

Conversation as a tool for development of new knowledge? Reporting from the field

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This article constitutes part of the final chapter of my doctoral thesis in progress. The thesis holds the title; *Room for Children's Participation? Reflections on own communicative practice*. Key words are children, the built environment and participation. The aim of the thesis is, through reflection on my own practice, to arrive at a set of principles which might possibly assist in enhancing practical experience in democracy for children and the young, particularly stressing the participatory part.

The point of departure for such practical experience is the details of the built environment. The set of principles derives from 1) the **Model for Increasing Awareness of the Built Environment**, the MIABE (designed by the author) 2) reflections following the application of the MIABE, particularly to the pilot project on the 'Small Ugly Places' and 3) The Theory of Communicative Planning.

This article comprises one part only. It has a monographic approach, elaborating upon the question raised in the heading. Belonging to the research network *DesignDialogue*, in which the members aim at contributing to a better understanding of the importance of communication in its broadest sense, made me wish to share my experiences. Conversation as a possible means of methodological approach for acquiring of new knowledge might hopefully contribute to an extension as well a strengthening of the already established platform of the *DesignDialogue* initiative. The complete story of how I eventually succeeded in my search for some of the former pupils, how the conversations developed, and to what extent the new knowledge actually did evolve, is accounted for in my thesis to be.

What is the MIABE?

My concern about how children and the young could possibly increase their awareness of architecture in its widest sense, 'from the spoon to the city' (Dunin-Woyseth), goes back many years. The **Model for Increasing Awareness of the Built Environment**, the MIABE, therefore partly evolved, partly was designed. It is a context-bound practical teaching and learning model aiming at action, closely linked to different subjects within the National Curriculum of 1997. A useful tool for expressing children's impressions when working with

the details of the built environment is seen in the subject Arts and crafts, particularly the topics architecture and design. The school and its neighbourhood public spaces constitute the arenas for application of the model. It is designed for use by all children in the primary school, particularly addressing the syllabus of the 5th grade. The MIABE does not expect any 'right' answers, but stimulating of critical thinking and discussion that evolve from the informed knowledge obtained from work with the details of the built environment in the public spaces like bus shelters, benches and litter bins.

The components of the MIABE are ranging from establishing of working-groups within the class to the children's writing of a formal letter to the municipality. Reflections on own communicative practice elucidated from the study of related projects on children and participation, indicate many shared components. These are particularly evident within the registration process. Some components seem, however, to be found in the MIABE only. These components are made part of the arrived at set of principles.

The 'Small Ugly Places'

Application to my model is seen in different projects holding different aims, from learning to know the identity of place to that of serving as means to input to municipal planning processes. In 1996, however, the Municipality of Oslo initiated the pilot project on 'Embellishment of the Small Ugly Places' as part of their ongoing 'Safer City' project.¹ The aim of the project was to make use of the public spaces in a practical-pedagogical connection. Primary schools from inner urban areas of Oslo were invited to join the initiative. The children should, in contact with the municipal departments, take measures to improve the design as well as report on the lack of maintenance in the public places to help combat decline and thus make the places more safe and pleasant for all users of the local environment. More than 250 children and their teachers joined the initiative. The children mostly belonged to the 5th grade, i.e. aged 10-12, some were younger. The title of the project immediately was abbreviated by the children to just the 'Small Ugly Places', which has been used with enthusiasm from everybody ever since.

The research question

In the final chapter of my forthcoming doctoral thesis, I want to look closer into the following question: Could such practical experience from the details of the built environment possibly also hold a transfer value to a more general understanding of the importance of being an informed citizen? Three research questions comprise my doctoral thesis. The third is related to this article: In which way could conversations with former pupils having joined a MIABE-related initiative, possibly contribute to new knowledge that might inform and guide the design of the principles arrived at?

The research strategy

The research strategy of the doctoral thesis is pluralistic. The three main parts build upon different approaches in its consequence as well as in ways of presentation. In the final chapter, I wish to make use of conversations as production of new knowledge. Krogh emphasises that

¹ The project was a co-operation between the Oslo Municipality, Office of the Chairman of the Executive Board and the author, and makes up for the main reference project of my forthcoming thesis.

such new knowledge might be understood as a spiral which develops from within the good dialogue taking place between two parties (Krogh, 2005a:1). All methodological approaches in the thesis are qualitatively oriented.

How is a qualitative research strategy recognised?

How, is a qualitative research strategy recognised, and are any such signs seen in the empirical part of my doctoral thesis? Starrin & Svensson (1994) has looked into different identifications of qualitative methodology. Some examples would be; Soft, hermeneutics, micro, closeness, word, and phenomenology. Opposed to these are for example; Hard, positivism, macro, distance, figures, and positivism. I have chosen these key words of his because they are concurrent with the key components of the MIABE. Thus they also comprise the main content of the base for my conversations with the former pupils.

The pilot-project on the ‘Small Ugly Places’ took, in all aspects, part on a micro level. Children aged 10-12 were the main actors. The initiative took place in ‘small ugly places’ in the local neighbourhood of the school. The level of the structural decision making process was also placed locally; within the school, the city district and the municipality. Cooperation between the pupils might be characterised as soft as practical mastering for all pupils is a prerequisite for use of the model. The children work in self appointed groups. The public space, the ‘small ugly place’ in the neighbourhood area is chosen as a point of departure for teaching and learning. It forms part of a shared ‘lifeworld’ of the children and the different groups of interacting adults. The public space belongs to everyone, and is made use of by all citizens; children, people in wheel chairs, bicyclists, adults. It thus gives meaning derived from lived experience rather than being the object of distant consideration. The public space might be a ‘room of being’² for people in urban areas in the same way as is the landscape to people of coastal and rural areas (Østergaard, 2001:6).

Knowledge in, as well as knowledge of the details of the public space is a prerequisite for the communicative action which takes place between the children and the adult actors.

Why do I want to make use of conversation as methodology for acquiring of new knowledge? Communicative acts in a shared lifeworld in the shape of a small public space is guiding throughout my entire doctoral thesis. As already mentioned, the pilot-project on the ‘Small Ugly Places’ comprises the main part of the context. The MIABE is the tool for acquiring the kind of knowledge I claim necessary to make participation happen. Two of my other MIABE related projects do, however, also contribute to the empirical part. One, is the ‘Slemdal’ project, the other is the ‘Råholt’ project. I wished to meet with former pupils from all three projects.

In all three projects, I have functioned as what in physical planning is called a facilitator or an enabler. I have, in all respects, been communicatively present ‘in the field’. Krogh speaks of the researcher’s role as a partner of cooperation as well as of conversation – a description covering my role in the reunion with the former participants of my precious projects (Krogh, 2004).

Nine years have passed since I last met with any of the pupils. They have become grown ups, or nearly so, and I have become a researcher. Did I wish to take on a new role, a role different

² My translation. ‘Værensrom’ is the concept used in Norwegian. This concept derives from Krogh (1995).

from the rather close relationship established during the projects? I did not, first and foremost because such an intimate way of collaboration reflects much of myself. Which methodological consequences would this entail? Krogh points at radical empiricism in which the point of departure is that; “self is a function of our meetings and interaction with others in a world of pluralistic and impressionable interests and situations” (Krogh, 2005b:1). The methodological consequence drawn from this, is that my interaction and conversations ‘in the field’ comprise the basis of what Krogh refers to as the creation of science³ by use of qualitative methodology (Krogh, 2005b:1). The presupposition of this is that the understanding which will be built in a text reflects my practical, personal and participatory experience. In the field, this implies my self being an observing participant ‘through native reflexivity’. Could I possibly manage to fulfil such preconditions?

I wished to prepare for a so called semi-structured conversation. This is an equivalent to what Kvale refers to as a qualitative research interview. In such conversations, the listening and reflection are significant and ‘in each other floating features’. The qualitative research interview (the conversation) builds upon active listening from the interviewee. What does active listening comprise, Østergaard asks? In short, it means that we are listening to those of the words carrying meaning, not listening to the words as sound or noise, carrying no significance (Østergaard, 2001:7). I soon realised this would become a challenge.

Is any conversation a piece of research?

Could any conversation be seen as research? Do all conversations contribute to the creation of new knowledge? Why conversation rather than a structured interview in the shape of questions? In my childhood home, we learned that questions were not a good way of conversation. Could this process of formation of mine possibly also be defended from a research point of view? Conversations based on questions might, slightly caricatured, be like this: How old are you now? When did you leave Råholt? Do you remember our project? The answers might easily be short and ‘final’ and probably contribute to limited new knowledge. Additionally they most likely could be categorised as what Østergaard speaks of as ‘quiz questions’⁴ (Østergaard, 2005). Such questions are recognised from not being researchable in the sense that they are facts. Kvale offers a good explanation of the difference between a research conversation and an ordinary conversation. He defines the former as an interview (conversation) aiming at obtaining descriptions from the lifeworld of the interviewee, in preparation for interpretation of the phenomena described (Kvale, 2002:21). A research conversation thus is defined as a professional conversation based on the everyday talk.

In what way would this claim influence the design of my conversation guide? The shaping of the research question became formative for the design of the semi-structured conversation guide. The questions were linked to my set of principles already arrived at;⁵ (i) the importance of making use of the details of the built environment as a point of departure for learning (ii) the importance of acquiring of an extended vocabulary linked to the built environment as well as from public administration. The latter is a tool for communication between the pupils as well as between the pupils and the different groups of adults forming part of the project. The final component, (iii) is practical experience with the participatory part of democracy.

³ ‘vitenskaping’ is the expression used by Krogh.

⁴ Østergaard, E. Spring, 2005. Personal communication. Fokhol gård.

⁵ those of which the previous pupils had had ‘user’ experience from, (and not the structural components).

Preparations for the conversations

To try and prepare for a pleasant introduction to our conversation, I wanted to present some project - specific memories to each of the young men and women I was going to meet with. As I still keep in store cardboard boxes full of project logbooks, letters, drawings, photos and more, all marked with the first name of the pupil, I succeeded in my search to find a piece of memory for nearly everyone. My questions prepared were few, and they were easy to adjust. The order proved to be of no importance. The conversation guide was used to a very limited extent. A test conversation is recommended for most practitioners of conversation as production of new knowledge. That I approve of. Ahead of the conversations, acting as an attentive listener seemed to become a major challenge. I was right. Did I listen or did I fall back into my previous role as a facilitator? From what can be heard of the tapes, I believe I went through all phases; from comparatively leading, to that of finding myself in a situation in which the dividing line between me as a researcher and that of my conversation partner apparently dissolved.

Starrin has developed a survey on what he refers to as a direction towards a theory on the difference between qualitative and quantitative analysis (Starrin and Svensson, 1994:23). The main features of qualitative analysis are aiming at identification of (i) not known or unsatisfactory known phenomena, (ii) characteristics and (iii) meanings concerning variations, structures, and processes.

My aim is, through conversations with former pupils, to let a 'fresh' perspective emerge on the question of a possible transmission value of the set of principles arrived at. Their views and ideas will represent a valuable contribution to my discourse deriving from the MIABE, the 'Small Ugly Places' and the theory of Communicative Planning respectively.

From a conventionally point of view, the analysis forms part of the method, following the collection of data. But, Østergaard asks, is it as simple as that within the methodology of conversation? He answers by pointing at different levels of analysis. (i) analysis of the design phase, (ii) the analysis within the conversation itself, (iii) empirical analysis of data and (iv) analysis throughout the writing process (Østergaard, 2004:3). Analysis within the conversation means asking interpretative questions. This is an active role. Analysis also means attentive listening.

My role

So, how did I perform in the role of the researcher in a research conversation? Did I master the situation? My intentions were the best and so was the will. Krogh makes use of a pair of concepts in which the conversation partner,⁶ indicate a shared activity (Krogh, 2005b:1).

I no doubt was acting during the conversation. My participation within the conversation is close to being concurrent with my participation in the various projects that is as an observing participant. Krogh claims that "In the same way, it is important to point at the fact that we ourselves are part of all phases of the research process. We are in it from the beginning to the end and we, more or less, also carry with us our dreams, wishes and ways of behaviour into these phases" (Krogh, 2005a:4). What was the sum of my own expectations and was I aware of the bringing or not bringing in of these in the conversations?

⁶ also called 'interaction partner'.

With my eyes wide open, I chose to do what Heidegger names inscribing yourself into the text. That is into the text, into the conversation and into the interpretation. The sum of my expectations was great. I very much looked forward to meeting with the former pupils. I looked forward to talk with them and I looked forward to learn to know about their views and ideas on my set of principles arrived at in my doctoral thesis. I looked forward to critical questions, ideas, and also to a possible confirmation of the way in which we had collaborated years ago. Had this collaboration possibly left anything of value to the youngsters, anything they had found useful, nice or informative? As during the project periods, I wanted first and foremost to act like the person I am, to be presently engaged. Knowing my strengths and weaknesses, I am aware of my tendency to overrule. This I do because of an eagerness to possibly arrive faster to the answer, and, once again, because of my lack of skill in listening. The one might be a consequence of the other and probably derives from my lack of patience combined with the joy of being part of the action.

Kvale lists a number of qualities that ought to be present in the interviewer. The interviewer should be clear, pleasant, sensitive, open, and guiding the direction, i.e. she should know what she wanted and she should be interpretative (Kvale, 2002:93). How I behaved myself is reported from in my thesis. Although I certainly did not fully possess of all the qualities recommended, I knew what I wanted, and the tapes reveal some interesting conversations. As with all other reflections, I assume a certain distance to the material is required. Somehow I have experienced the reflexive distance to work incrementally. This experience seem to be shared with the fourth of Østergaard's levels of analysis; the writing. Understanding and knowledge both come gradually, like with the appetite that arrives as you eat. To the extent to which I have not proven sufficiently critical to my own work, I expect this, too, to follow a certain critical distance similar to what I have experienced in the empirical part of my doctoral thesis in progress. Interpretation is the final component in the list of Kvale. Kjørup mentions what he cheerfully names the 'line of scholarly kings' within hermeneutics, starting with Schleiermacher early in the 1800 century and culminating after the Second World War by Heidegger's pupil, the philosopher Gadamer (Kjørup, 1996:276). The break between new and old hermeneutics is seen in the role of the interpreter who is now pulled along. One inscribes oneself into the text, concurrent with my own choice. Østergaard refers different approaches to interpretation. He claims that an analysis is built on an exact description of the phenomenon described, but it *overrides the purely descriptive*, by looking behind the phenomena described (Østergaard, 2004:3). On the "thing-in-itself",⁷ he asserts that this stands as the true motto of the phenomenology. Approaching the thing — in itself — was the point of departure of Husserl's aim to turn philosophy into science. Østergaard emphasises that it is not until the thing in itself is being viewed from different perspectives and through repeated views over time, that its "inner nature will reveal itself" (Østergaard, 2001:2). Krogh recommends that the researcher deepens her relation to the phenomena that is the thing in itself. I have in my doctoral thesis in progress made extensive effort to try and deepen my relation to the thing in itself, the thing being that of participation.

Interpretation — to what extent?

Here I do, however, meet with a problem. Before finishing the final chapter of my thesis, I have to take the following questions into consideration; how deep do I want the interpretation to go? How deep is it necessary to make the interpretation go to ensure the best of reliability? I feel confident in that the new knowledge evolving through the conversations will exceed the

⁷ 'saken selv'.

purely descriptive and thus fulfil the aim of interpretation of first level. Interpretation of first level is where the researcher interprets by virtue of his participation. The interpretation of the interviewee is comparable to the interpretation of the researcher. The researcher builds her interpretation on presence and participating observation (Østergaard, 2004:3). Whether or not this provides me with a necessary validity remains to be seen.

The ability to go deep into some material is Østergaard claims, a presupposition to the establishing of the formation of theory — as well as of concepts. Have I not already performed a deep diving into my thesis? I think I have, particularly concerning the concept of 'participation'. This has been the subject of deep dives as well as wide and shallow investigations, in theory and in practice.

In the final part of my doctoral thesis in progress more questions are raised than answers given — there is width more than depth. A bit 'supermarket like' perhaps, rather than a specialised delicatessen. The MIABE is designed to serve as a tool in a process. It is not after any 'right' answers, but stresses conversations and critical reflection.

Despite all this, following Østergaard's model of rationality would be a challenging experiment of mind (Østergaard, 2004:5). Although he underlines phenomenology being a slow and thus time consuming process, the following idea is a tempting one; I could, for instance, make conversations with the children and the young, in primary school, in connection to a practical project about the built environment. Then I could repeat the conversation sometime during secondary school, or with youngsters of 18-19. Maybe a conversation should also take place sometime like ten years later? What evolve from the deeper layers to the surface are, however, Østergaard claims, less tangible, and thus harder to put in wording.

According to Kvale, the research conversation, as opposed to 'everyday conversations', are, recognised from "... focusing on the dynamics of the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee, as well as of a critical attitude to what is being said" (Kvale, 2002:31). Such a dynamic was noticeable during my conversations, and would be rediscovered in my text. This, no doubt makes conversation much more challenging than expected. Additionally, more knowledge is produced. Analysis of the movements of the conversation might be read keeping different criteria in mind; did I follow the thread in the guide of the themes? Were new nuances heard in the messages? What was added, what was left out? How were new momentum picked up in the replies? In this way, analysis of the conversation might; 'meet with the moving character of the knowledge production'. Such moving methodology of analysis, Krogh claims, is linked to post readings of the conversation. Conversation with the conversation could be performed over and over again (Krogh, 2005:3). The purpose of such moving analysis is, as I have already mentioned, to give the data another chance 'before they go completely stiff'.

Reliability and validity

Reliability and validity are already referred to. If generalisation is added, then I get what Kvale names a "holy, scientific trinity" (Kvale, 2002:158) within modern social sciences, a trinity he, by the way, speaks of as positivistic. I find it comforting reading in Kvale that Lincoln and Guba more than twenty years ago made use of ordinary linguistic concepts in their discussions of the value of truth, reliability, trust, safety and confirmation. Kvale rejects the idea of an objective, universal truth. He does, however, accept the possibility of a specific

local, personal and societal kind of truth, focusing on everyday life and the local narratives (Kvale, 1992:34, 50). The concepts of reliability, generalisation and validity are not rejected, but are reconceptualised to become relevant for interview (conversation) within science. Understanding of the problems of verification begins, Kvale claims, within the lifeworld of man and their everyday speech. Reliable observations, generalisation from one case to another and valid arguments are part of our everyday social interaction. Reliability thus is the trust of the empiricism. As a researcher, I therefore have to ask myself; is the result arrived at based on subjective interpretations? The answer is yes.

A quick look into the remaining parts of Kvale's 'holy trinity' brings about the following questions; is the result arrived at valid, and could it possibly be generalised? I take it the validity might only be judged if someone wishes to walk my way the other way round? Do I practice so called pragmatic validity? Kvale claims that pragmatic validity is verifying in the literary sense — 'to make true'. To pragmatics, truth is what helps us act so that the result we desire is achieved. Knowledge is action more than observation and the efficiency of our knowledge is demonstrated by the efficiency of our actions (Kvale, 2002:173). In the pragmatic validity of a statement of knowledge, reason is replaced by application. A pragmatic concept of validity goes further than to communication. It represents a stronger knowledge claim than consensus through dialogue. It depends on observations and interpretations in which one is obliged to act according to grounds from the interpretations; 'actions mean more than words'. This is exactly what I want to do. I wish to contribute to making a change from the present situation. Today, participation is seen as a 'sleeping' advantage. Through my set of principles, I wish to assist in a possible change from this present stage. This requires a change in attitude from passive to so called active participation. By active participation I mean practical experiences from participation for all children like in my projects mentioned. Hopefully such participation might contribute to increase practical understanding of society and the skill to act. Thus an empowering of the children and the young might contribute to make them better prepared also in taking control over their own lives (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). When the bringing about of change is stressed, pragmatic knowledge interests counteracts the tendency of the social constructivism of walking round in endless circles of interpretation. Likewise, it might also counteract post-modern analysis being driven into infinite deconstructions (consensus based validity).

A division is made between two kinds of pragmatic validity; knowledge assertions followed by action, and knowledge assertions contributing to a change of action. The latter is the stronger of the two and concerns the question on whether or not interventions based on the knowledge of the researcher might create true behaviour changes (Kvale, 2002:174). The different kinds of pragmatic validity are varying, and might for instance be the interaction of cooperation between the researcher and the interviewee. A pragmatic approach contributes to truth becoming what helps us act so that the desired aim is achieved. The reliability of the researcher is in Patton accentuated as being important criteria (Patton, 1980). Kvale claims that according to a post-modern knowledge concept, the conversation about utilising of the knowledge forms an important part of construction of the social world. Rather than offering fixed criteria, the communicative and pragmatic validity refer to different ways of asking the question of validity. The aim should be research that makes the claim for validity superfluous (Kvale, 2004:177).

Østergaard points at the fundamental claims of reliability; (i) others might check what I have been doing and perhaps accomplish a similar study, (ii) transmission of the results would most likely be seen in relation to cases sharing essential common traits (in my case these

would be: children, the built environment, participation), (iii) the claim of the problem presented in the case and the results should involve current themes of the time (Østergaard, 1998:9-47). These claims should all be attended to, and openness to what is to come should be allowed. Generally, Østergaard claims, it is the analytical skill of the researcher that is decisive to whether or not the findings (of the case study) are of general validity (Østergaard, 2004:8). He claims that the selections of the case study should build up to a generalisation. It should, consequently, be representative in relation to the research question – as opposed to the selection of a survey which should be representative in relation to the population. How about the outline of patterns and possible new questions? Do I see any signs of an outline of pattern? It depends on what is understood by patterns. I choose to view this as one or more threads which every now and then find their own way, but which more often are seen working together. Such threads are operating throughout the whole of my doctoral thesis in progress and might be synthesised as; (i) children, (ii) the built environment, (iii) an extended vocabulary, (iv) democracy and participation. The threads strengthen their validity. They are elucidated from knowledge of different perspectives. I have been told that the ropes onboard the British Navy have a weft of red. This tradition derives from an ancient attempt made to more easily recognise the ropes, and also to prevent them from being stolen. In my case, the pattern might well be such a red weft. I take it a lack of patterns might be a kind of pattern, too?

What kind of patterns that might evolve from my conversations remains to see. I do, however, at the present stage, see the outlines of a shared approach from the previous ‘users’ of the MIABE, on many of its components. To my great pleasure, these are concurrent with those having been decisive for the formation of my set of principles arrived at. Surprisingly, I have also noticed that new questions keep evolving, and thus preparing the grounds for new conversations. Although I can see no possibilities for further action at this stage, it somehow proves part of a positive answer to my question raised in the heading of this article.

Conclusions

In my research question I asked if the knowledge emerged from conversations with former pupils could possibly indicate whether my set of principles arrived at are valid or not? Would they possibly serve the purpose intended? I claimed I was hoping for comments, ideas, and critique as a result from interaction with my young conversation partners. I was, however, never after any “right” answers. Reflections on own practice has, however, taught me the importance of distance. I therefore hope that the skill and the will shall swap places in my future writings and thus contribute to a possible further improvement in constituting of the basis for the children’s experience of the rights and obligations of the participatory part of democracy. Conversation as a tool development of new knowledge is a long, slow and time consuming process. Why should you prefer this particular research strategy to all the others? As the advert goes; “simply because you are worth it!”, and so is your conversation partner and your research. I see the utilisation of the research strategy described as a useful supplement to future research initiatives within the group of *Design Dialogue* – and outside.

My answer to the question asked initially would, therefore, be that the conversations reported from in my doctoral thesis in progress most likely shall give an indication to whether or not the developed set of principles are qualitatively good enough. To me this constitutes a fruitful point of departure in assisting the achieving of aims as well as strengthening of the set of principles already arrived at.

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Summary

I denne artikkelen har jeg beskrevet min egen erfaring med samtalen som redskap for kunnskaping i kvalitativ forskningsmetodikk, slik den brukes i antropologisk og pedagogisk forskning. Samtaler med elever som har deltatt i mine 'medvirkningsprosjekter' er valgt for å belyse siste del av mitt pågående doktorgradsarbeide *Room for Children's Participation? Reflections on own Communicative Practice*. Avhandlingens målsetting er å komme frem til et sett av prinsipper som muligens kan bidra til en praktisk prosess for å styrke barn og unges forståelse av demokratiet. Innledningsvis redegjør jeg kort for to av de tre kildene som ligger til grunn for utarbeidelse av de ovenfor nevnte prinsippene; (i) min modell for økt bevisstgjøring om de byggede omgivelsene, og (ii) om bruk av denne i pilot-prosjektet 'Forskjønningen av de små, stygge stedene'.