

# Community Engagement and Action Research

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Wilson, Patrícia (2019). *The Heart of Community Engagement: Practitioner Stories from Across the Globe*. London & New York: Routledge.

## A learning journey

I offer these stories as a mirror for community-engaged professionals to reflect on their own practice as catalysts for sustainable community development and social justice. The readers may see themselves and their work in these stories and draw their own meanings from them. Practitioners will likely recognise many of these turning points in their stories (p. 4)

This quotation from the Introduction captures the spirit that guides Patricia Wilson's thinking and writing in the book. The stories she shares with us are presented as "parables for learning". A parable, as we know, is an instructive example, a comparison that entails lessons that connect with our daily life experience. It is this apparent simplicity that makes the reading so captivating and inspiring. I say apparent because, as with parables, the stories lead us to deep reflections on what we do, and how we do it, when we engage in research or in transformation projects.

The book is structured as a journey. In the first part, "The Journey Begins", we have two practices from Latin America where practitioners are confronted with questions and dilemmas, faced while beginning a change process in their communities. Patricia helps us to reflect on how to deal with defensiveness, with distrust within a divided neighborhood, with dissention and opposition. However, it is not only a beginning for local practitioners and community leaders. It is also a beginning for the "outsider" who constantly asks herself about her role in these places. In the case of the "Cabildo Abierto" (Open Municipal Council) in El Salvador, Patricia realised that it was necessary to build the awareness of a bigger picture while conducting *dialogic interviewing*. The name she gave to this larger social, historical, cultural and economic picture is *issue ecosystem*. This is just one example of how Patricia uses reflexivity in her research practice for developing relevant concepts, and contributing to theory building in action research.

The second part of the book, “Going deeper”, is made up of stories of facilitation and leadership in community engagement, by practitioners with a consolidated professional and vocational trajectory. On their way, there were difficult choices to be made, there were mistakes and learnings, and there was pain and joy. I understand that Patricia regards this part as the heart of the book, not only because of eventual positive outcomes of the involvement, but because it takes us to what really matters for persons and communities who embark in movements for social and environmental justice. In “Building Deep Democracy in South Africa’s Shantytowns” she sums up Charlotte’s transformation experience as a participant of South African Homeless People’s Federation in four key turning points:

“I can” – the awareness that I can do something to change my situation, that I am not powerless and isolated.

“I care” – the awareness that I am part of an ever-widening circle of community, and that I feel a sense of responsibility for that widening circle.

“We can” – the realisation that together we can find our voice and engage the powers ‘out there’ to make big changes in our community.

“We care” – and ultimately, we feel a sense of solidarity and stewardship not just for our own community, or even other communities like ours, but for those communities and institutions that we used to perceive as ‘others’. (p. 112)

This quote about Charlotte’s experience is representative for many other stories told by Patricia. There is always a personal commitment to the process: it has to do with me: “I can”, “I care”. In this sense, when presenting the case from India, “Collective Reflection in Rural India”, one of the key takeaways is that development from below is not enough. “The key for sustained social change is development from within: i.e., a change in individual and group consciousness” (p. 149). At the same time, there is always a participatory and collective dimension inherent to the change processes. The “I can” and “I care” go hand in hand with the “We can” and “We care”. It is not a matter of what comes first, since the I and the We are constituted in the same engaged change process.

Besides the examples from South Africa and India mentioned above, there are stories from community peace-building efforts in Colombia, and from a participatory research process in peri-urban Mexico. Part 2 closes with a call for “Engaging Global Community with Depth and Breadth”, when Patricia shares the result of six hours of recorded interviews with Otto Scharmer<sup>1</sup> about his personal journey, and about his theory for understanding and building the foundations for societal transformation on a global scale. Based on multidisciplinary studies, Scharmer’s Theory U advocates “presencing”, as opposed to “absensing/hubris”, not only as a means for promoting changes in organisations, but as an approach for addressing the three big divides that threaten our future: the concentration of wealth, the ecological survival of the planet, and the cultural schisms that divide persons and peoples.

So far, I have mentioned briefly the larger structure of the book. However, I would also like to shed some light on the structure of each chapter. There we find a thorough description of the context and the program or project, with a careful introduction of the main stakeholders, who are actually the protagonists in the book. And they have names: from Cynthia Curtis, a North American NGO activist based in El Salvador, to David Arizmendi,

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1 For more information on Otto Scharmer and his U Theory see <https://www.presencing.org/>

a community activist in the US-Mexico border; from Father George and his experience with community based groups in South Africa, to Varun and Amla, two group facilitators in India who integrate the Hindu practice of satsang, which means “gathering in a group to share the truth of one’s own consciousness through dialogue” [p. 130].

Each chapter includes lessons learned, often with the subtitle “Key takeaways”. They have a very concise formulation, and are important tools for individual and group reflection. I transcribe some of them as examples:

- Define your sense of self in a way that opens your heart, mind, eyes, and ears.
- Being a good facilitator requires more than knowing techniques. It requires *mística*.
- Plant seeds. Some will sprout if people take ownership of them.
- Group creativity and learning are enhanced through ongoing dialogue and reflection-on action.

At the end of the chapters, questions are included for individual and collective reflection. They challenge us to immerse into our own being as persons and professionals, as well as acquiring a deeper understating of key concepts and, above all, they are tools for dialoguing with others about research, social transformation and personal commitment. Again, some examples:

- Think about your current or next project. How have you defined your purpose in undertaking it? How might you redefine it in a way that galvanises you further?
- How would you describe your own positionality? How does that definition serve you? How might your sense of self differ from your positionality?
- Three different words are used in this chapter [Chapter 3: Building Community in a Texas-Mexico Border Colonia] to describe the community change agent: organizer, facilitator, and catalyst. What differences and commonalities among them do you see? What implications does each hold for the practice of community engagement? What words would you use to describe your own approach to change processes?
- Three concepts were briefly introduced in this chapter: deep democracy, learning organisation and action research. How would you define each of these terms, based upon what you read, and your own experience?

The last part of the journey is made up of two chapters: “Generative Patterns of Practice” and “Ensemble Awareness and the Interconnected Whole”. In the first of them, Patricia returns to the previous chapters to identify what she calls “generative patterns for community engagement practice”. There are thirteen of these patterns, each one of them with a short description: 1) The relationship between Self and the Social Field; 2) Purpose and Field Awareness; 3) From Head to Heart: Building Relationship; 4) From Heart to Soul: Using the Arts to Celebrate, Inspire, and Connect; 5) Starting from Where People Are; 6) Creating Fertile Spaces; 7) Deep Listening; 8) Deep Dialogue; 9) Flows and Cycles; 10) Holding the Tension of Opposites Together; 11) Addressing Judgement, Cynicism, and Fear; 12) *Mística* and the Facilitator’s Toolkit; 13) Creating New Structures. Even those who have not yet read the book can easily, using their imagination, make sense of these patterns and extract important leanings for practice, as well as for theorising upon practice.

In the closing chapter, Patricia reconnects us with the Introduction where the key concept is ensemble awareness. In her words, “Ensemble awareness is the term I use to describe the ability of the community engagement practitioner to sense the invisible web of relationships in which he or she is engaged” (p. 1). From the first paragraph, she warns the reader that action research or community engagement is not about controlling this web of relationships, but attuning with it to promote the community’s own potential for change. In a box in this chapter, Patricia exposes her “personal credo for practice” as a *practitioner for deep democracy*, as a *change agent for deep democracy* and as a *trainer of change agents for deep democracy*. It is, again, an invitation for everyone to develop his or her own understanding, and not a model to be copied and followed. Let us listen to her:

As a trainer of *change agents for deep democracy*, I aim to replicate and exemplify the practice of deep democracy in the classroom: self-reflection, dialogue for building shared understanding, collaborative learning and inquiry, group deliberation and decision-making, and participatory action learning. I aim to facilitate a transformative learning experience. Thus, I am not a trainer at all. Rather, I create a space for the participants’ own learning, action and reflection. The critical learning is not mastery of the methods of participatory engagement but rather the inner practice of the facilitator (p. 220).

## A brief dialogue with action research

There is neither a single entrance point to the book nor a definitive point where everybody should exit. The book is a platform where people from different professions and interests meet with the author, and with the many practitioners and community members. The community leaders and workers will find inspiring examples of professionals and engaged community members; teachers in schools and universities will find helpful examples to create spaces for collaborative and dialogical learning; government officials on municipal level can be helped to identify empowering movements within communities. However, based on the above comments on the content, the book has very clearly a special relevance for action research, or more broadly, for participatory research methodologies. It is from this perspective that I want to share: using Patricia’s word, some takeaways. The book based on stories from the global south resonates very strongly with the action research tradition in Latin America, and it is within this framework that I selected some generative themes for short comments.

*Action research has an explicit ethical and political dimension.* It has become a basic axiom in action and participatory research that there is no neutrality in the process of knowing. While objectivity will always be a horizon for intersubjective inquiry, political and ethical assumptions guide the decisions from the selection of the topic and formulation of the problem to the sharing of results. The praxis of Orlando Fals Borda and Paulo Freire, referred to in this book, today resonates in many experiences of Latin America. In this sense it may not be by chance that four out of the eight stories are from Latin America. Patricia’s great contribution lies in connecting these stories with the stories in other continents, evincing a movement in knowledge generation and social transformation that crosses national borders and cultural differences.

*La mística suggests that there are alternative epistemological approaches.* *La mística*, a basic concept for Patricia, originates from practices that are very common in the educa-

tional activities in popular education all over Latin America. They are symbolic actions and gestures that trigger the imagination and create spaces for people's expression. In a group meeting during a research process (Streck, 2012), we asked participants to tell us about their understanding of *mística*. The answer of one of the participants is an interesting summary of key ideas contained in the concept:

*La mística* gives a voice to the person, it identifies our group, it cannot be missing; it brings people closer, makes them think and reflect, awakens other senses, it's a part of the values. We use sentences of Paulo Freire, food, symbols, the Bible .

First, participation in action research cannot be taken for granted in a context that Paulo Freire characterized as a *culture of silence*. The researcher, as we heard in the stories told by Patricia, has to deal with resistance or even hopelessness within a reality where one's voice never counted. Second, there is the issue of identity of the group, that which gives the participants a sense of purpose and brings them together, from housing to peace building. Third, *la mística* provokes thinking and reflection at a cognitive level, but also awakens other senses, as when there is shared food, a flower, a drawing or a song as materialities that mediate communication. Four, *la mística* fosters values, such as solidarity and sense of justice, which are at the core of the experiences analysed by Patrícia.

*"Sensing" and "presencing" are requirements for action research.* According to Patrícia, "action research practice is built upon the relational and process capabilities of the practitioner" (p. 233). The researcher is not a detached observer, but a person who is present with his or her wholeness as a precondition to "bring out the inherent wisdom of the whole embodied in each individual and group" (p. 237). That is why action research should not be taken as intervention. Marianne Kristiansen and Joergen Bloch-Paulsen (2005, p. 254) have made a distinction between intervention and mutual involvement, which is relevant for coming closer to understand *presencing* in action research: "The interventionist has to risk his logical-analytical sense, while we, in a way, end up risking ourselves as human beings". This implies creating what they call "midwifery conversations" in the context of "maieutic spaces", which contain three patterns of relationship: co-humor, relaxed mutual availability and verbal co-production. This is just one possible connection with the richness of the book's stories about being there, with body, mind, heart and soul.

*From knowledge democracy to deep democracy.* Action research, while based on the co-production of knowledge, is a way of promoting knowledge democracy (Tandon et.al, 2016). Patricia challenges us to see that it is not enough to see knowledge democracy as a cognitive process, obviously a necessary ingredient for an integral view of democracy. Instead, she advocates *deep democracy*, which grows out of small daily life experience. "Deep democracy will not be created by a master plan, or government officials, but rather by small daily acts of engagement" (p. 232). It is about the creation of "habits" of listening, of reflecting and revealing one's own assumptions and values, of sensing together the potentialities for growth and transformation. On one hand, the concept suggests that there are limits to the researchers' eagerness to change the world and the need to be realistic about the actual possibilities. On the other hand, it demarcates a clear and feasible starting point for real and lasting change. As Gustavsen (2020) has argued, single cases may grow together in a movement for larger scale transformations. Patricia helps to set parameters for building bridges among stories across the globe.

*Ensemble awareness and the education of action researchers.* A question often raised by the action research community is about the education of researchers. Where did professionals engaged in action research learn about action research? Who were the educators that educated them? Can action research be taught in conventional methodology classes? Through the stories Patricia functions as a *facilitator* and *catalyst*, as an educator for action research as much for beginners as for experienced researchers. It is also a book on research methodology in the broad sense and in particular for action research. Olav Eikeland (2007) helps us to clarify the idea of methodology we are talking about:

My contention is that, basically, methodology is built on the self-reflections of the research community, founded on the community members' long-term, practically acquired experience from doing research, i.e. as research practitioners. Methodology, then, is knowledge developed "inside-out", "bottom-up" by practitioners within a certain community of practice by sifting and sorting similarities and differences in their own acquired habitus and experience. (p. 52).

As Patricia tells us in the Introduction, the stories chronicle the path from *self-awareness*, to *ensemble awareness* by community engagement practitioners. The individual and collective biographies that compose the stories reveal that this is neither a simple nor a linear process. However complex reality presents itself, the book ends with a message that sums up the whole book:

We are the change agents for the future that is wanting to emerge. And we begin with our own inner practice: at the heart of community engagement (p. 237)

## References

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