

# The many prepositions of practice research: About, for, in, with and from

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*Paper to 2nd International Conference on Practice Research, Helsinki, May 30-31 2012*

## 1 Introduction

Practice research (PR) has emerged as a viable research approach in several professions oriented domains; for example in social work (Pain, 2011; Salisbury Forum Group, 2011), public administration (Huxham, 2003), strategizing (Whittington, 2006), planning (Watson, 2002), nursing (Reed, 2006), information systems (Goldkuhl, 2011). There are several threads coming together within a practice research approach (Goldkuhl & Julkunen, 2011; Goldkuhl, 2011):

- Considering the empirical field in terms of practices
- Research dealing with topics that are highly relevant to practice
- An interest for what is actually going on in practices (not just what people think is going on)
- Inquiries are conducted dependent on problematic situations in practices
- An helping and guiding knowledge interest
- Collaboration with and involvement of practitioners in the research process

This paper builds on an earlier described structure and functionality of practice research (Goldkuhl, 2011). PR is here considered to consist of a continual interplay between the sub-activities of situational inquiry and theorizing. The purpose is to focus and conceptualise different relations (“prepositions”) between research and practice within a practice research approach:

- Research *about* practice (theorizing about practices)
- Research *for* practice (creating knowledge that is valuable for practices)
- Research *in* practice (a close study of practices with access to pertinent data)
- Research *with* practice (collaboration with practitioners in inquiry processes)
- Research *from* practice (knowledge is being built from what is going on in the practices)

A case study on evaluating information systems in social work is used for illustration. This evaluation study was part of a broader research on developing an evaluation method, for information systems, based on the ontology and epistemology of pragmatism (Lagsten, 2011).

## 2 Practice research – a basic conceptualisation

The study of different relations between research and practice is based on a conceptualisation of practice research. This conceptualisation is founded on *pragmatist epistemology* (e.g. Dewey, 1938; Argyris et al, 1985; Cronen, 2001) and it has emerged through a continual interplay between 1) theoretical reflection and articulation and 2) empirical applications (Goldkuhl, 2008; 2011). PR is considered to consist of two sub-activities of *situational inquiry* and *theorizing* (figure 1). It aims to contribute to one or more local practices, through situational inquiry, into their practical affairs. PR aims also to contribute to general practice through abstract useful knowledge that is also aimed for the research community.

A situational inquiry is conducted based on problems and needs in a studied local operational practice and it is based on initial and emergent research interests. Theorizing is conducted, as a sub-activity in PR, based on empirical data from the situational inquiry and also through the use of extant abstract

knowledge. A basic idea of PR is a continual interaction between situational inquiry and theorizing. Theorizing is serving situational inquiry with research interests and useful abstract knowledge. Situational inquiry is serving theorizing with empirical data. Through a situational inquiry contributions are made to the local operational practice. These produced local practice contributions (LPC) can be of different kinds. A local practice contribution can be a diagnosis, a design proposal or implementation of changes/new artefacts. PR (specifically its theorizing sub-activity) produces abstract useful knowledge for general practice, which is called general practice contribution (GPC). General practice should be interpreted as a special kind of abstraction. It should not be seen as *one* particular practice. When talking about general practice we mean *a set of different practices with relevant similarities*.

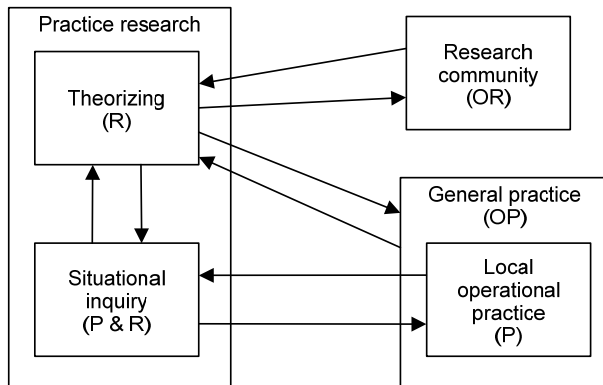


Figure 1. The anatomy of practice research

Studies into local operational practices means that practice research is usually performed as some kind of case study. Besides this, there exist different ways that practice research can be conducted (Goldkuhl, 2011). It can be performed as *evaluation research* producing an evaluation of some practice (Van der Knaap, 2004). It can be performed as *design research* creating artefacts aimed for practices (Hevner et al, 2004). It can also be performed as *action research* aiming for direct changes in practices (Susman & Evered, 1978).

### 3 Relations between research and practice in practice research

Practice research as a notion is built from two separate notions; research and practice. The constitution of this compound notion is built from different relations between the two constituting elements. The analysis of the linking between research and practice in practice research reveals five different relations. These relations can linguistically be expressed as prepositions between research and practice e.g. “research *about* practice”), which motivates the title of this paper. The relations can also be described by the use of attributive concepts, which will be done below when the different relations are discerned. We are clarifying five different types of relations between research/researchers and practice/practitioners.

#### 3.1 Research about practice

Practice research produces knowledge. It produces knowledge about some empirical field. The empirical field studied in PR is conceived as practice. This is an ontological stance. The practice is conceived as a whole. A practice is a meaningful ensemble of actors, their different actions, interrelated material, linguistic and institutional elements (Schatzki, 2001). A practice is shaped by humans as an organised, artificial and continually evolving arrangement. Practices are at the same time stable (in following institutions and routines) and changing. A practice is usually not self-contained. What is done in a practice is often done *in favour of some people* outside this practice, i.e. the clients of the practice (Goldkuhl & Röstlinger, 2006). Practices are related to other practices in different ways.

There might be client relations as mentioned above, but there might be other relations like e.g. governance, financing, instructing and assessing (ibid).

What is studied in practice research and what is said something about is conceptualised in practice terms. The relation between research and practice is a *designating* relation. Research produces knowledge that says something about practice.

### **3.2 Research for practice**

Practice research does not only produce knowledge about practices as such. It is not only a symbolic relation of the created knowledge to practice. PR produces knowledge for practice. This means a production of knowledge with the intent of that knowledge being valuable for practice (Benbasat & Zmud, 1999; Pain, 2011). In PR a distinction is made between general practice and local practice (Goldkuhl, 2011). PR must contribute to general practice (GPC). This can be done through knowledge that is formulated as practical theories (Cronen, 2001), models, methods or other types of constructive knowledge. This is founded on a basic attitude from pragmatism to *improve existence through knowledge* (Dewey, 1938). In PR abstract knowledge is created based on situational inquiries into local practices. Situational inquiries are driven by problematic situations in local practices and an interest to resolve such situations. This means that such inquiries may create knowledge (e.g. diagnosis or design proposals) that is valuable for the local practice (LPC). To be helpful in the local is a way to be helpful in the general.

The created knowledge in PR is aimed to be constructive knowledge, i.e. useful for practitioners. The relation between research and practice is a *helping* relation. Research produces knowledge that is intended to be valuable. This is the purpose of the produced knowledge.

### **3.3 Research in practice**

To conduct research about social practices in a serious way is hard to do at distance. Practices are complex and emergent phenomena. Without close studies of what is going on in practices it is hard to generate valid data. Practice research often means research in such practices. Researchers need to get *access* to data that disclose what is performed in local practices. It is often necessary for practice researchers to get *close* to the studied practice and arrange for access to what is not only immediately visible or reportable (Gummesson, 1991). What is going on in practices is seldom easily available from distant viewing. Researchers need to be *in practice sites*. It is hard to obtain a holistic view of the practice without close and mixed studies. Different complementary types of data generation methods should be used. Talking to people is of course valuable, but triangulating methods are needed since there might be a difference between what people claim they are doing and what they actually are doing (Argyris et al, 1985). To follow and even participate in the ordinary activities of the local practice might be necessary in order to generate valid data.

The created knowledge in PR should be based on valid data. For generation of such valid data about complex and emergent practices, researchers need to be in such practices. The relation between research and practice is a *participating* relation. Research about practices should, in parts, be conducted in such practices.

### **3.4 Research with practice**

In order to create knowledge about and for practices, there is usually a need for cooperation between researchers and practitioners. Collaboration can take different forms and be of different degrees (Pain, 2011). Practice research will often be performed as a combined effort of local practice improvement and abstract knowledge generation (Goldkuhl, 2011). An inquiry of how to improve a practice is hard to do without involvement of members of the studied practice. An informed study of values and purposes in the practice and possible means and improvement measures can be conducted through dialogue processes between practitioners and researchers. Researchers may contribute with outside

perspectives and fresh eyes on old problems. Collaboration between researchers and practitioners can also be generative for the process of abstract knowledge generation. Such abstract knowledge should not only be directed to academic audiences but also aimed as useful knowledge for general practice (Goldkuhl, 2011). Actors in a local practice can be a support for the generation of useful abstract knowledge. The first test of abstract knowledge is to see if it is useful in the studied local practice and the local practitioners can be helpful here.

Practice research is conducted through exchanges between research and practice. Researchers contribute to practice development and practitioners contribute to knowledge development. The relation between research and practice is a *collaborative* relation. Practice research is preferably conducted together with the practices studied.

### ***3.5 Research from practice***

The generation of knowledge about practices should be taken from practices in the sense that abstract knowledge is really built from what is going on in the practices (Fook, 2002) and not what researchers just think is going on. The thoughts, vocabularies and activities of practitioners are necessary building blocks for practice theorizing. Pivotal in PR is a situational inquiry conducted with the purposes to diagnose and possibly improve some local practice. Such a situational inquiry should be performed based on problems, goals and other data taken from the local practice. The research interests should thus be influenced by the local practice (Schein, 2001). The evolution of research interests and selected topics for inquiry can also be influenced from general practice, i.e. knowledge about practical problems and needs (Van de Ven, 2007). This is a way to develop research with high practical relevance (Benbasat & Zmud, 1999).

Practice research is driven by what is found problematic in local and general practices and is fuelled by real data from local practices. The relation between research and practice is a *generative* relation. Practice research is conducted based on knowledge from local and general practice.

## **4 Case study: evaluation of a social work information system**

This piece of research, an evaluation study, was performed at the social welfare services in a Swedish municipality where a preliminary design of an evaluation method was tested and refined in an evaluation of a Social Work Information System (SWIS) (Lagsten 2009, 2011). The SWIS was an off-the-shelf system from a large Swedish ERP vendor. The SWIS was used by approximately 350 social workers and had been in use for seven years. The system manager wanted to evaluate the system in order to make clear if the system satisfied the needs of the practice or if it was about time to terminate the system. The researcher had developed an initial design for an evaluation method that fitted the situation and identified that the SWIS evaluation was suitable for further refinement and validation of the evaluation method. The evaluation went on for one and a half year, the design were participative in nature, altogether there were about 70 persons participating in the evaluation process.

The *research was about two main practices*, the case handling practice and the evaluation practice, each practice with meaningful ensembles of actors, actions and interrelated linguistic and institutional material. Central actors in the case handling practice were social workers (in different fields). Social workers performed case handling promoting social change for vulnerable groups, the work included; problem solving together with caretakers, writing field notes, documenting investigations, making decisions on measures, assessing measures, making decisions on placements in institutions and residential care. The social workers carried out a large part of their activities, as documentation, decision making, and cooperation, through the SWIS using 40 to 60 % of their working hours with the system. The SWIS directed work in the respect that workflow, data, entries, semantics and regulations for cases were built into the SWIS. The other practice in the research was the evaluation practice. The researcher performed an evaluation of the SWIS “as a tool for case handling in the social care practice” (Lagsten 2007). The evaluation included: planning evaluation activities, understanding and describing the practice, identifying stakeholders, carrying out dialogue-seminars (focus groups),

analysing stakeholder concerns, interpreting and evaluating change needs, developing recommendations, reporting and informing on evaluation results. The aim of the evaluation was two folded 1) to evaluate the SWIS from different stakeholders' perspectives, the main question was if it was time to terminate the SWIS or if the current system satisfied the organisational needs, and 2) to test and refine an evaluation method based on the ontology and epistemology of pragmatism. Other sub practices, as managing units and maintaining the SWIS were also recognized within the research.

*The research was for the practice* since the aim was to produce usable results for the social work agency. Results for local practice were the evaluation results (descriptions, evaluative judgements, recommendations, operational knowledge) and also experiences of using the method. The researcher put an effort in framing results for practice, as adapting language, format and information of results, in order to be useful. The refined evaluation method is a result for the general practice of evaluation.

*The research was in the practice.* The evaluation was organised by the way of dialogue-seminars (similar to focus groups); altogether 16 dialogue-seminars were held with 8 different stakeholder groups (two each). These seminars were on site at the social service. The researcher also participated in regular meetings with the maintenance personnel, the social welfare committee and in the ordinary SWIS education. Evaluation information and results (e.g. working report from seminars) were successively published on the municipality intranet.

*The research was conducted together with the practice.* The researcher collaborated in the seminars with different stakeholders of the SWIS generating knowledge for improving different sub practices. This knowledge was immediately operational ("You get to learn new ways and shortcuts on how to handle the SWIS") and abstract due to the meta perspective of the SWIS generated ("It has contributed to reflective thinking about the SWIS"). An evaluation board was set up consisting of the researcher, the IS manager, the IS operations manager and maintenance people. The board assisted the evaluator with knowledge of the domain such as work content, documents, tools, laws, rules, routines and contacts as well as transforming evaluation design into evaluation activities. The researcher reported on the progress of the evaluation. Abstract evaluation design were discussed, tested and refined in collaboration were the researcher contributed with both practical and theoretical inputs on design and operation of evaluation and the board reflected back possible operations of activities as well as achieved benefits from made activities. The board also constituted a reflection area, paralleled with the dialogue-seminars the evaluation board interpreted reports from seminars and translated them into change requirements. Also more abstract models of problems, goals and conceptualizations of the SWIS were elaborated.

*The research was built on knowledge from the practice.* The informational base of the evaluation was the concerns of the SWIS held by its different stakeholders. Central organizers of stakeholder concerns were four specific questions, according to the evaluation method design; what do you do while using the SWIS? What problems do you perceive? What good does the system do for you? What are the goals you try to achieve? These four questions were elaborated in the dialogue-seminars. The evaluation method design was refined during the whole evaluation process; different method components were tested, discovered and adjusted due to their applicability and the needs detected in the evaluation process.

This research developed an evaluation method as contribution to the research community. The research was conducted through interplay between theoretical reflection and articulation of evaluation method design and empirical application. An articulated evaluation design was applied through situational inquiry into the practical affairs of social work. The evaluation contributed with useful knowledge in the local operational practice, the evaluation results and the method contribute with knowledge to other, general, practices with relevant similarities.

## 5 Conclusions

Practice research is a complex and ambitious research endeavour since practice research includes different subsets of knowledge creation and knowledge contribution in the research project. The practice research approach put demand on the researcher to organise and coordinate these different subsets. The anatomy (figure 1) of practice research is a viable tool for planning, organising and communicating practice research. The anatomy helps the researcher to structure and make explicit important activities and contributions from practice research.

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