PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE AS ACTION RESEARCH. THE SOCRATIC DIALOGUE METHOD AT NORWEGIAN FOLK HIGH SCHOOLS

LA FILOSOFÍA APLICADA COMO INVESTIGACIÓN-ACCIÓN. EL MÉTODO DEL DIÁLOGO SOCRÁTICO EN LAS UNIVERSIDADES POPULARES NORUEGAS

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Abstract: In this article the authors discuss whether and how philosophical practice in general and the Socratic dialogue method in particular can be understood, not only as a form of counseling or education, but also as a form of research. For this purpose references and comparisons to so-called participatory action research are made, on the one hand. On the other, by means of several short case studies, a project about Socratic dialoguing is presented, which was conducted at so-called Norwegian folk high schools and which should point out the inherent research-character of philosophical practice.
Keywords: philosophical practice, participatory action research, Socratic method, Norwegian Folk High School

Resumen: En este artículo, los autores discutirán si es possible, y cómo, la Filosofía Aplicada en general y el método del diálogo socrático en particular puede ser catalogados no solo como una forma de orientación o de educación sino, además, como un mecanismo para investigar. A tal fin, se articulan comparaciones con la, así denominada, investigación-acción participativa. Por otro lado, partiendo de un conjunto de pequeños casos, se presenta un proyecto

sobre diálogos socráticos. Éste se llevó a término en las universidades populares noruegas, lo cual pone de manifiesto el caracter investigador inherente a la Filosofía Aplicada.
Palabras clave: philosophical practice, participatory action research, Socratic method, Norwegian Folk High School

Introduction

Today, one can find a vast amount of publications on philosophical practice. By now, there is also a diverse range of methodologies in use within the field[1]. Nevertheless, since the "hour of birth" of philosophical practice, the discussion on what kind of activity it actually represents and how it can be defined, did not fall silent until today. For this reason, one of the guiding questions of this article reads: What is a philosophical practitioner actually doing, when performing philosophical practice – and to what extent can this activity be understood, not only as a form of counseling or education, but also as a form of research?

Philosophical practice as a counseling or educational activity

Since its beginnings in the early 1980ies, many practitioners proclaimed that philosophical practice is a counseling activity – so-called philosophical counseling. Other approaches, like the Socratic method after Leonard Nelson, or the so-called Philo Cafè as introduced by Marc Sautet, suggest philosophical practice to be more of an educational activity. The respective (academic) literature on philosophical practice, however, shows that

[1] see WEISS, Michael N. (ed.): *The Socratic Handbook. Dialogue Methods for Philosophical Practice,* LIT Publishing, Vienna, 2015.

understanding it either as an educational or as a counseling activity is both problematic.

There are several publications, which discuss the identity and uniqueness of philosophical counseling compared to psychotherapy, coaching, life counseling, pastoral care etc.[2] In our opinion, however, the respective literature on the matter remains inconclusive. In its essence there seem to be too little decisive aspects that would identify philosophical counseling – mainly practiced in one-on-one settings – as clearly genuine and different from other counseling approaches, like existential analysis or existential psychotherapy[3]. Furthermore, our personal and professional experiences over the last years, leads us to the question, whether philosophical counseling really deserves the name "counseling" or whether it actually is an activity of a rather different kind[4].

When understanding philosophical practice as an educational activity, then it is obviously not an educational activity in the traditional sense – though without any doubt certain philosophical practices can lead to learning effects with the participants. However, these effects are not the outcome or the result of *teaching* as we normally understand it. Rather, one can interpret the kind of learning achieved in philosophical practice in the sense of so-called

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[2] see i.e.: ACHENBACH, Gerd: "Philosophy, Philosophical Practice, and Psychotherapy", in LAHAV, Ran & TILLMANN, Maria da Venza (eds.): *Essays on Philosophical Counseling*, University Press of America, Lanham, MD, 1995. Or: LAHAV, Ran: "A Conceptual Framework for Philosophical Counseling: Worldview Interpretation", in: LAHAV, Ran & TILLMANN, Maria da Venza (eds.): *Essays on Philosophical Counseling*, University Press of America, Lanham, MD, 1995.

[3] see ibidem, p. 11

[4] see HANSEN, Finn Thorbjørn: "The Call and Practices of Wonder. How to evoke a Socratic Community of Wonder in Professional Settings", in WEISS, Michael N. (ed.): *The Socratic Handbook. Dialogue Methods for Philosophical Practice,* LIT Publishing, Vienna, 2015. p. 219f.

anamnesis. Anamnesis, as a certain form of learning, was presented in the Plato's dialogue *Menon*, where only by means of questioning and not by direct teaching Socrates succeeds in making a slave (who never received any previous training in mathematics) solve a geometrical problem.

One has to admit that many philosophical practitioners do neither refer to counseling nor to education when defining their work-approach. Often they rather refer to terms like critical thinking, existential reflection, philosophizing or dialoguing – but these activities are not necessarily unique to philosophical practice (i.e. existential reflection or dialoguing is done in other professions or disciplines too). To put it in other words, a teacher is supposed to teach, a therapist is supposed to treat, a counselor is supposed to counsel etc. – therefore the question is: What is a philosophical practitioner actually doing when she performs philosophical practice? To approach this question it is necessary to go into the specific context of this particular activity.

Philosophical practice as a research activity

Until now research in philosophical practice has been a rare phenomenon, so to say. This issue of the Haser journal is an "exception to the rule", being one of the few publications in which philosophical practice *and* research is discussed. In this article we would like to take it even a step further – our intention is to re-interpret philosophical practice *both* as a narrative-based method of investigation *and* as a research activity in itself. In order to do so, we will relate the so-called Socratic dialogue method to what is called participatory action research[5]. In the course of this article we

[5] see CHEVALIER, Jaques M. & BUCKLES, Daniel J.: *Participatory Action Research: Theory and Methods for Engaged Inquiry*, Routledge, London & New York, 2013.

will present several short case studies, which should exemplify how and why we understand philosophical practice as a research activity in general and a form of participatory action research in particular. However, before introducing these short cases, we would first like to make some theoretical and methodological remarks on the Socratic dialogue method.

The Socratic dialogue method after Leonard Nelson

Today many philosophical practitioners make use of the so-called Socratic method as developed by Leonard Nelson[6]. When conceptualizing it, Nelson's intention was to offer a dialogue method for groups in order to make the respective participants of such a dialogue (like students) *philosophize* about the topic at stake. A unique characteristic of this method is that it does not require any philosophical pre-knowledge with the participants. Another central aspect of the Socratic method is that the chosen topic, subject or phenomenon of the dialogue is investigated by means of concrete cases and experiences, formulated as narratives. A philosophical investigation performed according to the Socratic method consists of several steps, its most central ones are briefly summarized in the following.

The steps of a Socratic dialogue

First, a topic is chosen, preferably a philosophical term i.e. an ethical value like honesty, but it can also be a term like self-knowledge, meaning of life, etc.. Then the dialogue participants are

[6] see HECKMANN, Gustav: *Das sokratische Gespräch: Erfahrungen in philosophischen Hochschulseminaren,* Schroedel, Hannover, 1981.

invited to tell a personal memory-based story, in which they once experienced the topic at stake. In the next phase these narratives are reflected and investigated in order to make definitions what the topic means according to each narrative. Finally, the group tries to make a more general definition out of the definitions already made due to the different narratives.

Philosophizing by means of story-telling and experience-sharing

An important question, which comes up at this point is how and why such a dialogue can be called *philosophical*? As described previously, narrated experiences represent the starting point of a Socratic dialogue. From these specific cases the investigation leads deeper into the subject matter in terms of making definitions about what the topic at stake actually means. And it is this "movement" in the thinking process, which goes from the concrete (the personal stories) to the general (the general definition) – a characteristic which can also be found in the dialogues of Socrates – that makes such a dialogue philosophical: If one assumes that the activity of philosophizing means to reflect and investigate general aspects of the human condition (like empathy, freedom, the search for meaning, etc.), then such an activity is certainly performed by means of the Socratic method as described here (since general aspects of the human condition, like ethical values, are reflected by means of story-telling and experience-sharing). Moreover, with an emphasis on the term *to investigate*, one can already get a first idea of how and why the Socratic method can also be understood as a narrative-related and experience-based "research activity".

Forming a community of inquiry and *performing* narratives

A further characteristic of the Socratic method after Nelson is that the dialogue facilitator (often a philosophical practitioner) and the participants form a so-called *community of inquiry*, to use a term coined by Mathew Lipman[7]. In other words, the facilitator and the participants *investigate* a topic *together* – there is no expert-layman hierarchy, there are only "co-researchers" in a Socratic dialogue. This is the first way in which this dialogue setting relates to the practice-oriented research approach of *participatory action research,* as it will be described afterwards. The other way is concerned with performing the narrations, that is the plot-telling as such, which can be identified as action (which in the next instance turns into interaction between the dialogue participants).

Ricœur-inspired Socratic narratives

By analogy to Ricœur, the narrative process in Socratic dialogues may also be considered as a particular kind of action, understood as follows: "According to Ricœur, the work of art – including literary fiction – may be considered as a particular kind of *action*."[8] The question now is what kind of action is this narrative process in a Socratic dialogue about? In our opinion it is an action of self-reflection. For example, by answering a reflective question or sharing a story in the course of a Socratic dialogue, the storyteller

[7] see LIPMAN, Matthew: *Thinking in Education*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003. p. 84.

[8] BJØRSNØS, Annlaug: "Den lange veien til forståelse. Om Paul Ricœr og litteraturens epistemologiske funksjon", in *Norsk Litteraturvitenskapelig Tidsskrift*, Nr. 1, Vol. 15, Trondheim, 2012, p. 61.

herself can reach a revised understanding of herself. That means coming to a clearer or richer understanding of herself, or just starting to understand herself. To put it into more concrete terms: Such a self-reflective action is taken in the course of a Socratic dialogue, when i.e. a participant starts to ask herself : "What does the story that I just told (or heard) tell me about me?" Asking oneself such questions often happens unexpectedly with the participants, but it can bring revealing self-insights for the respective participant to the fore[9]. Such kinds of "actions" are of course neither foreseeable nor predictable in the beginning of a dialogue. But the presupposition in order to "perform" such self-reflections is to share personal narratives.

Furthermore, hermeneutics (that is the interpretation of a literary work, a narrative, a metaphor) and the self-reflective process of a Socratic dialogue seem to correspond with each other. The (trans-)formation (formation in the sense of "danning" in Norwegian) of the self, reflected in the "telling" of the respective narratives and the resulting changes in self-understanding happen simultaneously. But it seems to be the latter that is the object, the phenomenon of a Socratic dialogue in the sense of research.

The actions of Socrates – philosophical midwifery and irony

The term Socrates used to describe his way of conducting dialogues was *maieutics* – the art of midwifery of the soul. The self-image of Socrates was the one of a midwife assisting a pregnant soul in the birth process – an image, in which one certainly can find similarities to counseling activities. However,

[9] see HANSEN, Finn Thorbjørn: "The Call and Practices of Wonder. How to evoke a Socratic Community of Wonder in Professional Settings", in WEISS, Michael N. (ed.): *The Socratic Handbook. Dialogue Methods for Philosophical Practice,* LIT Publishing, Vienna, 2015. p. 219f.

when one takes a closer look at what the figure of Socrates was actually doing in those dialogues, it was far more than counseling. Rather, it was to investigate a topic, a term or a phenomenon together with his dialogue partners, simultaneously as giving birth to new stages of self-insight among these adepts.

Investigation and formation

At this point, two key-aspects of the Socratic method have come to the fore: *investigation* and *formation* ("Bildung" in German), both approached *simultaneously*. In other words, in his dialogues the role of Socrates was not the one of a traditional teacher, nor the one of a counselor – it was the one of a researcher and a releaser. However, the relationship between Socrates and his dialogue partners was not constituted according to a researcher/interviewer role model. Rather, he saw *both* himself as well as his dialogue partners as investigators or "co-researchers" and partakers in the "birth process". At first sight we have to admit that this does not sound convincing, since Socrates often introduced himself as a layman on the matter and his dialogue partner as an expert. However, according to Sæverot this attitude of Socrates is not only a trick to "lure" his opponents into a deeper investigation of the subject matter[10]. His saying that "I know nothing except that I nothing know" conceals a double meaning, pointing directly to the intrinsic structure of his philosophical midwifery method and the "judgmental" aspects of the formation processes. With this not-knowing-attitude Socrates tries to give his adepts a definite "push" towards self-reflection in the sense of "Know thyself".

[10] see BRUNSTAD, Paul Otto, REINDAL, Solveig Magnus & SÆVEROTH, Herner (eds.): *Eksistens og Pedagogikk*, Universitetsforlaget, Oslo, 2015.

With the role of Socrates as a "co-researcher" in mind, and self-reflection as a specific action in the course of a Socratic dialogue, we would like to continue with a research approach, which comes from outside traditional philosophy and science.

Action research

In general terms, action research represents a form of research, which has the explicit aim to solve a particular problem and to produce guidelines of best practice[11]. In other words, action research is solution- and practice-oriented. In simple terms, action research investigates certain actions, which are performed in a certain context. It can be undertaken in smaller groups like teams, but also in larger organizational structures like in educational institutions, companies and even in local communities, which face a particular problem. Often, this type of research is performed for the purpose of reflecting, changing and improving a given situation (like improving certain strategies or practices). People involved in action research processes are sometimes also called *communities of practice*[12] – a concept which additionally is rooted in the *community of inquiry* approach as introduced in American pragmatism[13]. Therefore it is also based on experience-sharing by means of story-telling. In this way, the challenges we meet in action research can also involve problems of ethical nature (i.e. social predicaments) or problems in a socio-pedagogical context (i.e. issues concerning "understanding-the-self-and-the-other").

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[11] see DENSCOMBE Martyn: *Good Research Guide: For small-scale social research projects*, Open University Press, Berkshire, GBR, 2010. p. 6.
[12] LAVE, Jean & WENGER, Etienne: *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991.
[13] see LIPMAN, Matthew: *Thinking in Education*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003. p. 84.

The *community of inquiry* concept and participatory action research

As we have seen, the community of inquiry concept plays not only a central role in the Socratic method, but also in action research – especially in a certain type of action research called *participatory action research*. The term *participatory action research* was introduced by Kurt Lewin in the 1940s[14]. It intends to point out the unique feature of this form of research: research should not be done "on" or "for", but "with" people. In the introduction of their anthology *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research*, Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury state that "communities of inquiry and action evolve and address questions and issues that are significant for those who participate as co-researchers."[15] In this way, like in the Socratic method after Nelson, also participatory action research dismisses traditional expert-layman hierarchies (which is often in place in other forms of research) and replaces it with a researcher/co-researcher setting. The underlying assumption here is that not only researchers possess valid knowledge, methods and capabilities in order to reflect and to solve a certain problem, but so do the people too, who are directly concerned with this problem (either at work, schools, hospitals, local communities etc.).

Participatory action research and Socratic dialoguing

[14] see LEWIN, Kurt: "Action Research and Minority Problems", in *Journal of Social Issues*, Nr. 2, Vol. 2, 1946. Pags. 34–46.
[15] REASON, Peter & BRADBURY, Hilary (eds.): *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2008. p. 1.

Applied in business organizations, in educational contexts and in local communities, participatory action research intends to integrate the following three aspects: participation (life in society and democracy), action (engagement with experience and history) and research (soundness in thought and the growth of knowledge)[16]. In the further course of this article we will point out how and why these three aspects of participation, action and research are also of central relevance in Socratic dialogues.

In order to do so, we would like to present several short case studies in the following. These studies are supposed to exemplify and corroborate our interpretation of philosophical practice as a philosophical "version" of participatory action research. These case studies will present different Socratic dialogues, which were performed in the course of an educational project in which philosophical practitioners trained teachers from Norwegian folk high schools. The purpose of this project was that these teachers acquire the necessary skills to facilitate Socratic dialogues at their schools. However, before we go into the short case studies, we would like to make some general remarks about Norwegian folk high schools, since they represent unique and quite different educational institutions compared to the conventional education system.

The movement of Folk High Schools

So-called folk high schools have a long tradition in the Scandinavian countries (there are about 70 folk high schools in Norway alone). Their founding father was the Dane N.F.S. Grundtvig, whose pedagogical ideas were disseminated early in the

[16] see CHEVALIER, Jaques M. & BUCKLES, Daniel J.: *Participatory Action Research: Theory and Methods for Engaged Inquiry*, Routledge, London & New York, 2013.

19th century. His specifications on what a folk high school should be can be found on the common website of the Norwegian folk high schools[17]. Here is a short summary:

Grundtvig is the Danish ideological father of the folk high schools, though his own ideas on education had a broader focus. He was a typical representative of the Enlightenment, and the common denominator of all pedagogical efforts of Grundtvig was to promote a spirit of freedom, poetry and disciplined creativity, within all branches of educational life.

Grundtvig's idea of a folk high school was a *school for life*, different from the traditional Gymnasium. The keyword was enlightenment of the spirit, and the most important component was the free, animated communication between teacher and students in and outside the classroom. According to Grundtvig, the dialogue was the unique method of the "curriculum", which also comprehended everyday life as a learning arena. The sole aim was life enlightenment ("livsopplysning" in Norwegian). When it came to human life, students and teachers were equal. He promoted values such as wisdom, compassion, identification and equality and opposed all compulsion, including exams, as deadening to the human soul. Instead Grundtvig advocated to unleash human creativity according to the universally creative order of life. Therefore a spirit of freedom, cooperation and discovery was to be kindled in individuals, in science, and in the civil society as a whole.

On the same website one can also find information about what the schools are like today and what they focus on[18]:

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[17] see FOLKEHØYSKOLENE: "Hva er folkehøyskole?" available in HU http://www.folkehogskole.no/hva-er-folkehogskoleUH (last access October 16th, 2015).

[18] see also OHREM, Sigurd & HADDAL, Odd (eds.): *med livet som pensum. danning og læringsprosesser i folkehøgskolen*, Cappelen Damm, Oslo, 2011.

> Folk high schools are one-year boarding schools offering a variety of exciting non-traditional and non-academic subjects, as well as academic subjects. The idea of folk high schools is learning for life, an opportunity to grow both individually, socially, and academically in small learning communities. All students live on campus in close contact with staff and their fellow students. One important part of the folk high school experience is to form a community, in and out of class. […] The folk high schools do not grant degrees or conduct exams, the aim is to provide a formative (Bildungs) year, nurturing "the whole person". By taking away the pressure of grades and exams, you learn to motivate yourself. You choose the topics that interest you, for instance theatre, outdoor life, music, creative arts, media and communications, philosophy. Folk high schools are separate from the rest of Norway's education system. Students can be any age and can have any level of educational experience. Indeed, these are schools for all people, all "folk"[19]

Introduction of the short case studies

With this conceptual background of folk high schools in mind, we would like to introduce the previously mentioned short case studies about different Socratic dialogues, which took place in a teach-the-teachers course on Socratic dialoguing at this type of schools. In 2013 the course was held for the first time, and it lasted for a period of one year. About 35 teachers participated and about 10 philosophical practitioners conducted training. The schedule included two full days of general meetings with all participants and all practitioners, a full day of regional meeting and two full days of local meetings. In the general meetings at the beginning of the

[19] FOLKEHØYSKOLENE: "What is Folk High School?" available in HUhttp://www.folkehogskole.no/site/main/les_mer.php?page_id=357UH (last access October 16th, 2015).

course lectures on the Socratic method and philosophical practice were given, on the one hand. On the other, participants could get first experiences with the Socratic method, since the philosophical practitioners were facilitating respective dialogues in small groups. In the regional meeting one of the philosophical practitioners facilitated a Socratic dialogue with the teachers of 2-4 schools, which participated in the course. Here the goal was to go further into the method by means of a learning-by-doing approach. In the local meeting the teachers who participated in the course had to facilitate Socratic dialogues at their own schools – supervised by one of the philosophical practitioners. The general meeting at the end was mainly used to share experiences, which were made during the course. Cases and certain situations, which occurred during a dialogue could be discussed in plenary. The purpose was to get feedback as well as new ideas, in addition to go further into still open questions.

According to Grundtvig dialogues are the unique method of the "curriculum", which also comprehended everyday life as a learning arena[20]. Because of this it was clear from the start of this course that the Socratic dialogues, which had to be performed and supervised, would not be offered as an additional school subject. Rather, the idea was to integrate them into the everyday life at the schools, like into ongoing classes, project days, staff meetings etc. A Socratic dialogue could for instance be conducted together with students in order to reflect on experiences made during an outdoor activity or a school trip abroad, with regards to the existential and ethical learning effects these experiences might have had on the students. Another possibility was to do Socratic dialogues with the teaching staff in order to develop and implement core values or new teaching strategies. On other occasions the Socratic method

[20] see FOLKEHØYSKOLENE: "Hva er folkehøyskole?" available in HU http://www.folkehogskole.no/hva-er-folkehogskoleUH (last access October 16th, 2015).

was applied with the purpose of team building. In the following, several cases are presented in which Socratic dialogues were performed – these cases should also give a first glimpse of how and why philosophical practice can be understood as a philosophical "version" of participatory action research.

Case 1: Implementing core values by means of the Socratic method

The first case is about a Socratic dialogue that was performed at a school, which is owned by the municipality. The fact that the municipality is the owner of the school is important, because at a certain point the leaders of this municipality decided to develop new core values and mission statements. After this development-process was finished and new core values and mission statements were "on the table", a campaign was started in which all entities of the municipality were invited to implement these values and mission statements in their respective field of work. Now developing core values can be hard work, but implementing them can be even harder. The teaching staff of the respective folk high school knew that they had a difficult task to fulfill, because only putting up banners on the schoolyard with the core values printed on them would not do the job. The task included two main challenges. The first was how to actually implement core values, which were given to the school from outside? And the second, how to do this implementation in a way so that it would fit the school culture? Soon the idea came up to combine this task with the teach-the-teachers program on philosophical practice and to perform Socratic dialogues on each of these values (these dialogues were part of the course mentioned above and facilitated by one of the teachers as well as supervised by a certified philosophical practitioner). In this way, the dialogue participants (which finally were both members from the teaching and the administrative staff as well as students) could share experiences by which they

experienced the value at stake. One of these dialogues, for example, was on the topic of "professionalism", which was one of the core values to be implemented. Here the participants shared personal stories, which all started with "Once I experienced professionalism, when…" Most of these stories were about experiences made at the school. The result – the finding of this investigation, so to say – was how the value "professionalism" *already was* and *can actually* be practiced at the school. In other words, instead of discussing how professionalism *should ideally* be practiced, the participants of the dialogue came up with concrete examples of *best practices* by means of storytelling. In addition, the dialogue resulted in a common and more general definition and understanding of what professionalism actually means (at the school).

With regards to participatory action research, we would like to summarize this case as follows: A school was confronted with the task to implement a set of core values, which was given to them from outside, namely from the municipality. However, there were no strategies offered on how to do that. Since the school culture of a folk high school leaves little room for top-down approaches, it was clear from the beginning that the implementation process would have to include both the teaching and administrative staff as well as the students in a rather democratic manner. Since it was not clear how to do the implementation, it seemed to be natural to tell each other stories in which these core values were once experienced and practiced. An advantage here was that many of these experiences were made at that school, because in this way the participants became aware of how these values were already practiced there. In the course of the Socratic dialogue certain best practices came to the fore. Since these practices were communicated in the form of stories, they were also easy to be remembered (simply because stories are much easier to remember

than i.e. plain theories or guidelines)[21]. However, what has to be mentioned is that it was not the direct goal of this Socratic dialogue to find and to develop best practices – the main goal was first and foremost to investigate this set of values by means of a philosophical-practical approach. And maybe this is also one of the main differences between action research and philosophical practice, that the latter is not focusing on finding solutions to a problem, but rather to reflect and to investigate the problem together with those who are concerned with it. That such investigations and self-reflections often lead to concrete actions, however, is undoubtedly the case. In this way, and as this previous case has shown, the three aspects of *participation* (all staff and students have been involved in the dialogue process), *research* (the core values have been investigated together and self-reflection was performed on how each participant of the dialogue could practice this value on his or her own) and *action* (in the form of best practices but also in the form of the dialogue itself) have been present in this dialogue.

Case 2: Team building through philosophizing about the practice of pedagogical and educational ideals

In the next case a Socratic dialogue setting is described in which both the teaching staff as well as the administrative staff from one school participated. It has to be mentioned that the administrative staff not only included the secretaries, but also the staff from the school kitchen as well as the school caretakers. The reason for this was that at this folk high school the opinion was shared, that not only the teaching staff but also the administrative employees

[21] see HEATH, Chip & HEATH, Dan: *Made to stick. Why some ideas survive and others die*, Random House, New York, 2007.

contributed essentially to what can be called formation ("danning" in Norwegian) with the students, which is the overall goal of all folk high schools: "The aim is to provide a formative (Bildungs) year, nurturing "the whole person"."[22] One could also call this the pedagogical and education ideal of Norwegian folk high schools. Since in former times there was a rather strict distinction at folk high schools between the teaching staff and the administrative employees (a distinction which of course had an influence on the school culture as such), several measures had been taken at this respective school to unite these different "leagues" into a common team. One of these measures was that both the teachers and the administrative employees started to share a common staff room, where they would also have lunch together. This did not only foster the dialogue and the exchange between the two "leagues", but it was also a clear sign that both the teaching staff and the administrative staff were equally important. Though the teachers and the administrative employees had different tasks to fulfill at their work, the idea was introduced that they still were working towards a common goal, namely formation with the students. This was a first step in the team building process (that is, uniting the two "leagues"). To go further into this process several other measures were taken over the years, and one of them was to perform a Socratic dialogue with all staff members on the question "Hva er god danning?" (in English "What is good formation?"). The overall goal of this Socratic dialogue was not to find a common definition of what good formation would be (this was rather seen as a natural outcome of the dialogue), but to hear, share and philosophize about stories, in which good formation was experienced. Because in this way the staff members would learn from each other how and by what means the process of formation was fostered in their different

[22] FOLKEHØGSKOLENE: "What is Folk High School?" available in HUhttp://www.folkehogskole.no/site/main/les_mer.php?page_id=357UH (last access October 16th, 2015).

work contexts. In this case, however, the dialogue was not necessarily about best practices that were developed. Rather, this Socratic dialogue represented a collective self-reflection process in which the whole group and the whole team could become aware of the different situations at the school in which formation with the students was actually fostered. To philosophize about how the common goal of formation can be fostered in everyday life situations at the school, i.e. when cleaning the tables in the dining hall together with the students, and what formation in this context actually means, turned out to be quite fruitful for the team-building process among the staff members.

First, because the staff members did not exchange on an everyday basis in what exact way they would contribute to their overall goal. Therefore, in this Socratic dialogue the different approaches and practices were not only voiced and heard, but also appreciated by the other team members (in this way, the *participation* aspect of participatory action research was included). Secondly, the different stories unveiled a bigger picture of the potential learning areas for formation, which the school as such had to offer (this was the result of the *research*, so to say – the second aspect of participatory action research.). This bigger picture, however, only became meaningful when each staff member of the school performed a self-reflective action so to say, namely self-reflection in the sense of the question "What are my resources, my potentials – in terms of attitudes, ideas and social skills – to help unleash the potentials that the school as a whole is offering, in order to promote the over-all goal (that is formation with the students)?" In other words, the third aspect of participatory action research – which is *action* – received a double meaning here: On the one hand, it was about performing self-reflection (and here the narratives told in the dialogue became a vital resource for this type of action). On the other hand, it was about becoming aware of potential actions (as a result of self-reflection), which the respective

staff member could undertake in order to contribute to the overall goal (which was formation).

Case 3: Experience-sharing between colleagues form different work places

The last short case is about one of the regional meetings as described previously. At this meeting ten teachers from four folk high schools participated. The Socratic dialogue, which was performed in this meeting was facilitated by two certified philosophical practitioners. The teachers were in the role of participants. One of the goals of this dialogue was to make the teachers more aware of the respective steps and procedures of such a dialogue, so that they could facilitate Socratic dialogues on their own in the upcoming local meetings. The topic of the dialogue was courage, and the teachers were sharing many different stories where they once experienced courage at their schools. The outcome of this dialogue was not only a general definition of courage. But rather, the actual benefit of this dialogue was that by means of story-telling the teachers could become more familiar with each other, as well as familiar with certain educational practices from other schools (the teachers did not know each other at all, or at least not very well). Especially the latter aspect seems to be important for the educational idea of folk high schools: Courage is not just one of the cardinal virtues of Aristotle, but developing virtues with the students is seen as an essential aspect of formation at folk high schools. Now, sharing experiences where someone acted courageously at one school was understood by the other teachers in the sense of "leading by example" – and "leading by example" can be seen as a guiding educational principle at folk high schools. And last but not least, this case shows that the Socratic dialogue method is a suitable approach to make people, who do not know each other

from before, *philosophize together* and to share stories with each other – something which should not be taken for granted.

In order to point out how this particular dialogue relates to the three central aspects of participatory action research (*participation, action* and *research*), we would like to start with the aspect of research: *Research* in this dialogue was done in the sense that the participants were *investigating* an ethical value *together* – they were *philosophizing* about it (that is, doing philosophical research, so to say). *Participation* was in place since all dialogue participants were sharing stories and reflecting on them – all of them were engaged and involved in the dialogue process. In contrast to these two aspects, which seem to be rather obvious, was the third aspect: *action*. The actual action that was performed in this dialogue was not planned or intended, it just happened incidentally – it was “to get familiar with each other”. At first sight this might not appear like an action, however it can be understood as a form of social *inter-action*, which is vital for any kind of dialogue: “To get familiar with each other” is a necessary prerequisite for the so-called *togetherness*, which seems to be an indispensable element in any form of dialoguing. Only when this togetherness between the dialogue partners is established, the ethical values of trust, honesty and authenticity (which seem to be essential for the course of a dialogue) can start to evolve.

Socratic dialogues as philosophical “versions” of participatory action research

By means of these three short case studies we intended to point out how the three main aspects of participatory action research (namely *participation, research, action*) are also present in Socratic dialogues, and hence, why and how the Socratic dialogue setting can also be understood as a research setting. In this regard, the

community of inquiry concept, which is central in a Socratic dialogue setting, plays a decisive role: The dialogue participants (those who are concerned with a certain topic, like certain core values in the context of their work) and the dialogue facilitator (the philosophical practitioner) form an investigative fellowship of "co-researchers", so to say. In a *community of inquiry* there is no expert-layman-hierarchy, neither is there a counselor-counselee role model in place, there is no teacher and no students. In a Socratic dialogue the philosophical investigation – the research, so to say – is not done "on" nor "for" but "with" people. The philosophical practitioner is seen to be "on eye level" with the dialogue participants – practitioner and participants are philosophizing *together*. Therefore, if people who are involved in action research processes are also called *communities of practice*[23], then the people involved in a Socratic dialogue could be called *communities of philosophical practice*.

The "research objects" of Socratic dialogues when understood as participatory action research

As all these three short cases above show, the research objects of a Socratic dialogue are not objects of research in a traditional sense (as cancer or global warming would be, for example). The research objects of a Socratic dialogue are rather phenomena constituted by the language employed within the dialogues (i.e. ethical values). The phenomenon or term under investigation comes to life in and through the dialogues – especially through the narratives, which are shared and which constitute the initial and decisive part of such dialogues. In other words, the research object of a Socratic dialogue

[23] see LAVE, Jean & WENGER, Etienne: *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991.

when understood as participatory action research is the Socratic dialogue itself, and the phenomena, which are occurring through it – in short: the story-telling as such is the actual action which is investigated. The question now is, what can be the result of such an investigation? Here another reference to more traditional action research comes to the fore: action learning.

Socratic dialogues as action learning

The short case studies as presented here were about Socratic dialogues, which had certain learning effects on the participants – even though most of these effects were neither intended nor planned. Nevertheless, when understanding Socratic dialoguing as a specific form of action, then one can say that the participants of the previously presented dialogues learned something by means of telling narratives and reflecting them philosophically. However, the decisive point is: What the participants learned cannot be taught, so to say. Through self-reflection and self-insight the participants learned about certain values, attitudes, mindsets and how they can transcend, transform and even further develop and apply them *in practice*. The outcome of such an action-oriented learning process is not *knowledge* (which would be the goal in traditional forms of research), rather it is what one could call *awareness* (i.e. the awareness of how to practice an ethical value in a given situation). In this way, one could also call a Socratic dialogue to be socio-pedagogical in nature.

Differences between Socratic dialoguing and action research

There are of course also main differences between Socratic dialoguing and participatory action research. Participatory action

research often has a very specific goal, i.e. to solve a certain problem together with the people who are directly concerned with that problem. A Socratic dialogue, on the other hand, is not necessarily goal-oriented. This, however, can also be seen as one of the advantages of the Socratic dialogue setting: Problems are investigated, reflected and seen from different perspectives without the direct intention to solve these problems – and only because of this "intention-free" approach, completely unexpected and genuine ideas on the problem can appear (which then often can be "translated" into solutions). In other words, in a Socratic dialogue you learn to "let go" of a problem – and often it is exactly this "letting go"-attitude, which leads to valuable (self-)insights, and eventually even to unexpected and ground-breaking solutions. But this, again, is a side effect of a Socratic dialogue, so to say, whereas in participatory action research it would be an explicit goal.

Concluding questions instead of concluding remarks

Instead of making concluding remarks at the end of this article, we would rather like to pose some concluding questions. This simply seems to be more natural in the context of philosophical practice, since authentic philosophizing often leads to further questions than to final conclusions. The questions below may not be so easily understood by those readers who never participated in a Socratic dialogue, since they represent questions, which came to us after and during several years of experience with Socratic dialoguing. Nevertheless, or just because of these years of experience, they *feel* important to us.

In this paper we have, among other things, taken a closer look at the interactive processes unfolding between the participants of a Socratic dialogue. This leads us to our first question: What happens when our personal narratives – and with that also our thinking and

telling about ourselves – are put to play in a socio-pedagogical context, in which stories are imparted, recreated and elaborated by a community of inquiry? To be more precise: Are there any remains of individuality left in the totality of disseminations, comparisons of stories and after the interactive "thickening" and elaboration of these stories? And if it is so, how are they expressed?

Another question is about an aspect of Socratic dialoguing, which could be called "re-remembering": What is phenomenologically happening when we "re-remember" (that is having the story present in mind after we told it), and how does this interact with and is influenced by the verbal storytelling? On the phenomenological level we talk about how stories are created, starting from personal experiences, and how these stories are formed by the act of recollection and creation. So the next question is: How does this kind of recollection and creation relate to other kinds of recollection and creation like writing, dramatization, visualizing, which represent other ways of reproducing memories? A question, which is also about the relation and interaction between storyteller and audience, that is, the specific ways the stories are told to and received by a story-telling and inquiring audience.

The last group of questions has been (and is) one of the most important from a philosophical point of view: When an ethical subject is chosen and the story is elaborated based on this subject (for example, "What does it mean to be brave?"), then in what ways is this story, and its particular parts, relevant in regards to the understanding and practical application of the virtue in question (in this case the virtue of courage)? Furthermore, another interesting question in a Socratic dialogue is how conclusions based on the descriptions of the selected story can shed light on the others' stories. To which extent is there a correlation between our existing, common (pre-)understanding of, for example, the virtue of courage and individual stories about it (also those which are not shared in

the respective Socratic dialogue) – and the other way around? In other words, is common sense also operating in the realms of narratives, because the connection seems to be very close?

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