

“Life as Action Research”

Interview with Richard Ennals by Miren Larrea and Danilo Streck

About Richard Ennals

Richard Ennals was educated at King's College School Wimbledon, Phillips Academy Massachusetts, King's College Cambridge, London University Institute of Education, and Imperial College of Science and Technology.

Richard taught History in the UK and Nigeria, before becoming a researcher and then research manager in Advanced Information Technology, at Imperial College and in the UK Government Department of Trade and Industry. He resigned his posts in December 1985, when the UK Government signed a secret Memorandum of Understanding to participate in the American Strategic Defense Initiative, thus endangering the research he was managing. He joined a successful campaign to prevent UK involvement.

Richard moved to Kingston College, then to Kingston University, where he was Professor at Kingston Business School from 1990. His research was based on collaboration in Sweden (National Institute for Working Life and Royal Institute of Technology) and Norway (Work Research Institute and Centre for Senior Policy), and on working with the European Commission. In the UK in 1997 he was co-founder of the UK Work Organisation Network.

Richard has been Emeritus Professor at Kingston University since 2013. He currently has part-time Professorial posts at the University of Agder (Norway) and the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. He has Visiting Professorial posts at Mykolas Romeris University and Kazimieras Simonavicius University (Lithuania), where he has an Honorary Doctorate, as well as engaging in research with Kathmandu University (Nepal), Sabanci University (Turkey) and the University of Cape Town (South Africa). The common themes are participation and empowerment.

He is an Editor of the *International Journal of Action Research* and Editor in Chief of the *European Journal of Workplace Innovation*. He is author or editor of numerous books, on Education, Information Technology, Working Life and Innovation. For example:

Beginning micro-PROLOG. Ellis Horwood, Chichester 1983.

Star Wars: A Question of Initiative. Wiley, Chichester 1986.

Artificial Intelligence State of the Art Report (Editor). Pergamon Infotech, London 1987.

Work Organisation and Europe as a Development Coalition. (with Bjorn Gustavsen). Benjamin, Amsterdam 1999.

Work Life 2000: Yearbooks 1, 2, 3. Springer, London, 1999, 2000, 2001.

Dialogue, Skill and Tacit Knowledge. (Edited with Bo Goranzon and Maria Hammaren). Wiley, Chichester 2006.

From Slavery to Citizenship. Wiley, Chichester 2007.

Learning together for local innovation: promoting learning regions. (Edited with Bjorn Gustavsen and Barry Nyhan). Cedefop, Luxembourg 2007.

Creating Collaborative Advantage: Innovation and Knowledge Creation in Regional Economies. (Edited with Hans Christian Garmann Johnsen). Gower, Farnham 2012.

Coping with the Future: Rethinking Assumptions for Society, Business and Work. (Edited with Hans Christian Garmann Johnsen and Halvor Holtskog). Routledge, London 2018.

Miren and Danilo: Thank you, Richard, for granting this interview to the *International Journal of Action Research*. We know that you have been, and continue to be, active in many fronts, and any interview will come short in terms of your rich life story. Let us focus on Action Research and related themes. In some circumstances you mentioned that your life is Action Research. Could you elaborate on this idea, eventually bringing in some examples? What does it mean to consider life as Action Research?

Richard: It is a privilege to be asked to reflect. I have not had a conventional career path. There have been apparent changes of direction, with successes and failures. In the UK, for example, with a background in English literature, I studied philosophy and history at King’s College, Cambridge University, before teaching in the UK and Nigeria. I was then a researcher and research manager in logic programming and artificial intelligence at Imperial College London. I have tried to take on a series of challenges, in different fields, which means that my “career” (or “skid”) can seem to be a series of “projects”, with varying levels of success.

In December 1985 I resigned my government funded posts in opposition to UK participation in President Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), which threatened the research which I was managing. I suddenly spent some months in 1986 as a peace campaigner. My collaborations in Scandinavia began in December 1986: with Bo Göranson, who was interested in my resignation, and the issue of what he called “civil courage”, and with Björn Gustavsen from 1988, who introduced me to “Action Research case studies” as a way of evaluating managed research programmes. Both had been influenced by the philosophy of Wittgenstein, whose work I had encountered at Cambridge. My subsequent work in Scandinavia has been in Working Life Research. I worked at Kingston College from 1986, and as a Professor at Kingston University from 1990. My referee for the professorship was the director of the national programme from which I had resigned in 1985.

Miren and Danilo: Richard, could you come back to the idea of life as action research?

Richard: This is a very useful challenge, which has prompted me to further reflection. I have always tried to respond to opportunities. I have had no specific clear goal, other than to work on projects in which I believe. I do not have a personal website. I could describe my life as Action Research.

On reflection, I can see how foundations were laid:

- At school in the UK in 1964, I experienced an Action Research approach to physics teaching, in particular “wave-particle duality”.
- From my time as a student in the USA in 1969, encountering the human relations movement and working in a quality control tester in a woolen mill, I have been familiar with the challenge of fitting in with different discourses: finding the appropriate vocabulary and concepts, and engaging in dialogue. It was always a matter of combining action and research.
- Leading weekly Study Groups on social issues at Cambridge University, with students from many disciplines.
- The influence of Frege, Wittgenstein and Chomsky: action and research; speech acts.
- Role play and simulations: this took me from school history teaching to artificial intelligence research.

- Writing and directing plays and musicals: working with political, social and workplace actors.
- Working on an Experimental Social Work project with John Bellers Ltd in London: I was waste recycling manager.
- With a series of different jobs, it has been necessary to fit the part, and play the role. This has been all the more important as I have typically lacked conventional qualifications. I have been judged on the basis of my performance.

Miren and Danilo: You have been with the *International Journal of Action Research* almost since its beginning (1997), when it started as *Concepts and Transformation* (CAT). How do you see the development of the journal since its creation, and the role the journal plays or should play today?

Richard: In May 1997 I failed in my attempt to be elected to Parliament in the UK. Björn Gustavsen invited me to attend a seminar at Skebo (Sweden), with leading members of the Action Research community. Hans van Beinum and Öyvind Pålshaugen were editors of *Concepts and Transformation* (published by John Benjamin). I joined them in 1998. Werner Fricke also joined the editorial team, and later succeeded Hans as editor-in-chief. My focus was on “language cleaning”, helping authors to publish their ideas in English. Danilo Streck then joined the team, and succeeded Werner Fricke as editor-in-chief. The journal, renamed as the *International Journal of Action Research* (published by Rainer Hampp and then Barbara Budrich). IJAR has built an international research community, encompassing many paradigms of Action Research.

Miren and Danilo: Can you tell us about changes in the process? New themes? About the international perspective?

Richard: The journal has remained human and pluralistic in focus, supporting a network of researchers, rather than relying on automation and a single rigid methodology. Starting with a Scandinavian focus, the journal has become increasingly international and diverse, across Europe and then Latin America. In my “language cleaning” I have had to try to understand a new range of approaches. For example. “systematisation” is a key concept in Latin America. It has taken time for me to see how it fits with Action Research in other contexts, such as at Linnaeus University in Sweden. This led to an appreciation of the key bridging role played by Björn Gustavsen, who had been the real founder of CAT / DOWI and then IJAR.

IJAR should have a great future, based on international participation, and links to ongoing debate through symposia and special issues.

Miren and Danilo: The *International Journal of Action Research* has promoted biannual symposia for discussing theoretical and practical developments in Action Research (Porto Alegre, Copenhagen, Bogotá, Kristiansand, San Sebastian: the next is scheduled for Istanbul in 2022). In the last one we had a PhD seminar. We understand that the journal has also a role in enabling researchers not only to do good research, but to publish good papers. Considering your long experience as an editor, what suggestions or recommendations do you have, especially for beginners?

Richard: I see writing as a way in which we explain ourselves to ourselves. When we publish, we try to explain ourselves to others. It is important to write, and then to receive feedback. We need to have something to say, to an intended audience, and to contribute to a discourse, for example in a particular chosen journal. Our words can also be seen as actions. We have learned that collaborative research, and collaborative writing, are not straightforward, particularly in the recent context of the international Covid pandemic.

Miren and Danilo: Does one have to publish everything one writes? How to choose a journal or other vehicle?

Richard: We do not normally publish our draft notes. However, they can be an important starting point for regular writing. With the idea of "speech acts", I see writing papers as engaging in action. I regard journals as networks, and communities of practice. Language is not simply used for description. There are many different "tools in the tool box". This can affect the choice of a journal. It is important to read as well as to write, in order to contribute to debate.

Miren and Danilo: You have worked with students from many places around the world, and recently worked as visiting professor at a seminar on Action Research Methodologies at the Action Research PhD Programme at Sabanci University in Istanbul. How do you see Action Research within the academic community? Could you provide some examples of the promises, accomplishments and obstacles in doing Action Research, for instance, in doctoral dissertations?

Richard: I was Professor and Head of Department at Kingston University from 1990. However, the dominant positivist paradigm, and the disciplinary rigidity of the UK government's Research Excellence Framework, were not suited to my approach to research. I led the Centre for Working Life Research at Kingston, which engaged in collaborative research with UK and international partners. I used income from overseas contracts to fund research at Kingston, where I have been Emeritus Professor since 2013. I published as I saw fit. My work was classified in several different disciplines. I preferred not to use conventional highly rated journals. I was co-founder of three international journals.

From December 1986 my research was influenced by Scandinavia. In Sweden, I worked with the National Institute for Working Life, the Royal Institute of Technology and the Royal Dramatic Theatre, with a focus on Dialogue and Practical Knowledge, and then with Linnaeus University. I was then rapporteur for the Swedish "Work Life 2000" programme of 64 specialist workshops and an EU Presidency conference. My role was to capture the dialogue, and to publish a series of Yearbooks. In Norway, I worked with the PhD programme EDWOR (Enterprise Development and Working Life), which was based on Action Research, as well as with the Centre for Senior Policy and the University of Agder. In Finland I worked with the Institute of Occupational Health.

It may be helpful to give some examples of doctoral students and dissertations where I have been an adviser.

Trond Haga (Norway) orchestrated networks of companies for regional development. He had a background in school teaching, and in Quality Education. This underpinned his AR

work on regional development. He now works in the Norwegian offshore industry, and co-ordinated an EJWI special issue on socio-technical systems thinking in manufacturing.

Anne-Inga Hilsen (Norway) took an AR approach to issues of Older Workers. Her research involved challenging assumptions of quantitative research, as she illustrated the transforming impact of changing work organisation.

Zelin Li (China) took a socio-technical systems approach to mobile health information systems in community healthcare centres. While he was my PhD student at Kingston, he also led the Chinese Students and Scholars Association in the UK, with over 100,000 members. He is now CEO of a property development company with offices in London, Hong Kong and Beijing.

Jude Rachele (USA) took a critical view of diversity management, based on Action Research in a Further Education College, with a Quality Cycle process. She is CEO of a successful consultancy in the USA and the UK.

Johan Berglund (Sweden) considered formalisation and skill in the nuclear power industry. This built on research by Bo Göranson on Skill and Technology. Johan now works in the field of nuclear safety.

James Karlsen (Norway), researched the regional role of universities. He is now Professor and Head of Department at the University of Agder, and is engaged in close collaboration with the University of Deusto (Spain).

Roger Normann (Norway) applied his background in economics and political science to his PhD research on Democracy in Development. He is now Dean of Agder Business School.

Tauriq Jenkins (South Africa) seeks to decolonise accounts of the history of the Western Cape. He is a Khoi chief, and a researcher in the San and Khoi Research Unit in the Centre for African Studies at the University of Cape Town. He has a live Action Research case study concerning Amazon's proposed building of a new headquarters in Cape Town, with major concerns regarding heritage and environmental issues.

Tina Saud (Nepal) is exploring participative management, and the role of Quality Circles. She has faced obstacles at Kathmandu University in her approach to Action Research, which she has addressed through writing. My role has been to serve as a dialogue partner. She worked with Students' Quality Circles, and she will be applying her thesis research in an EU funded project as a Quality Champion in the coffee industry in Nepal. She teaches at Kathmandu University.

In the Action Research industrial PhD programme at Sabanci University (Turkey), we have explored a range of Action Research Methodologies and Approaches, learning from differences. It has been a rich learning experience for both faculty and students. It became clear that from within a particular tradition, such as "Action Research Ala Turca", it can be hard to develop explanatory documentation. At Sabanci the programme involved full time senior business executives, with heavy workloads.

Behind the different traditions of AR, there is a shared view that change and transformation are possible. They require active engagement, rather than traditional detachment. I am primarily concerned with Socio-Technical Systems Thinking, Trust and Environmental Sustainability, linked by AR.

My starting point in recent work has been the newly fashionable field of "Blockchain" technology, which tends to have been focused on financial applications, such as crypto currencies. It had been assumed that ledger transactions are "trusted". This is not now a reliable assumption, following major financial crises. I start by considering Trust, and shared

objectives such as Environmental Sustainability, where we can identify key data to support decision making. STS provides a suitable framework, with a key role for AR.

In Norway at NTNU there is well established cross-departmental collaborative research on Blockchain technology. Based on my past experience of research management in advanced IT in the UK in the 1980 s, based on Declarative Systems, and of Socio-Technical Systems Thinking and design in Norway, as well as Environmental Sustainability, I suggest a new approach, including a fresh account of computation. The project could bridge the gap between normally separate research perspectives and traditions. We can put the idea to the test with a PDCA approach, based on AR case studies.

Miren and Danilo: You once mentioned, paraphrasing you, that "being optimistic is more fun, and may produce positive results". At the same time, your realistic comments sometimes don't sound that optimistic about the future. How do you "read" current international developments? Does the idea of coloniality help to understand the past and present power relations?

Richard: We face many daunting global challenges, such as Climate Change and Inequality. In my experience, success has sometimes been possible in what had seemed to be impossible causes. Our campaign in 1985–6 to resist the American Strategic Defense Initiative was successful, after a complex process of dialogue, which was consistent with the Appreciative Inquiry tradition in Action Research. We found common ground in unexpected places. This does not mean that all campaigns will succeed. It does show that, on occasion, individuals can make a difference. This is a view which I have inherited from my late father David and uncles John and Martin, who were activists with a focus on internationalism, self-determination and human rights.

Struggles continue, such as in South Africa, where I work with the San and Khoi Research Unit. There is also a need to build new digital archives following the disastrous fire in the UCT University Library in April 2021. We currently await the outcome of a High Court case in Cape Town.

I know about failure, which can be seen as attributable to my own poor judgement. I had experience of leading an international arts festival in 1996, which lost money. It was my personal responsibility to deal with the consequences.

We can now see compelling international evidence for the emergence of a "New Colonialism", and a continuing widespread refusal to address uncomfortable historical truths regarding slavery, the slave trade and empire. Decoloniality concerns the present and future, as well as the past. It challenges established orthodoxies, including in politics and academia. It is important to write and publish, through "academic activism".

Miren and Danilo: In retrospect, what are the key learnings in your journey with/as Action Research? Where did you learn? Whom did you learn with?

Richard: From an early age I have sought to link action and research. Action Research has provided a number of contexts, including in Educational Action Research, which I encountered as a school student of physics with Nuffield Foundation, and as a secondary school teacher of social studies, teaching about race relations, with the University of East Anglia. This linked to my work with classroom simulations, and on education for world citizenship.

I learned a great deal from my experience of leading research on “Logic as a Computer Language for Children” from 1980, based at Imperial College London. We launched a network of new projects in the UK and internationally.

I have learned not to work alone, but to co-operate with trusted colleagues who can apply a veto to my overly optimistic plans. Björn Gustavsen was a formative influence from 1988, when I encountered his “action research case studies”, which he used to evaluate research and development programmes. I was honoured when he asked me to write his profile, which IJAR then published as his intellectual obituary. He was an “AR particle”, who “made waves”. He built bridges which we are still learning to cross.

Events can move fast, so I ensure that I write up my work each day. This was learned from my experience of the successful campaign against SDI in 1985–6, in a context of high politics and official secrecy.

There is no one best way: we need to understand the diverse contexts in which people work and write. I have worked in the UK, European Union, Sweden, Norway, Lithuania, South Africa and Nepal, as well as with UN agencies and NGOs. In each case there are institutional borders to be crossed.

Miren and Danilo: This is very interesting. Can you tell us a little more?

Richard: Now I work from home in physical terms, but with a variety of external partners and contexts. When I publish, my writings can be regarded as actions, sometimes in ways which I might not have anticipated. I can be taken by surprise, such as when, in 2020, I was awarded a PhD Honoris Causa by Kazimiero Simonavicius University in Lithuania, in recognition of my support over thirty years for the successful campaign for Lithuanian self-determination and independence.

Miren and Danilo: You have shared with us, sometimes confidentially, about your illness, and we are very much impressed about the way you deal with life. What keeps you moving with such confidence and willingness to participate and help? We would appreciate your comments as a way to deal with difficult situations.

Richard: I have experienced difficult illness for 50 years, which has meant that I have often had to challenge my own judgement, balancing my preferred optimism with enforced realism. For a period, I stepped back from my role with IJAR. After a while, I felt able to resume activity. I was very fortunate to be able to maintain my work.

I now have a recent diagnosis of chronic lymphocytic leukaemia (CLL), which could continue for many years. This makes succession planning, and keeping writing up to date, all the more important. I do not take on new projects which depend on my leadership or continued presence. I can work with partners around the world, but without leaving my home. You might think that this is now “Inaction Research” on my part. The test will be seen in the outcomes of work by my network of students and partners. Many of them have published articles and books. The work continues. At heart, I am a teacher and editor, but without a consistent clear conventional discipline. My life continues to be Action Research “work in progress”.

Miren and Danilo: Thanks, Richard! An impressive testimony.

About the interviewers

Miren Larrea is senior researcher in Orkestra- Basque Institute of Competitiveness and lecturer at the University of Deusto in the Basque Country, Spain. She is also associate researcher at Praxis Research Institute in Rafaela, Santa Fé, Argentina. Her research focuses on regional innovation systems, Industry 4.0, smart specialisation strategies, multilevel and collaborative governance, local development, and shared leadership. She is one of the proponents of action research for territorial development, practiced by a multilocal community of researchers in the Basque Country (Spain), Agder (Norway), Santa Fé and Tierra del Fuego (Argentina).

Danilo Streck is Doctor of Education from Rutgers University. He has been a Visiting Scholar at the Latin American Center, UCLA, and at Max Plank Institute for Human Development in Berlin. Danilo is Professor at the Graduate School of Education of the University of Caxias do Sul (Brazil). His research projects focus on popular education, Latin American pedagogy, participatory social processes and research methodologies. He is author of “A New Social Contract in a Latin American Educational Context” (Palgrave/McMillan), co-editor of “Paulo Freire Encyclopedia” (Rowman & Littlefield).

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