

Action Research on the Edge

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I write this editorial after sharing three intense days in the IJAR 2022 symposium, organised by Sabanci University on the 12th, 13th and 14th of October. My sincere gratitude to Oğuz Babüroğlu and Pinar Akpinar for the organisation of the event and for taking care of every detail while it was ongoing.

Our colleagues in Istanbul challenged participants in the symposium to reflect on “Action Research on the Edge” and we were able to discuss, among others, edges regarding climate change and sustainability, democracy, inclusion and exclusion, anti-gender mobilisations, knowledge democracies and decolonisation. Many of the cases had to do with city or regional development, but we also got to discuss international relationships.

In the opening speech I shared three edges that IJAR has addressed that I consider relevant for the future of the journal: new forms of capitalism and their impact on climate and sustainability, the stagnation of global democratisation and dehumanisation. I share here the contributions that inspired me.

The first is a recent IJAR article (Fricke, Greenwood, Larrea and Streck, 2021) that I had the pleasure to co-author with Werner Fricke, Davydd Greenwood and Danilo Streck. Writing with them helped me better understand the tradition of this journal and its future potential. That is why I shared it in the symposium. The article addresses capitalism, and especially its uncontrolled, disembedded forms, as the main force that is changing the world and pushing it closer to the edges by generating both environmental disaster and unprecedented levels of global and societal inequality. The paper is an invitation to Action Researchers to find new formulas to face these emerging forms of capitalism.

Democracy is another relevant concept to understand the edges. In this case I went back to Björn Gustavsen’s paper published in IJAR in 2017 and entitled Action Research and the Promotion of Democracy. Gustavsen argued that a global democratisation process seems to have stagnated, and a kind of post-democratic hybrid emerges in formerly democratic countries. He asks: “Is this development of concern to social research in general and Action Research in particular? If so, what can or should be done?”. He invited Action Researchers to positively pursue specific ideas about what constitutes a better world, examine the performance potential of democracy, and even to act in its defence.

My third reflection referred to humanisation as another relevant and complex concept to understand Action Research on the edge. For this reflection I was inspired by Danilo Streck, in the interview published in the previous issue of IJAR. Danilo tells us that Paulo Freire, 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.

I want to invite all readers of IJAR to reflect on these and other edges that we are facing, and to consider this journal as a space where we can share not only our research, but also discussions and book reviews that keep dialogue going on how to improve these situations. In this specific issue we address some of these challenges.

The first article, authored by Sebastian Huber and entitled “The shift from owning to sharing: employing Action Research to facilitate SMEs’ business model transformation” is based on the rationale that business-to-business sharing facilitates a more sustainable use of resources, besides saving cost to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Huber frames this rationale in the recent discourse that, looking for more sustainable ways to run businesses, calls for novel business models based on collaboration, co-creation and co-opetition. Here, sharing fits more naturally, challenging traditional views on competition. The problem he addresses is that SMEs seem to find barriers to enter in sharing processes. He argues that Action Research can be used to overcome such barriers and presents an Action Research process developed with Swiss SMEs favourably inclined towards B2B sharing activities. In the paper he describes the process and provides frameworks that can be useful for other cases of transformational nature regarding business management research.

The second article, entitled “The role of Action Research in democratizing governance: the case of Bilbao Next Lab” discusses the connection between Action Research and democratisation, inspired among others by the work of Björn Gustavsen. The author, Joaquín Gregorio Oliva Peirano, is a Chilean researcher who has developed his master thesis in the Basque Country (Spain). There, he has found out that researchers using Action Research for territorial development claim that their research contributes to democratisation, however, they have no frameworks that explain how this happens. Consequently, they do not evaluate in an explicit way whether this happens, nor how it happens. In this context, Oliva proposes a framework to analyse such democratisation processes and uses it to evaluate an Action Research process that was already finished. He does this through interviews with the participants. Although what he shares in the article is an ex-post evaluation by participants, his framework could be used by Action Researchers who want to integrate the democratisation dimension in their facilitation.

The other two articles of this issue focus on educational contexts. One of them emphasises the relevance of making educational processes inclusive, while the other focuses on the need to make them meaningful.

Ariane Janse van Rensburg contributes with the paper entitled “Retrospective Action Research on facilitating equitable learning outcomes in a diverse class”. This paper addresses two challenges, one is educational and the other, methodological. Regarding educational processes Janse van Rensburg shares how, in a class of students coming from diverse lived experiences, she found out that students with the same potential were not achieving the same academic outcomes. The questions she poses regarding this challenge are: How should I change my teaching to give all students equitable access to successful academic outcomes? Equally importantly, how could I equip future architects with a broader social understanding that would enable them to be relevant designers in a diverse society? While addressing these questions, the author responds also to a methodological challenge. Her study was retrospective, meaning that she conducted it after the changes in teaching had been completed. A valuable contribution of the paper is how to guarantee the robustness of this type of retrospective studies.

The fourth paper in this issue is authored by Reynaldo O. Cuizon and entitled “Healing assessment trauma: an experience of mutuality in Action Research”. Cuizon presents his experience as a teacher, when he realised that the way he assessed his students was traumatic for them and decided to develop an Action Research process to transform his assessment materials. He shares in detail how he proceeded to develop such materials collaboratively with his students, and the results he got. However, he also writes about a result that seems to be unexpected: mutual healing between teacher and students. To explain how mutual healing happened Cuizon shares, on the one hand, quotes by students and, on the other, the results of his self-inquiry process. He thus integrates second person and first-person Action Research. Consequently, the article shares not only a process of technical improvement of assessment materials, but also a deeply humanising experience. It is this last dimension that the author emphasises as a feature that can help improve the international landscape regarding education.

Together with these papers we share an interview with a co-editor of International Journal of Action Research, Malida Mookan. She takes us through a journey from Mauritius to Canada through Scotland. For every step of her journey, she shares lessons learnt about transnational monopoly capitalism, “human” substantive individual and collective freedoms, forms of discrimination/ domination and decoloniality, among others. They are all part of her perspective on Action Research.

Finally, we share a review by James Karlsen of the book entitled “Students’ Quality Circles – QC Circles Re-engineered for Developing Student Personality” authored by Dinesh P. Chapagain. It is an open access book based on experience and practice to enhance the pro-social personality of students and thus empower them with tools and technology and boost their moral values. It can be inspiring for readers facing similar challenges.

I hope that readers of the International Journal of Action Research will enjoy this issue focused on how Action Research can help develop more democratic processes, sustainable businesses and inclusive and humanising education.