Special Issue: Conceptualising Action Research: Basic assumptions and terminology in Action Research

Action Research on the rise

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How do we conceptualise, communicate, and describe Action Research in a language which expresses and corresponds adequately to the basic assumptions behind Action Research? Our call for papers tried to pinpoint some very specific challenges for Action Research as we see it: As Action Researchers, when writing applications for research funds, when communicating research insights, when developing knowledge in collaboration with stakeholders, when reasoning and voicing knowledge in research communities, we often feel forced to navigate in a language field foreign to our Action Research activity, and compelled to use conventional, mostly interpretive social research terminology to legitimise our creation of knowledge as research. This language field is, to a large extent, still based on a principal division of labour between intellectual and manual work, knower and known, and researcher and researched, creating a horizon of meaning linked to a still dominant but old-fashioned and monopolised knowledge management regime. This terminology reflects an institutionalised but hardly validated division of labour in the understanding of social knowledge generation, othering the subjects of study. Thereby the more basic and radical knowledge generation processes happening in certain forms of Action Research are made almost invisible and stretched between the "inner" language of contextual knowledge and value production, and other, "outer" ways of communicating scientific knowledge and research insights presumed as valid by a wider research community and in society at large.

Nevertheless, Action Research gains popularity in different professions and professional studies, in management and organszation studies, community development work, and in other areas concerned with practical relevance, application, and development. The situation reflects societal changes concerning the social distribution of education and knowledge generation, from having been monopolised in specialised academic institutions to becoming much more socially distributed.

As indicated, social or human knowledge development and creation need to come to *its* own, and find its own form, similarly to how natural science and technology have come to their own during modernity. Bringing social and human knowledge to its own, however, does *not* mean imitation or emulation of natural science. Extant forms of inquiry all need to be critically examined, transformed, and adjusted to the radically practice based creation of knowledge in core Action Research.

Certain forms of practitioner Action Research are already making progress in their attempts at this by connecting to more colloquial and prevalent understandings of *experience* which do not operate within the divisions of conventional research. These attempts are si-

multaneously theoretical, empirical, methodological, and even simultaneously descriptive and normative, thereby challenging basic categories of modern research and societies.

Action Research is not alone in this, of course. Hence, when developing appropriate Action Research terminology, concepts, and language, we must critically let ourselves be inspired and learn from other schools of thought. The European tradition has several continuous critical strands (critical theory, phenomenology, hermeneutics, post-structuralism, social constructionism, etc.), which could and should be explored, mobilised, and utilised. Other, currently emerging attempts at developing terminology from indigenous, practitioner research, and other traditions need to be reviewed as well. A promising, emerging, and important *starting point* for developing concepts, terminology, and language could be basic historical concepts: *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe.* Action Research needs to immerse itself in these and develop them through a form of immanent critique. Besides starting by connecting to established and emerging critical traditions and approaches, it is necessary to start by exploring the different *clashes* between Action Research and conventional terminology and understandings actually experienced by both researchers and practitioners in Action Research projects.

Therefore, this special issue called for papers that would join us in the search to find and develop new and proactive language, concepts, and practices to qualify research based on fundamental principles and approaches in Action Research. We called for papers that would e. g., summarise extant attempts at developing concepts and language more adequately adjusted to knowledge production from within practices, providing us with new voices in the cross-fields of tensions between various discourses and institutionalised practices in a field filled with research and practice dilemmas. The special issue also welcomed investigations of different *clashes of discourses* typically happening in Action Research which, from this, may lead to the development of new concepts and language. Our question was: What constitutes Action Research and how can it be communicated adequately? Not just for what purposes is Action Research useful, or how to perform given forms of Action Research. Or what justifications for given forms of Action Research exist already?

The call has resulted in several interesting papers expressing the variety of knowledge understandings, methodological developments and innovations, and research challenges that characterise the field of Action Research. However, a pattern seems to emerge across the received papers. They tend to reactivate well-known proposals for solutions to the problem formulated in the call, rather than going deeper into the above-mentioned discussions and implications of the challenges of language, terminology, and methods for communicating knowledge creation in Action Research. It is encouraging for the future, however, that so many Action Researchers feel the urge to contribute to this explorative journey.

Beside the final text written by the editors of the special issue, one article in particular, written by Catrine Halås, explores the fundamental discussion of what is at stake when addressing language in Action Research. In her article, *Praxeological Dialogues from within: handling tensions in Dialogical Praxis-oriented Action Research*, she both reflects on contemporary attempts to develop a comprehensive and adequate language for experience-based and contextual research. She does this by discussing many, including Eikeland's and Arendt's, philosophies of knowing, assessing them in relation to their applicability to the "lived practices" in Action Research. She finds that the Norwegian philosopher Jakob Meløe's *praxeology* can be used as an approach to collaborative knowledge development from within practice towards what she, using an Eikeland term, calls Praxis-based Theoria.

Inspired by Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy, Meløe has developed a theory of cross-cutting language philosophy and action theory, influenced by perspectives from phenomenology and pragmatism, which she offers as an inspiration to Action Research and its language of knowledge / knowing.

The second article is written by Finn Thorbjørn Hansen and carries the title *What Would Apophatic Action Research Look Like?* The article presents and discusses how to consider delicate matters of silence and wonder from *within* the practice of Action Research. With inspiration from existential phenomenology, hermeneutics, and an "apophatic turn" in theology, philosophy, and art, the article argues for apophatic thinking in action research and encourages the reader to step back as an actor to let life or the phenomenon itself act upon him / her. The author asks the question: "How do we, as Action Researchers, capture such delicate and volatile experiences of meaning-giving moments and "callings", which appear to be woven into a practice or relationship, and which can only be understood from *within* this practice or situation by being deeply engaged with it or acting by virtue of it?" His answer is that we must arrive with a non-knowing, receiving, listening, and effortless action attitude, a kind of contemplative approach based on wondering. While drawing on Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Gadamer (among others), Hansen argues for a wonder-based and apophatic approach to language and experience through concepts of "non-knowing" and "effortless-action". As he writes, we must "arrive with a non-knowing, receiving, listening and effortless action attitude".

The third article *Action Research conceptualised in seven cornerstones as conditions for transforming education* by Christine Edwards-Groves and Karin Rönnerman traces philosophical and historical roots within the field of educational Action Research for providing relevant theory. It argues that inventing entirely new concepts is unnecessary. Instead, a deeper understanding of the historical traditions and the constitutive practices is emphasised. The definition of Action Research in educational Action Research draws on Carr and Kemmis, while the historical roots are traced back to for instance Dewey, Freire, Lewin as well as critical theory, *Bildung,* and folk enlightenment. Against this background, the authors re-frame the historical ideas formulated into seven principal cornerstones, linked to four basic features of Action Research: Inquiry for learning, real life action, critical theory, and democratic dialogues. The principles "*contextuality, commitment, communication, collaboration, criticality, collegiality and community*" create coherence and understanding of basic conditions in educational Action Research. It also conveys an integrated and deeper understanding of Action Research rooted in historical traditions, concepts, and terminology.

The fourth article has the title *How to Go On? An Ethnographic Return to the 'Rough Ground' in PAR,* and is written by Mark Watson. The article describes and discusses a project within the frame of participatory Action Research, which is centered around giving voice to the Inuit people living in Montreal, Canada, through their participation in community radio shows. The central idea of the community radio shows is the building of socially inclusive infrastructures that allow marginalised communities to obtain ownership over their own development through communication. In this perspective, community radio can be seen as a vehicle of self-empowerment where marginalised groups can express themselves in their own voice and their own language, in this case the Inuit language Inuktut. The article discusses the transformative potential of participatory Action Research (PAR) and contributes to the field of Action Research from an ethnographic perspective. The author argues that PAR should be

seen as a living process, "woven into the circumstances in which it takes place and in the interactions, both linguistic and social, that occur between people".

In the final article in this issue, *Are Action Researchers mixed up?* (blindly peer-reviewed like the other contributions), Eikeland, Frimann, Hersted, and Jensen, try to outline and elaborate some promising ways forward concerning the challenges from the call. This article pursues the authors' need to acknowledge that the language challenge is more fundamental than merely terminological. It exemplifies this through a critical discussion of the term "data". Starting from the word "data", they discuss the wider implications of such ingrained and institutionalised separation of contextual knowledge production on the one hand, and the different concepts of "theory", "data" or "experience", and "methods" on the other. This is an implication that needs to be more transparent and discussed.

Finally, as editors of this special issue, we wish to thank all the authors and the blind peer reviewers, who have spent their precious time in contributing to this issue. In addition, we would like to thank the editors- in-chief of the International Journal of Action Research, Danilo Streck and Miren Larrea, for being flexible and cooperative throughout the whole process.

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