERE

This document has been downloaded from
TamPub – The Institutional Repository of University of Tampere

Post-print

The permanent address of the publication is
<http://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi:uta-201401221054>

Author(s): Heiskanen, Tuula
Title: Pursuing Theory and Practice When ‘Everything is Moving’
Year: 2007
Journal Title: Journal of Adult and Continuing Education
Vol and number: 13 : 2
Pages: 175-191
ISSN: 1479-7194
Discipline: Other social sciences
Item Type: Journal Article
Language: en
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7227/JACE.13.2.5>
URN: URN:NBN:fi:uta-201401221054

All material supplied via TamPub is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, and duplication or sale of all part of any of the repository collections is not permitted, except that material may be duplicated by you for your research use or educational purposes in electronic or print form. You must obtain permission for any other use. Electronic or print copies may not be offered, whether for sale or otherwise to anyone who is not an authorized user.

Journal of Adult & Continuing Education, Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 175-191

Tuula Heiskanen

Pursuing theory and practice when “everything is moving”

Introduction

“It started a weird period of confusion, hurry, reshaping, strangling, straining, and reorganization that has taken up my time and energy and driven me into a certain unpleasant situation.” (Pirjo, personnel administration)

The excerpt is from a person who participated in an educational program organized for people employed in Finnish public administration and engaged in management, training or other expert tasks. The program was initiated by university researchers who had ample experience in working life research and sympathies for action research. The program was offered to people interested in the problems involved in developing the public sector as a forum that would transcend the boundaries separating different work organizations. The expectation was that because of the role of these professional groups as interpreters, initiators and executors of change, the influences of the program would embrace the respective organizations where the participants work. The program promised to provide for the participants a possibility to conduct discussions on the basis of their own

experiences and compare them with the ideas of other participants, and to get support for their learning process from the multidisciplinary group of researchers and educators.

The educational program was the start of an action research process that continued in different forms through the 1990s. The beginning of the educational program took place in the midst of radical socio-economic changes that affected very basically the role of public services. The special kind of socio-economic situation came to shape the communication between the participants and the researchers in thoroughgoing ways. The pressures for change related to the public sector were accelerating. Many of the suggested actions were of such a kind that they would shake the very basis of agency and identity among those doing expert work.

The research group wanted to know more about what was going on in the public sector in general and in expert work in particular. Also the research group wanted to utilize its knowledge of working life research and support the experts in their efforts to make sense of the changes. Since the overall situation in their professional work caused the participants feelings of worry and insecurity, the research group had to face the challenge of organizing a forum that would provide a safe space for reflections.

Discussion on the complex interplay between theory and practice has been going on as long as there have been activities that deserve the label “action research”. The relationship between theory and practice in action research can best be characterized as an unresolved question that is open to reappraisals. The views have ranged from the direct links among theory, field experiments and social activity proposed by Kurt Lewin to the stance of participatory action research which relativizes the role of theory in action

research by emphasizing as a starting point practice-driven problems and by placing research into a process-supporter role. Partly the differences relate to paradigm shifts in science, partly to the enormous variation of the situations in which action research is applied. To emphasize the latter point, Frank Heller (1993) has introduced the term Research-Action by the side of the Action Research to draw attention to the fact that there are situations which necessitate a substantial research phase before the action phase. But the debate is ongoing. For example, Bjorn Gustavsen, who has been one of the main figures in the tradition that has developed the setting and process of communication between researchers and members of different kinds of organizations, has reassessed his view on the role of theory and research in his recent writings (Gustavsen 1998, 2001). He suggests that in network building development coalition research might have a more autonomous role to play than in the original participative forms of action research. If the goal of the coalition is an improved capacity for developing ideas on practical problems rather than a striving for shared understanding, multiple theoretical insights might, according to him, bear on the enrichment of the discourses.

The research group considered that in front of the challenges faced by the target group the research should find a role which combines aspects both from an autonomous and a subservient role. According to the reasoning of the research group, multidisciplinary research knowledge provided for the participants would help to build frames within which the ongoing changes would become more understandable. Further, it was thought that the program should be responsive to the acute needs of problem solving or comprehension related to the participants' own work and work organization. Thus, the researchers entered into the processes with theoretical insights and interests but with a

flexible program which was due to get its specific form and content along with the interaction process between the researchers and the participants.

This article describes the basic elements of the intensive action research process which started from the educational program but which kept the researchers' interest alive through the years up to the stage in which the worst scenarios of the fate of the public sector had receded and Finland had chosen a route to an information society with welfare society commitments. The article describes the structure and contents of the program by paying special attention to two issues: 1) what means were used to structure the discussions to utilize the potentials of multiperspectivity and 2) what means were used to support the integration of the participants' regular work activities and education. The article provides evaluative information as to how the basic principles of the program were experienced among the participants. Further, the article describes via case descriptions the ways in which the participants could integrate their normal work and education and what was the meaning of the program for them personally. It interprets the setting and processes of the program with the help of the concept of space. Lefebvre's (1998) differentiation of different aspects of space, of physical, mental and social; and Hernes' (2004a, b) operationalization of the aspects in organizational contexts are utilized in the interpretation. Special attention is paid on the dynamics between the different aspects of space.

Context: Public sector in crisis

The beginning of the research and education program coincided with a period when critical voices towards functions of the welfare state and the role of the public sector

started to accumulate in Finland. The critical voices came from two distinct but intersecting debates: a discussion about the crisis of the welfare state and a discussion focusing on public management. The crisis discussion repeated the same kinds of arguments that have been heard in many countries since the middle of the 1970s when Western governments have been announcing that they are finding it difficult to meet their welfare-state commitments. Throughout the 1980s this has been manifested in a number of economic austerity programs drawn up by the governments. As compared to the situation in the UK and the USA, for example (Gough 1991, Mishra 1990), in the Nordic countries cutbacks appeared on the political agenda relatively late. In Finland welfare services were still being augmented throughout the 1980s; it was only in the early 1990s, in the midst of a dramatic turn towards the economics of depression, that calling the soundness of the financial foundations of the welfare state into question struck a chord among a broad public. But in spite of the economic difficulties, the moral foundations of the welfare state were not seriously shaken. In the words of Julkunen (1992, p. 143), "the welfare state is anchored, firmly and with many ties, to the way in which Nordic society operates, strong interest groups, political competition, the expectation and daily life of citizens" (see also Therborn 1991, Kosonen 1993). In retrospect, this commitment to the welfare state, even though with slightly reduced expectations (Julkunen 2001, 11-15), came to characterize the special kind of model of an information society, which Finland chose to develop (Castells and Himanen 2001).

Kalliola and Nakari (1999, p. 2) summarize the ongoing trends in modernization within the Finnish public sector into four main, partly interwoven strategies: a) decentralization with the purpose of giving local municipalities greater autonomy; b) local and customer orientations with the purpose of giving ordinary citizens more say and influence in the

services they are provided; c) market orientation with the purpose of increasing cost consciousness and competition; and d) reforms in management with the purpose of developing budgeting and control systems. As Kalliola and Nakari state, so far most of the concrete changes have come about through decentralization and administrative reforms while concerning market and customer orientations only some tentative steps have been taken.

Most clearly the demands for better administration have found their concrete manifestation in the principles of management by results, with different variations developed in different countries. In the public sector, management by results has been a radically new approach. Consequently, its introduction has unavoidably involved more than just replacing an old steering system with a new one. Naschold's (1995, pp. 59-73) analysis of the situation in the OECD countries describes different variants of results steering; from the model in the UK, which relies heavily on managerial control over target setting and results monitoring, to Nordic applications, which constitute a compromise between the classical form of bureaucratic rule-based steering and newer forms of results steering.

Administrative decentralization and the application of the principles of results steering affect, in fundamental ways, the position of experts, confusing both working communities and individual employees. Administrative reorganization has led to reappraisals of fields of expertise. The turning point has been felt most radically by the experts working in the central administration, who have seen the institutional definition of their position change. But, it is not only those working in the central administration who have been forced to reflect on their expert roles; instead, there is a need for considering the issue also at local

levels. A central instrument of results steering comprises defined result areas. The whole administrative chain from the central administration to the local level must focus on achieving result objectives linked with the result areas. Inevitably, the language and frame of reference of management by results will become an aspect of goal setting both on the organizational level and in the work of individual practitioners.

In the daily life of organizations it was becoming clear at the start of the research and development program that rules have changed, but nobody was certain about the content of the new rules. Many confusing questions were in the air: What are the preconditions for the continued existence of a particular agency? What fields should it take up as its specific responsibility? Are the result areas and objectives set for it meaningful in a real context? Czarniawska-Joerges (1995) characterizes such a situation as a crisis of legitimacy, where accountability rules change. People must give new kinds of account of what they are doing.

What kind of action research?

We entered the program as researchers with our commitment to the constructive tradition of social science, whose methodological implications have been discussed in Galtung's writings among others. Galtung (1990, p. 102) has emphasized the constructive function of science over and above its accounting for the empirical and its provision of a critical perspective on it. According to him, the constructive aspect of science involves envisaging an alternative reality as well as a trajectory for its realization. Looking for a means to stimulate questions of feasible and desirable alternatives to the existing situation in the public sector and in expert work, we came to the conclusion that organizing

dialogues would help both the practitioners and ourselves as researchers to find through a process of shared learning some new understandings.

Our research group judged that we had a great deal to learn from the Scandinavian approach of action research (Gustavsen 1991, 2001) but that it was not as such suitable for our purposes. In our research and development program we judged that interpreting change processes and challenges cutting across different fields and levels of the public sector requires both networking of some kind and paying particular attention to the organization of communication. In order to make the situation of the public sector tangible in the communication arena, we applied the principle of inter-organizational and multilevel networking by gathering together experts from different fields and levels of the public sector, running from the central administration to the local level and from education and social work to more technical fields. This starting point created specific boundary conditions for the goal-setting process. Among public sector experts sense-making needs are linked with many levels: with the public sector as a whole, with their work organizations, with the perspectives of their own jobs, and with professional identity. Van Beinum (1993, p. 199, 1998, p.24) calls for a new kind of social space where it is “safe” to reflect on, debate and study socio-economic and political challenges. In our research and development program we have taken the word “safe” very literally. A state of change that shakes up structures, ways of thinking and personal security perspectives is a very sensitive subject for people affected by it. Those entering into and giving themselves up to a process of sharing need motivation of a kind that stems not only from an expectation that doing so will benefit them but also from a feeling that the parties engaging in the dialogue are able to trust one another.

These preconditions and circumstances suggested that we require an intensive and long-term communication relationship. In order to build our communication arena we designed the education program, which as a whole was intended to generate a progressive discussion about the public sector and the challenges facing expert work done there.

The reporting proceeds from the description of the basic principles and contents of the program to the general evaluation of how the expectations of the participants and the reality of the program met; and further from the differentiation of participant situations especially in the issue of work/education integration to the interpretation of the program from a perspective of dynamics between different aspects of space.

Researchers, participants, training program

The four-member group of university researchers (reference to be added), with the backgrounds in the fields of psychology, sociology and adult education, was the initiator of the process that finally came to mean for the group different kinds of encounters with the public sector practitioners through the 1990s. The group had funding for its research from academic sources and the organization of funding for the training program was also a responsibility of the group; the participation fees only covered a minor proportion of the costs. The main activities took place during an intensive one-and-a-half year period, which was the time span of the training program, but a reflection seminar one year after the program, small group meetings, interviews and feedback from the researchers to the participants in the form of scientific writings kept the interaction alive for many years (reference to be added).

We offered our further education program to people employed in Finnish public administration who had a university or college degree or who had completed corresponding studies and who had experience of management, planning, training or other expert tasks. We wanted as students developer groups who would bring the pressures for change affecting the public sector into the general discussion of our educational forum. Our assumption was that the same persons would also see to it that the conclusions reached during the discussions would also be carried back to their work organizations. In selecting our participants, we stressed the importance of an ongoing development project that was to be a concrete link between the respective organization and the educational forum. We selected 28 people employed in various expert and management positions. Most of the participants had an academic degree and a fairly long work history. The participants served in central administration, district and regional administration, various departments of the local government, separate expert organizations and institutions of higher learning. Most participants (17) held positions in central administration, 3 were from intermediate-level (district and regional) administration and 8 from local administration. Six persons worked as executive assistants to the management of their administrative branch or work organization. Their task was to prepare decisions that concern the future and development of the personnel and the work organization as a whole. They were also authorized to bring forward issues that profoundly affect the way in which the work of the work units and their own administrative branch are organized. Five of the participants had duties involving the coordination and steering of the operations of central administration. They were engaged in functionally centralized expert work that gave them the opportunity to influence the development of a particular sector or of public-sector personnel development as a whole. Six participants worked as internal developers of their organizations. Their duties consisted of the maintenance and creation

of opportunities for learning and renewal both at the individual and the organizational level. Seven of the participants were charged with expert specialist tasks with clearly delimited expertise requirements involving precisely defined professional qualifications. Much of their duties consisted of customer service. Four participants worked in educational and consultative jobs in separate expert organizations. Their task was to contribute to organizational development through selling their services, on the adult education market, both to work organizations and their individual members.

The educational program was scheduled to last some eighteen months, comprising seven contact periods (seminars) and five meetings of theme groups (tutorial groups) between the contact periods, assignments and the completion of a project paper. The program developed into an intensive process of action research where the researchers played several roles: we were planners of the educational forum as well as its teachers, tutors and researchers.

We left the program partially open-ended, allowing the participants to take up the challenges and problems that would emerge from the reality to be confronted. The accommodation of the program was most clearly visible in the contents of the seminars. To support reflective thinking in the groups and other discussion forums organized by the program, the educators provided knowledge of learning, the process of expertise and promises of multidisciplinary. To help to place the present development situation in the public sector in a perspective, the program provided lectures on a range of management and development approaches. Along with crystallization of the themes of the participants' projects, the program provided material and lectures which supported the specific themes.

In addition to the discussions as a one group, the participants were divided into small groups, guided by two or three tutors. These small groups met both during the seminar days and between the seminars. The organizers divided the participants into the small groups on the basis of the information the participants had given in the application stage. A theme was defined for each group which somehow integrated the interests of the participants but which also was broad enough to generate different perspectives on the issues. The themes were 1) The changing administrative culture – change or changelessness? 2) Cooperation – on whose terms? 3) Maintaining working capacity – prevention or therapy? 4) Organizational learning – the obstacles to learning and development 5) Education and development – intervention strategies at the workplace.

The most important role was given to project work. Each participant brought into the program a project of his or her own, completed either alone or in groups of a few members. The aim was for the project work to integrate each participant's studies with the other study methods subservient to this central element. The project topics fell into the following categories: 1) developing work communities (8 projects) 2) evaluating a developmental operation (4 projects) 3) discussing the operational idea of an organization – identifying its social obligations (3 projects) 4) structures of cooperation – the roles of and links between service organizations (5 projects) and 5) the need for and targeting services (2 projects).

The program wanted to ensure that the workplaces knew about the educational program and its goals and that the participant is empowered to work with a specific project. To achieve this aim, the program started with a work conference used in Nordic development

projects (e.g. Gustavsen et.al. 1991, 309). To the conference were invited not only the people chosen to participate in the program but also a support person from each workplace, in most cases the participant's immediate superior. The goal was achieved partly but not fully. In some cases the support person had difficulties with timetables, but in some cases there was also lack of interest at the management level.

Evaluation of the process and the results

During the process different kinds of data was gathered both for research and feedback purposes. The data consists of in-depth interviews, tape-recorded discussions in the organized group-situations, evaluations made by the participants, written reports made by the participants of the progress of their projects, reflections by the educators and tutors and documentary material of the participating organizations. The researchers continued to be in contact with the participants also after the program and collected material for research purposes in the later encounters and interviews.

Interviews made at the beginning and the end of the program give a possibility to reflect on the process against the expectations expressed by the participants (a detailed analysis made by: reference to be added). A uniting interest and reason for wishing to join the program among the participants was a desire to develop one's own work and personal interest in the development of the work community. Behind the uniting goal, however, were differences of emphasis in the individual interests; some wished to carry out their tasks more effectively than before, some emphasized an aspiration to fulfill departmental expectations, and some were hoping to develop oneself or renew one's knowledge of research on working life.

Half of the participants were directly involved in at least one development project underway in their own organization. Also in most of the remaining workplaces some development undertakings were being planned. Thus, the participants had prerequisites to link their project to the change processes going on in the organizations. Finally, 10 participants tied their project directly to an organizational development process, the rest defined their project from the perspective of their own work tasks.

Almost all the participants assessed that it is possible to combine personal and organizational interests in a further education program. Half of the participants, however, gave various reservations: as the most important precondition was considered that both the participant and the organization commit themselves to the educational process. The commitment in the involved organizations varied. Most of the participants felt that the superior and peers had a positive attitude towards his or her joining the programme. Still, about a quarter of the superiors and a third of the colleagues were neutral or indifferent according to the participants

The multidisciplinary and multiprofessional nature of the program was considered almost unanimously to be an important and valuable side of the program and it was also thought that such a perspective becomes even indispensable in the future. When the participants were asked what was most positive about the program and what may have hampered the studies, the question about teamwork and group discussions split the respondents. 14 respondents mentioned group discussions as the most important strength of the program, while 10 respondents brought up the shortcomings of group discussions as the greatest problem of the program. The degree of personal investment in the project work

differentiated replies to the question of the strengths and weaknesses of the program. The participants who made an ambitious project saw as the most positive aspects of the program their personal experiences, project work and increase in their knowledge base. The participants whose project work was fairly modest appreciated group discussions more than the average.

Examples of participant situations

The participants had different kinds of organizational positions and personal orientations which had an influence both on their relationship to the general development trends and the educational process. The feelings of confusion, hurry and straining about which Pirjo talks in the opening excerpt were quite common among the participants, as well as the feeling that “*everything is moving*”. In Pirjo’s case such feelings were more pronounced than among the majority of participants, partly because of the diffuse situation in the organization in which she worked, and partly because of her personal expectations regarding the definition of expert positions.

Pirjo worked in a local-level organization as a member of the management staff with duties involving personnel administration. Pirjo started the program in a less favourable situation than most other participants. Her most immediate superior was opposed to her taking part in the program because the superior thought it useless to the organization. Pirjo herself, however, felt that in a situation in which the organization seemed to be drifting between different alternatives, a broader view on the issues would help to make well-argued choices. The organization was preparing to change over to profit budgeting

and was working out operational models appropriate to the management by results approach. Pirjo thought that the program might be a place to reflect on these matters and especially issues related to developing systems of participation were close to her interests. Pirjo was in a conflict situation, since she felt that her own values and interests and the way the organization was working were not matching. She found it difficult to go along with the tasks she was given in her job. *“Yes, it is reorganization that I am planning now. It’s never our own jobs that we reorganize, it’s never the elaborate structures of administration that we question...no, the cuts affect personnel who are purely producing (services) for the needs of the local people.”* The interests that had led Pirjo to join the program caused her inner struggle from the beginning. During the eighteen months that the educational program lasted, her superior showed no interest in what was taking place in the program. A few other executive-level officials and her closest fellow employees were interested, and with them Pirjo had an opportunity to talk in the course of the program about its contents. In any case, her superior’s reluctant attitude closed some gateways to combining her own and her organization’s interests. It was clearly a liberating solution to Pirjo when she gradually came to use the program as a forum where she could talk about things that she herself, from the perspective of her own role, found problematic. *“I expect it was me who was most anxious to bring their own worries and their troubles at work to the group...I did not find any very great wisdom to help my working community, but I did find things that helped me in my own position.”*

In contrast to Pirjo, Veikko’s opportunities to combine his own interests and his organization’s interests were good. The local-level organization (in the Finnish scale a medium-sized town) where Veikko worked as a member of the management staff had been active in initiating different kinds of development projects. Veikko was a member of

the inner circle of executive officials who tried to steer the town towards a new kind of administration in which the central administration would use its change agent role rather in a supportive than in an instructions-giving way. Before our program began, the local authority had started a wide-ranging scheme, supported by consultants, for developing its management methods and cooperative systems. Veikko had been a core person in developing and planning the project from the beginning and described himself as a “*tool*”, a link between the management, the personnel and the consultants. During the program he wanted to get discussion support in order to reflect on whether their project was going on in the right direction and that is what he considered to have received from the program: (What was the strength of the program?) “*Conveying the latest knowledge...and, it is difficult to differentiate, especially the method, the reflection*”.

Petra was responsible for specialist tasks that required highly specific competence and expertise acquired through education and working experience. The central administrative board that employed her was going through a time marked both by active development work and by uncertainty. The uncertainty was linked with political decisions that would change the department’s organizational status within the structure of public administration. Internal development projects were going on that had been started independently of high-level political decisions, but that gave the personnel themselves new resources for meeting the coming changes. The organizational rearrangements going on and the internal training that Petra was running alongside her own job had increased her knowledge needs beyond the boundaries of her own field of expertise. In her project she combined her aspiration to understand better aspects of both her own field of expertise and of the organizational rearrangements in progress. In the midst of uncertainty the program gave Petra a welcome breathing space. “*At first I thought that the program*

should increase my resources in this organizational rearrangement. I think it has done something like that.” The project served goals defined by Petra herself, the support of her organization was mostly a matter of entering into the spirit of her enterprise.

Helena worked as a trainer in a central administrative board with centralized training services. Helena applied to join the educational program because she thought that she might be able to make use of the experiences of experts and members of other departments in her own acute developmental situation. Around the time the program was starting, Helena’s central administrative board was going through the process of making profit goals concrete. Helena participated intensively in the discussions on the development of one office. Helena suggested that instead of examining development only at the level of individuals and tasks, the level of the work community as a whole should be taken under focus. Her view was accepted and she got the permission to start the experiments that she promoted during the program. Even though in this case Helena had found commendable response to her own ideas, she also brought up the other side of a trainer’s marginal position. *”I expect that when you have duties of this kind, you have a vague feeling that the management is not with you. If you did not have this inner fire, you would not be able to keep up your enthusiasm.”* Later she estimated what the educational program had come to mean her as follows: *“This program came just when it was most needed, that is, when things were already underway and we were losing our way a little. This program brought challenges.”*

The program set itself goals involving both indirect and direct influences by aiming at both cognitive and practical results. The broadening of perspectives, gaining a long-range view and support for one’s own thinking mentioned by the participants in their final

assessments correspond to the goals that the program could be expected to reach in terms of cognitive results. “*What I have myself as an expert benefited from this (program), well, it is a certain kind of orientation, a sort of distant horizon.*” (Interview). Project work was the link that concretely transmitted the reality of public administration into the program and that made the program visible at the workplaces.

Generally speaking, the participants were both willing and able to bring their ideas born during the program into their workplaces. Veikko’s and Helena’s projects had a direct link with ongoing organizational undertakings. Both of them used the opportunity to reflect on the objectives of the wider development undertaking in the educational program. Helena’s organizational position in the training function gave her autonomy to generate ideas but it also meant that in relation to the main operations of the organization she was an outsider. In Helena’s case, her normal work did not provide many possibilities for conversational support and that is why she appreciated the opportunity to reflect on her ideas with the other participants and researchers. In Veikko’s case, lack of conversational channels was not the issue, since he was an active member in the internal networks of his organization. For him the major gain from the educational program was a broader horizon to introduce to the numerous interorganizational discussion forums.

Pirjo and Petra are examples of participants who were so unsettled about the conditions of change that they felt they needed, at the first stage, to reflect on their own role and its foundations before they could take a broader look at what was happening to their organization. Petra’s project work related to methods of developing expertise in a very specified field of engineering, challenged by new regulations from the European Union. In spite of the specificity of her topic, she got, however, acknowledgement for her work

more widely in the organization. She got interested listeners to her ideas, not only among her closest colleagues, but also in the educational events which she initiated, and within the group of in-house trainers. In Pirjo's case, the educational program was less visible at her workplace than in the other examples. In her case, the reflective "trip" in the educational program led to conclusions so painful that to her the educational forum largely came to mean a therapeutic stop, which meant very much to her personally but did not have any direct contribution to the organization.

What kind of space was it?

Lefebvre's (1998) differentiation of different types of spaces, which he calls physical, mental and social, provides useful insights in putting the program into perspective. According to Lefebvre, physical space refers to the material aspects of space, mental space to the sphere of theory and meaning and social space mainly to social relations. Hernes' (2004a, 72, 2004b) interpretation of the various aspects is used as a bridge from the philosophical categories presented by Lefebvre to concepts which apply in organisational contexts. Hernes gives as examples of physical spaces in organizational contexts budgets, electronic domains, physical barriers, work schedules and rules. Examples of mental space are knowledge, meaning, strategies, sensemaking, and learning. Examples of social space are trust, identity, loyalty, love, dependence and norms of behaviour. According to Hernes, all the examples are circumscribed by limits and form a basis for interpretation and action; and hence can be treated as spaces.

From a limited point of view the physical space of the program were the seminar facilities provided by the two universities involved in the organization of the program. The

physical arrangements of the seminars were important in the sense that they enabled the participants to take some distance to their daily work and time pressure which was experienced by many of them. To look at the aspects of spaces only from the inside of the program is, however, too constraining a perspective. From the set-up of the program followed that the program was present in the participants' workplaces in a very concrete meaning and their workplaces and organizations were present in the program in a mental meaning. The participants defined their project work in relation to their own work and processed it as a part of their professional work. From their organization they brought to the program their own experiences, but also more general thought patterns prevalent in the organization.

The orientation of the program to process work-related problems of the participants resulted in that the thought patterns in the participants' organizations as well as discourses in the society concerning the public sector were essentially substance of the mental space of the program. Other substance were the theoretical perspectives brought up by the researchers and the lecturers. One defining feature of the mental space was a multitude of perspectives rising from experiential knowledge of the professionals and from the various theoretical roots. Another was a critical orientation to a "given" framework or discourse and an emphasis on the examination of the phenomena from different perspectives and frameworks. Results of the orientation could be seen in the participants' replies in which they said they had gained broader horizons both for their own work and for the communication situations in their organization.

A shared condition for the participants was some sort of confusion of what is going on in and around the public sector. This shared confusion became one of the characteristic

features of the social space. In some sense, the participants felt they were in the same boat. The social space developed along with social interaction. In the application stage and in the early discussions of the program the participants expressed confidence in the prospect of gaining useful knowledge in the discussions with other professionals and researchers. Along with the discussions and having a multitude of perspectives “on the table”, impatience began to grow. Since the participants had an expectation to promote something which would be useful in their work and the richness of perspectives did not serve directly that purpose, demands for a structure in the discussions were expressed. Gradually, however, tolerance towards both the participants’ own and others’ unfinished thoughts developed. The increased tolerance smoothed the ground for discussions in which frameworks could be sought and specific work-related problems could be reflected within multiperspective frameworks.

Hernes (2004a, 86) has talked about regulatory space by which he refers to the autonomy the person has within the limits of the space. The participants had pretty much independence in their organizations as it concerned definition and carrying out their work tasks. The economic situation in the public sector and the simultaneous introduction of the idea of management by results introduced some new boundary conditions for each of them and forced them to take some kind of stand towards the situation of the organizations as a whole. The case example persons formulated the stand differently, but all of them did it by protecting their own regulatory space and by seeking potential degrees of freedom. Ville had access to the inter-organizational networks which made interpretations of the practical applications of the doctrine. Ville attached to the doctrine but wanted to do it creatively. Helena strived to train her work community to find out collectively ways to adapt to the new demands. Petra wanted to go on with developing

her specific professional field and to find out how to do it within the new boundary conditions. Pirjo took as her goal to clarify for herself what kind of professional role would be possible for her in the new situation, a role, which would not force her to violate against her values and moral judgments.

The fact that they could go along with these different orientations is one indicator of the existence of a regulatory space. The participants had in general a wish to utilize the program for developing their work and for giving a worthwhile contribution to their organization but their regulatory space allowed them to define also a different function for the program and their role in that.

A special challenge for the researchers as the organizers of the program was to regulate the dynamics between the mental and the social space. The new management doctrine in the public sector generated mixed feelings among the participants. They had to live with the new thinking and practices but they did not want to do it without questioning. The lectures added to the idea world different theoretical perspectives to look at the situations on macro and micro levels. The sensemaking task was defined to be supported by the joint discussions.

The tensions felt in the social space resulted mainly from two sources. One was some sort of anxiety whether there would be found such theoretical perspectives which would help to look at the concrete organizational and work situations. Another was impatience concerning the group discussions. The group discussions were successful in bringing forth a multitude of experiences. The social space was safe enough to permit also expressions of strain and insecurity felt by the participants. The question raised up in

some of the feedback reports was that whether the discussions would stay at that level or whether they would proceed towards something more structured.

We were as researchers sensitive to the tensions. Both during the seminar days and immediately after each seminar we gathered together as a group to reflect on the social processes and contents of discussions. Our means to regulate the tensions were, for example, to provide a lecture which would come close to the immediate concerns of the participants if the gulf between the theoretical world and the practice seemed too wide, or if the group discussions seemed to be drifting for too long a time, to contribute to the structuring of the discussions, for example, by building links between separate views or by suggesting theoretical perspectives.

The pressing need of sensemaking by the participants shaped the degrees of freedom of the researchers. The expectation held by the participants to “give us the theory, give us the methods to deal with this confusion” was felt throughout the program but especially strongly at the beginning. On the other hand, as highly educated people, the participants were cognitively aware of the fact that in the midst of a change period there are no ready answers by anyone. As a contrast to the sometimes unrealistic expectations towards the researchers in the program-organizer and teacher-tutor roles, the participants accepted well the researchers’ investigator role. The long-term span of the interaction laid foundations for confidential relationships, a safe space, between the researchers and the participants. During the joint discussions and especially in the interviews, also very sensitive questions related to agency and identity could be touched on. The social bond was tenable and even after years the participants were ready to recollect memories of the program. In the interviews some years after the program the past, present and future

could be reflected on in a more settled situation in which the development route towards an information society and the place of the public sector in that development could be seen more clearly.

Discussion

Successful development of organizations and societies is nowadays emphasizingly viewed through the development of knowledge and expertise. Along with the discourse of information/knowledge societies, the understanding of expertise and expert work has become broader in scope. It has been argued that the examination of expertise from the point of view of professional groups or individual possession of expert knowledge is not alone sufficient to reveal change trends in expert work. To understand the requirements of expert work, one should approach it as contextualized and in such a way that it captures also the multicontextual aspects of the work. As it has been claimed, experts must extend their knowledge beyond their specialized fields and build links to other expert fields to an increasing extent (Nowotny 2003, 55).

The case related to a situation in which expertise fields were in the process of reshaping due to reorientation in organizational thinking and within the pressures of wider discourse in the society. The sensemaking needs among the professionals concerned both their desire to understand what is going on in the public sector in general and to clarify their own role and options as professionals.

The program kept the contextualised nature of expertise in sight through its course along with dealing with general change trends which have an effect on the boundary conditions of the unique situations. The project work of the participants was a means for continuity between the workplaces/organizations and the educational program. The projects focused on specific knowledge needs of each participant and his/her organization. The program provided a multiprofessional and multidisciplinary forum in which the participants could get feedback on their plans and change ideas of variegated aspects which might be useful in building a framework for approaching the specific questions.

The article conceptualized the program through the concept of space. In the present stage of information/knowledge societies, in which professional work and knowledge production necessitate to an increasing extent transgression of organizational boundaries, a need for construction of spaces increases as well. In line with the described case, the participants do not only bring to such spaces their own professional aspirations and problems, but also the context of their work. Lefebvres's differentiation of different aspects of space, of physical, mental and social, helps to direct attention to different spheres which may have an influence in the encounters.

The dynamics between the different aspects of space determine what kind of space in each case is optimal. In the described case, the expectations and objectives necessitated long-term communication relationships in which the participants could feel safe to express their unfinished thoughts and personal worries. In some other development situations in which the task is, for example, to more generally exchange and generate ideas, the demands for safety are not to the same extent vital.

References

Castells, M. & Himanen, P (2001). *Suomen*

tietoyhteiskuntamalli. Vantaa: WSOY.

Czarniawska-Joerges, B (1995). *Public management contra*

public administration: A change of accounting rules in the

Swedish public sector. Working paper series 1995/5. Institute of economic research. School of economics and management.

Lund:Lund University, 1995.

Reference to be added

Galtung, J. (1990) ”Theory formation in social research: A plea

for pluralism”. In Oyen, E. (ed) *Comparative methodology:*

Theory and practice in international social research.

Trowbridge, Wiltshire: Sage, 96-112.

Gough I. (1991) ”The United Kingdom”. In Pfaller, A., Gough

I. & Therborn, G. *Can the welfare state compete? A*

comparative study of five advanced capitalist countries.

Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 2XS and London:

MacMillan Academic and Professional Ltd, 101-151.

Gustavsen, B. (1991) "The LOM program: A network-based strategy for organization development in Sweden. *Research in organizational change and development*". *JAI Press* , 5, 285-315.

Gustavsen, B. (1998) "From experiments to network building: Trends in the use of research for reconstructing working life". *Human relations*, 51 (3),431-448.

Gustavsen, B. (2001) "Theory and practice: the mediating discourse". In Reason, P. & Bradbury, H. (eds.) *Handbook of action research. Participative inquiry and practice*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 17-26.

Heller, F (1993). Another look at action research. *Human Relations*, 46 (10), 1235-1242.

Hernes, T. (2004a) *The spatial construction of organization*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Hernes, T. (2004b) Studying composite boundaries: A framework of analysis. *Human Relations*, 57 (1), 9-29.

Julkunen, R. (1992) *Hyvinvointivaltio käännekohdassa*, Tampere: Vastapaino.

Julkunen, R. (2001) *Suunnanmuutos. 1990-luvun sosiaalipoliittinen reformi Suomessa*. Tampere: Vastapaino..

Kalliola, S. & Nakari, R. (1999) "Introduction". In Kalliola, S. & Nakari, R. (eds) *Resources for renewal. A participatory approach to the modernization of municipal organizations in Finland*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co, 1-6.

Reference to be added

Reference to be added

Kosonen, P. (1993) "The Finnish model and the welfare state crisis". In Kosonen, P. (ed) *The Nordic welfare state as an idea and as reality*. Helsinki: The Renvall Institute, University of Helsinki, 45-66.

Lefebvre, H. (1998) *The production of space*, Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell.

Mishra, R. (1990) *The welfare state in capitalist society. Policies of retrenchment and maintenance in Europe, North America and Australia*. New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo, Singapore: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Naschold, F. (1995) *The modernization of the public sector in Europe. A comparative perspective on the Scandinavian experience*. Helsinki: Ministry of Labour.

Nowotny, H. (2003) Democratising expertise and socially robust knowledge. *Science and Public Policy*, 30 (3), 151-156.

Therborn, G. (1991) "Sweden". In Pfaller, A., Gough I. & Therborn, G. *Can the welfare state compete? A comparative study of five advanced capitalist countries*. Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 2XS and London: MacMillan Academic and Professional Ltd., 229-269.

van Beinum, H. (1993) "The kaleidoscope of workplace reform". In Naschold, F., Cole, R. & van Beinum, H. *Constructing the new industrial era*. Assen: van Gorcum & Comp. B.V., 169-202.

van Beinum, H. (1998) "On the practice of action research". *Concepts and transformation*, 3 (1/2), 1-29.