

About my learning journey with Action Research

Interview with Danilo Streck

Richard and Miren:

How did you first encounter Action Research during your own academic career?

Danilo:

Thank you, Richard and Miren, for granting me the opportunity to speak about my experience with Action Research. As with most action researchers, I did not come across Action Research in my formal education in undergraduate or graduate courses. Research methods were usually about statistics. I came to Action Research first through systematisation of experiences with popular education in Latin America, at that time (1970–1980) in connection with CELADEC (Comisión Evangélica Latinoamericana de Educación Cristiana), supported by the World Council of Churches and other international social and ecclesial organisations that intended to connect grassroots movements in churches, NGOs and schools and universities. It was supposed to be an exercise of critical reflection on practice to promote change, inspired in the liberation movement, in areas such as pedagogy, theology and communication. This practice was rarely integrated with the academic work, and the material produced was dedicated to group leaders and social organisations. It also provided inputs for teaching materials for use within these organizations. Still today in Latin America, popular education and Participatory Research go hand in hand, and sometimes it is difficult to identify where one ends and the other begins. Paulo Freire's study of the generative themes for the literacy programme, as described in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, is a good example of how research and education are intertwined in the same process of knowing and changing one's world. A formal project of Action Research started with the study of Participatory Budgeting in South Brazil where we understood that we needed a participatory methodology to study participation. At that time, however, the research group was already pretty well acquainted with the literature of Action Research, from reports of systematization of experience to academic writings.

Richard and Miren:

How has your view of Action Research changed since then?

Danilo:

At the beginning of my work, as mentioned above, I was not involved with Action Research. The intention has been, and still is, to bridge the gap between practice and theory, based on the assumption that changes will be promoted by people in their respective social, professional and cultural context. I guess that during these years I became more aware of the relevance of critical reflection on our practice as professional academics. There is a serious risk of action becoming activism, and I think that I became more aware of the researcher's role as being a

critical and empathetical companion in the process of knowing. The contact with a great variety of traditions and practices has challenged me to be humbler, and understand that Action Research is always contextual, while being attentive to a couple of general principles, such as respect for the other as true partner in knowing, and the collective construction of a world where there is space for all to live with dignity.

Richard and Miren:

Paulo Freire's work has been extremely influential across the world. What do you see as Freire's contribution to the field of Action Research?

Danilo:

Paulo Freire cannot be considered an Action Researcher in the canonical tradition of Action Research. His writings would hardly ever be accepted in our academically oriented Action Research journals. Reviewers would require references to other studies as well as to the theoretical foundations of his reflections. The methodic rigorousness he frequently refers to in his writings is anchored in different epistemic settings based on ethical and political principles. From Freire we learn that research is a dimension: not the only one, for sure, of social transformation, and that this transformation is a complex process that requires a trans-disciplinary perspective which in its turn requires trust among the partners. In an interview about Action and Participatory Research he interestingly concentrates his answer on the importance of trust. As put by Carlos Rodrigues Brandão, another key person in Participatory Research, in classical positivist research you rely on trustworthy instruments, in traditional qualitative research you trust yourself as producer of relevant data, and in Participatory Research you regard the other as a trustworthy companion to produce knowledge. As I understand Paulo Freire, these three dimensions do not exclude themselves mutually, but the last is the one that cannot be missing in Action or Participatory Research.

Richard and Miren:

Thinking about what Freire's legacy means today, what are the implications of Freire's views on capitalism and liberation? Has Freire been understood in North America and Europe?

Danilo:

In 2021 we celebrated the centenary of Paulo Freire's birth. I think that the most optimistic Freirean could not have expected such a massive revisiting of his ideas and his work all over the world, particularly in Latin America. The metaphor of Paulo Freire as a "the walking tree", coined by the Colombian educator and researcher Alfonso Torres, seems to capture the importance of Paulo Freire's legacy. In the generous shadow of the mango tree, different people gather today to resist what is known as disaster capitalism, both socially and environmentally, and look for alternatives. This tree has a strong trunk as well as deep roots. Poetic license allows us to see this tree as not static or fixed in a given space, but moving among peoples. A couple of days ago I saw in a TV series a painter who kept reproducing the same landscape, only changing perspectives or details. That is a little how I see Paulo Freire, who throughout his life kept reminding us that humanisation is a possibility that we actualize in history and can never be taken for granted. The risk of dehumanisation is always there, and today we are faced with it at every corner. That is why his legacy sounds so up to date today, and is reinvented in different parts of the world, in different ways. In the spirit of Freire, who

once referred to himself as a vagabond of the obvious, I do not consider it necessary to advocate for an orthodox reading of Paulo Freire, as if in Europe and North America, for example, they would need to have the same understanding of his work as we do in Latin America.

Richard and Miren:

Systematisation is a term that is often used in Latin America. However, there are Action researchers in other parts of the world that might not be familiar with it. What is meant by systematisation”?

Danilo:

Systematisation of experience developed alongside Action and Participatory Research in Latin America. Its history goes back to social work, from where it spread to other social practices, not necessarily within the academic context. I would consider systematisation of experience as part of the large and diverse family of Action Research in its critical tradition since they share important epistemological and political principles, like overcoming the dichotomy between theory and practice, the non-neutrality of research, the search for criteria of scientific rigorousness outside the positivistic paradigm. A distinctive feature of systematisation of experience is the centrality of daily life experience within the specific cultural and historical context. One basic step in the research process, therefore, is the “reconstruction” of the particular experience by the participants, connecting personal and collective memories and projections. Another feature is the not subordination to the academic logic allowing space for emotions and body expressions, which in Latin America is called “mística”. That’s why systematisation is usually situated in a space between the academic and the social world. Gradually it is being accepted as a legitimate academic research methodology, hopefully resisting being coopted within a logic that easily becomes self-serving.

Richard and Miren:

IJAR published accounts of your work on Participatory Budgeting. What is the significance of this intervention in political processes? And, what are the practical implications for the future of democracy?

Danilo:

Participatory Budgeting was developed in Porto Alegre as a key feature of the Workers Party government. The basic assumption is that democratic participation should allow people to have their say when it comes to the core of any public planning: the allocation of public resources. The administration created an interesting process combining the identification of basic thematic areas for the whole city and then particular projects, both local and for the whole city. This process was later taken to the state level in Rio Grande do Sul with a population of over 10 million. In the process we were able to see the potential for citizenship commitment when provided space and opportunity. At the same time, we could also see the maneuvers to reduce participation to eventually voting on particular projects without any public discussion whatsoever. While today, when democracies are at risk in many places, as in Brazil, and we are quite happy to keep at least a democratic formality, experiments such as Participatory Budgeting will continue to challenge the establishment.

Richard and Miren:

You have been a strong advocate of strengthening links between different Action Research traditions around the world, such as in Latin America and Europe. What has been the practical importance of your own German ancestry, and your fluency in Portuguese, Spanish and English?

Danilo:

I have not given much thought to the way I developed the interest, as you put it, in strengthening the links between different traditions of Action Research. In the small village where I grew up there is a cultural mix of German, Italian, Portuguese, Indian and Afro-descendants, as in many parts of Brazil. I also had the opportunity to study abroad, do consultancy in many Latin American countries, and learn with and from colleagues from different countries. And then when I go back to the post Second World War experiences, specially in the 1960th, I realise that in many parts of the world, sometimes without knowing from each other, people were trying to experiment with research practices that had similar foundations, from Systematisation of Experience and Participatory Research in Latin America to Grounded Theory and Action Research in the United States and Europe. What I mean is that if we broaden our perspective, we become aware that different nomenclatures sometimes refer to quite similar practices.

Richard and Miren:

You are also familiar with European and Latin American experiences of territorial development. For Freire, territorial development is about engaging and empowering people. Based on what you have learnt in these different contexts, can this produce lasting change?

Danilo:

I have learned about Action Research for Territorial Development (ARTD) with Miren and her colleagues at Orkestra. It is a way of bridging among stakeholders that make up the same territory, from government to workers' unions, from big business to small enterprises and NGOs. It is also an endeavour where transdisciplinarity needs to be exercised, thus overcoming the traditional academic disciplinarity and individual research projects. As in all social activities, including Action Research, there is no guarantee of lasting changes, but I believe in what Orlando Fals Borda once called "participatory Quixotism". Paulo Freire, on his turn, reminds us that perhaps we should be humbler in terms of individual roles in producing historical changes without giving up the hope that our work makes a difference.

Richard and Miren:

Particularly during the Covid pandemic, we have made increasing use of online communications, and new patterns of international collaboration have developed. How can we build on those developments, and bring about lasting changes?

Danilo:

The Covid pandemic has highlighted our global interconnectedness. There were no geographic, cultural, political or social frontiers for the virus, although, as we know, the virus affected people and societies in different ways. We have learned to use digital platforms as a regular tool for working with others in our countries as well as on an international scale. It

seems to me that this experience of sending a link for a conversation or meeting will remain. At the same time, we will have to learn how to combine the use of these tools with physical encounters which are essential for what could be called an “embodied” collaboration where the other person is seen within his/her context and circumstances.

Richard and Miren:

Interdisciplinary studies are another relevant feature in your career. How and why have interdisciplinary studies been central to your work? What is the role of comparisons, and of learning from differences?

Danilo:

For most of us who work with education, interdisciplinarity is not an option but a necessity to understand the complexity involved in teaching and learning; in knowing. We can see this in the work of historical references in education such as John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, José Martí, John Dewey and Paulo Freire. Today, we are realising that the big issues society is facing on a global level extrapolate the sphere of single disciplines, while not denying their importance. Among these issues today stand out sustainability of life on the planet and an effective democratic future. In my career I was fortunate to encounter colleagues from different disciplines from whom I continue learning. For instance, working with historians we embraced the study of the hidden or forgotten sources of the rich tradition of resistance and creativity of Latin American pedagogy. Participatory Budgeting is better understood with the collaboration of a colleague from Political Science/Sociology and another one from Feminist theory. It was a quite natural way into comparison as a methodological tool. When dealing with differences we are always comparing. The question then arises about what we are actually comparing that would allow at the same time respecting the differences and promoting a fruitful dialogue among experiences. Far from considering myself an expert in comparative studies I came to be involved in contributing to develop a framework for comparative studies on pedagogies of participation and more recently on institutionalizing inter and transdisciplinarity.

Richard and Miren:

We continue the interview with two other relevant concepts in your Action Research journey, decolonisation and decoloniality. Why is there now particular focus on issues of decolonisation and decoloniality? Is there a need for new political concepts and movements, in the context of problems of global capitalism?

Danilo:

A Brazilian sociologist, Octavio Ianni, argues that Latin America is a reality in search of a concept. This may also be true for other parts of the world, but it seems that in Latin America the question of “who we are” as a people acquires a special urgency. Colonisation with centuries of slavery left profound marks in our societies with indecent levels of inequality, with continuing racism and “machismo”. The point is not to play the victims of the past, but to understand the extension of this past into the present and avoid its contamination of a future that should be less unjust for most people and less exploitative of nature. The concept of coloniality, respectively, decoloniality, seems to capture the objective and subjective dimensions of the various forms of domination and oppression. An important ingredient in the

concept is that it highlights the role of race in the historical development of modernity where in the name of a “higher” civilization original inhabitants of the “new” land could be eliminated and others could be enslaved. This does not mean that the emancipatory principle of European enlightenment should be discarded, but we should strive for what Enrique Dussel, an Argentinian-Mexican philosopher, calls transmodernity, where modernity is inscribed within a broader historical and social context.

Richard and Miren:

Continuing with that, you are co-leading a current international collaboration on “Decolonisation of Knowledge Production and Dissemination”, with a focus on Brazil and South Africa. The collaboration is supported by BRICS. What have you learned during the first seminar series? What are the implications?

Danilo:

This seminar with participants from Brazil and South Africa was a great learning experience, and an adequate answer to your question would go beyond the scope of an interview. Here I only register two of these leanings. One of them is that coloniality is a process that manifests itself in different ways. For instance, in South Africa the still open wounds of apartheid and in Brazil the centuries of slavery have different effects on social practices. “Rage” has been a concept that appears strongly in the African experience, while in Brazil the persistent racial discrimination is hidden behind a gloss of equality. I have also realised how coloniality/decoloniality should not be seen as a progressive linear process from minus to plus, or from a negative to a positive pole, but as a permanent tension, as we have learned from Paulo Freire about humanisation and dehumanisation. While we strive for humanisation there is always the risk of dehumanisation since both are possibilities that are actualized within the contradictions of history.

Richard and Miren:

During your period as Editor-in-Chief of IJAR, the international diversity of published papers has greatly increased. We have several questions. How have you encouraged this development? And how have you engaged in dialogue with contributors?

Danilo:

When I was challenged by Werner Fricke to accept the task of becoming editor-in-chief of the International Journal of Action Research I had serious doubts if I would be able to carry out the job adequately, for various reasons. English is not my native language and I am aware of my linguistic limits. Furthermore, besides Orlando Fals Borda and Paulo Freire, few names of Latin American intellectuals circulate in the arena of Action Research. At the same time, I felt that the scope of Action Research could benefit, for example, if more of Latin America could be publicized, and IJAR could be a vehicle for that. This also applies for practices in other parts of the world, and I am glad that we started to get more papers from other places that were not on the map of Action Research. This merit has to be shared with the fellow editors who always supported me, and to the publishers: first Rainer Hampp Verlag, and now Barbara Budrich Verlag, who allowed the journal to construct its own road.

Richard and Miren:

You have also worked in the organisation of the series of IJAR symposia, every two years. What has their role been?

Danilo:

I understand that the role of a journal is not simply to publish papers, but to have a formative role in the field. This is usually accomplished through the editorial guidelines and through the reviewing process, which is fine. But a journal can be and do more, and that is how the symposia started. They can provide a space for authors to meet and discuss their work; it is particularly a dialogical space for educating ourselves as more experienced researchers together with researchers who are coming to the field, and do not have a training in Action Research in their university courses. The fact of being itinerant also provides the opportunity to know in loco particular developments of Action Research. As the next one will be in Istanbul, I have great expectation to know about the type of Action Research carried out through the Arama Chair of Action Research established at Sabanci University and led by Oğuz Babüroğlu

Richard and Miren:

You have developed a distinctive style of leadership of IJAR, with a central place for succession planning. What does this tell us about the potential role of an international journal?

Danilo:

Probably based on my experience when invited by Werner Fricke, the former editor-in-chief, I was aware that there are plenty of reasons for most colleagues politely not accepting the invitation to lead the editorial board. At the same time, I also know from experience that when there is team work, and if the work is regarded as worthwhile, someone will carry the stick one more mile. And here is Miren Larrea exploring new possibilities for the journal with a renewed team of editors. It is a gratifying feeling when I see that the journal is a living collective project.

Richard and Miren:

We want to have some final reflections now about the future. Should we see Action Research as a movement, bringing together diverse traditions, and challenging academic power structures? Alternatively, does it simply offer a marginal critique of mainstream academic orthodoxy and positivist scientific research?

Danilo:

I see the future as a horizon, a vision or utopia, towards which we want to walk, but at the same time recognising that features of this future are already present in our daily life actions, here and now. They are what Paulo Freire calls *inéditos viáveis* (untested feasibilities), which carry the seeds of the future we envision. I am not too concerned about Action Research becoming hegemonic or being part of the hegemonic research practices. I have learned from popular education that there is always a price to be paid by institutionalisation, and that therefore it is preferably to keep a healthy tension between the “instituted” and the “instituting”. I would prefer seeing Action Research being always on the side of the instituting movements, providing new insights, pushing for social justice whenever and wherever people are oppressed or excluded.

Richard and Miren:

Danilo, is there anything you would like to share with IJAR readers that we have forgotten about?

Danilo:

Just a thank you for the authors who trust their work to IJAR, and to the readers who are the *raison d'être* of the journal.

Richard and Miren:

Thanks very much Danilo, for sharing your insights with all the readers of IJAR.

About Danilo Streck:

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).

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, 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) and Santa Fé and Tierra del Fuego (Argentina).

Richard Ennals is Emeritus Professor at Kingston University, and a co-editor of IJAR since 1998. He studied Philosophy and History at King's College Cambridge, before teaching in schools in the UK and Nigeria. He was a researcher and research manager in logic programming at Imperial College London, resigning in opposition to UK participation in the US Strategic Defense Initiative. He has had visiting posts at the Swedish Royal Institute of Technology, Linnaeus University, the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, the University of Agder, and Sabanci University Istanbul. His books include “Star Wars: A Question of Initiative”, (Wiley), “Work Life 2000: Quality in Work” (Springer), “Dialogue, Skill and Tacit Knowledge” (Wiley) and “From Slavery to Citizenship” (Wiley).