



Theory and inquiry in practice research: Introduction

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1 Practice research

There are many challenges in the research on human work. The artificial character of work-settings, their sociality, their purposiveness and the multitude of values, and the use of material and linguistic artefacts put certain demands on such research (Simon, 1996; Schatzki et al, 2001; Nowotny et al, 2001; Van de Ven, 2007). There are also important claims to study what people actually do, not only what they claim to do (Argyris et al, 1985). Based on these views and demands, an articulation of practice perspectives on human work has emerged (e.g. Schatzki, 1996; Schatzki et al, 2001; Reckwitz, 2002; Miettinen et al, 2009; Simpson, 2009). This can be seen in many areas of inquiry; e.g. organisational learning (Bjørkeng et al, 2009; Gherardi, 2000; 2009), organisational studies (Cabantous et al, 2010; Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011), strategizing (Whittington, 2006), social work (Pain 2010; Salisbury Forum Group, 2011; Uggerhøj, 2011), nursing (Stevenson, 2005; Reed, 2006), information systems (Orlikowski, 2000; Mathiassen, 2002), evaluation (Schwandt, 2002; Donaldson & Scriven, 2003; Chen, 2005) communication (Scollon, 2001; Cronen, 2001), research studies (Pickering, 1995; Pickering & Guzik, 2008; Zundel & Kokkalis, 2010). A practice perspective implies a particular perspective on human work. For example Schatzki (2001, p 2) defines a practice as “embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding”.

To study work as practices implies a need to inquire what is actually going on, what actions are performed, what knowledge and external instruments are used. Practices are seen as emergent phenomena, gradually changing and also due to deliberate design interventions (Gartner, 1993). Certain aspects can be seen from the outside, but to reveal the practice logic it is usually necessary to get close to it and view it internally in order to unfold implicit and tacit elements of the practice.

A practice orientation in research is not only related to ontological considerations. It is not only a question of what we as scholars are researching. It is also a matter how we see ourselves in relation to work-practices. What is the role of knowledge in relation to practices? The pragmatist stance that knowledge is the means to improve existence through informed actions is a key for positioning a practice epistemology (Dewey, 1938). From this follows a need to address situations that are prob-

lematic to the people of practices and to develop ways to improve such situations (Lindblom, 1990; Schein, 2001; Cronen, 2001). There is a need to inquire into local knowledge and local situations. Relevance and usefulness are key characteristics of scholarly practice knowledge (Benbasat & Zmud, 1999). It is also important to see that the scholar does not have a privileged position in creating adequate practice knowledge. Knowledge is always positional and what may be conceived as valid from one position may be considered wrong from another. Knowledge making may be seen as social processes of negotiation. Different actors tend to negotiate about what is valid. Practitioners develop knowledge about their practices that is used in constant learning cycles. The idea of scholarly intervention is to make a difference to such knowledge development, but not to do this totally independent of the on-going knowledge evolution within the practices. The possibilities of creating grounded knowledge about practices and their potential improvements are dependent on fruitful interaction and collaboration between practitioners and researchers (Coghlan & Shani, 2005). In fact, very often research collaboration with practice forms the unseen and unknown into knowledge that may be articulated and used in the communication within the organisation. We need to find ways to engage scholars in practical development and to engage practitioners in knowledge development and to make these processes integrated and synergetic.

There is an emergent tradition of practice research. This encompasses the different threads of ontological, epistemological, methodological and ethical characters briefly outlined above. There are different emphases in this practice turn. Some scholars claim the importance of practice-based theorizing. Others claim the importance of addressing practical problems and developing useful knowledge through inquiries. Still others claim the importance of practitioner involvement in the research process and the establishment of fruitful practitioner – researcher collaborations. There is a divergent landscape of practice research that is evolving.

This special issue should be seen in the light of this emergent evolution of practice research. Its aim is to contribute to the continual articulation of practice research as a viable research orientation. It contributes with investigations of practice research foundations; how to inquire and theorize in, about and for practices; and how interaction and collaboration between practitioners and academics can be established. It gives inter-disciplinary views and practical examples of practice research. Our hope is that this can further our common knowledge and capacity to conduct practice research. What is written here is also due to the pragmatist conviction about the provisional and dialogical character of knowledge. We welcome reflections and reactions to what has been stated in these papers!

2 From workshop to special issue

Practice research (with varying labels and different orientations) is applied within many disciplines. Two of them are information systems and social work. An interdisciplinary workshop on practice research was arranged in Helsinki on June 8, 2011 with participants from both information systems and social work. Göran Goldkuhl (from information systems) and Ilse Julkunen (from social work) were the co-chairs of this workshop and we are also the editors of this special issue and the authors of this editorial. Organisers of this workshop were our departments (the Department of Management and Engineering, Linköping University, Sweden and the Department of

Social Work, Helsinki University, Finland) and the AIS special interest group on Pragmatist IS research (SIG Prag). The workshop was co-located with the 19th European Conference on Information Systems (ECIS) in Helsinki. Fourteen papers were presented at the workshop based on a regular peer-review process (www.vits.org/practiceresearch2011/). Eight of these papers were selected and invited to be submitted to this special issue on “Theory and Inquiry in Practice Research” in *Systems, Signs & Actions*. Seven papers are included in this special issue after a regular reviewing process. These papers have been improved through four rounds of review and revision through the workshop and special issue referee processes.

We express thanks to all colleagues that have contributed in different roles to the workshop and to this special issue. We thank the following persons for acting as reviewers for the workshop and this special issue: Mark Aakhus, Pär Ågerfalk, Steven Alter, Karin Axelsson, Michel Avital, Richard Baskerville, Dubravka Cecez-Kecmanovic, Rodney Clarke, Stefan Cronholm, Ritva Engeström, Karin Hedström, Juhani Iivari, Synnöve Karvinen-Niinikoski, Karlheinz Kautz, Juha Koivisto, Jenny Lagsten, Mikael Lind, Lars-Olof Lychnell, Angela Nobre, Malin Nordström, Markku Nurminen, Paidi O’Raghallaigh, Pasi Pohjola, Jan Pries-Heje, Matti Rossi, Jonas Sjöström, Rajiv Vashist, John Venable, Hans Weigand and Trevor Wood-Harper.

3 Papers in this special issue

The papers in this special issue cover different aspects of practice research. Several of the papers cover issues of both inquiry and theorizing, however, the emphasis is different in the papers. Most papers include case descriptions as empirical illustrations.

The first paper is *The research practice of practice research: theorizing and situational inquiry* authored by Göran Goldkuhl. This paper presents an overall framework for practice research. It adopts a practice approach to practice research when viewing it as a practice in itself. Practice research is defined as consisting of two sub-practices, situational inquiry and theorizing. Three examples of practice research are given as illustrations: Development of IT and workpractices in eldercare; competence development among IT consultants; evaluation of a taxation e-service.

The second paper is *A framework to support the planning and implementation of work-practice research: An example of using boundary practice lens on the work of business analysts* authored by Rajiv Vashist, Judy McKay and Peter Marshall. They present a framework for planning and implementation of practice research. This includes issues of developing research motivations, selection of a practice theory to apply, developing research questions, articulating a research perspective. The use of the framework is illustrated by a case of research on the boundary practice of business analysts’ work.

The third paper is *Reflecting the methodological tool box in studying ICT-related change in child welfare* authored by Raija Koskinen and Ilse Julkunen. They investigate how to apply practice-based frameworks and research tools in practice research with emphasis on empirical work and data analysis. The focus is on the fine tuning of methodological and theoretical choices that are being made in researching emergent practices. This is illustrated through a case of ICT-related change in child welfare.

The fourth paper is *An event-based approach for the “intermediate step” in process studies of IT-related organizational change* authored by Lars-Olof Lychnell. This paper also addresses the issue of how to apply practice-based frameworks in

empirical work and data analysis. It proposes a systematic approach (an event-based process approach) in order to facilitate the “intermediate step” of sensemaking between data collection and theory building. This is illustrated through a case of IT-related organizational change in a small travel agency.

The fifth paper is *Practices, modifications and generativity – REA: a practical tool for managing the innovation processes of practices* authored by Juha Koivisto and Pasi Pohjola. The authors present, based on a practice-theoretic framework, an open-innovation web tool called REA (relational evaluation approach). This tool is intended to be used in developing and modelling, implementing and evaluating work-practices, mainly in the social and health fields. An analysis is made of the practice-theoretic base for the tool. Preliminary findings are reported from the use of the tool.

The sixth paper is *The design of effective theory* authored by Paidi O’Raghallaigh, David Sammon and Ciaran Murphy. They address the issue of how theories should be designed in order to apply to practices. This involves claims for utility and adequate presentation and communication to practice audiences. The content of the theory needs to be understandable and useful to different audiences. This is contrasted to claims for generality and truth. A design science approach is proposed for the development of effective theory.

The seventh paper is *Practitioners’ motives as a key issue in organizing practice research collaboration* authored by Malin Nordström and Karin Axelsson. They address collaboration between researchers and practitioners and especially practitioners’ motives and interests to participate in such collaboration. The research is based on studies of a practice research program in IS maintenance and evolution that includes an establishment of a researcher-practitioner community. Within this practice research program and community there are efforts addressing both specific organisations’ challenges and general knowledge and competence needs.

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