

## Action Researching for Transformations: Interview with Hilary Bradbury

Hilary Bradbury, Danilo Streck, Miren Larrea

### **Danilo and Miren:**

Thank you, Hilary, for this interview for the readers of the *International Journal of Action Research*. It is a pleasure to have you with us. Let's start, as we always do, giving the reader a perspective on your trajectory. Why and how did you come to AR?

### **Hilary:**

Hola y gracias Danilo! Kaixo, Eskerrik asko, Miren!  
Thank you both for the kind invitation.

### **Danilo and Miren:**

What life experiences and authors have been important references in your work? Could you tell us how they have impacted your trajectory?

### **Hilary:**

Early formative experiences include growing up in Dublin. This meant growing up in a deeply religious, post-colonial state. We could compare it to today's Iran. Though we had more rain and better beer! I remember reading Orwell's *Animal Farm* as a kid. It so touched me, I became a vegetarian! My first trip alone was as an exchange student to Germany which I loved. I later applied for university exchange too. I got quite involved in environmentalism as I read all the great German philosophers. I also read deeply in feminism. My first job back in Ireland was working for Amnesty International and teaching English to Spanish kids who kept me on my toes. I was super thrilled to escape to graduate school in the USA. However I was disappointed by the intellectualism. This would become a lifelong tension. I love exciting ideas, am excited by rethinking power – I wrote a thesis on Foucault in graduate school – yet I felt as a scholar I was supposed to ignore real life. So I dropped out of my first PhD program in an attempt to find real life! I moved between extremes, from an eye-opening stint working for a very wealthy industrialist, I went to Japan to study Zen meditation for a year. When I returned to the USA I had the good fortune to find work with Peter Senge at the MIT Center for Organizational Learning. Finally I had an onramp to integrating my passions. I completed a PhD in Organizational Transformation, focusing on the greening of business and leadership for sustainability. From this a successful academic career grew, in which I managed the creative tension of doing scholarly work that is also relevant to life. That remains my passion.

**Danilo and Miren:**

There are several things you are well known for in the action research community. Let us start talking about the SAGE handbooks. They seem to be a formidable way to get to know action researchers from all around the world with a varied set of ideas and practices. What can you tell us about this experience?

**Hilary:**

The partnership with Peter Reason on the Handbook remains one of the more positive and productive early partnerships, and a terrific start to learning about many types of action research all over the world. I completed my PhD at the same time; I was action researching with Swedish business leaders in Sweden. Worth mentioning also is that quite a few academic mentors at the time discouraged me from getting involved with action research. They felt it would detract from my career on tenure track. Happily, they were wrong.

In this early editorial work with the Handbook I brought an interest in framing and connecting the different approaches. Peter and I had very few disagreements, though I recall a good one. We disagreed over whether to include a definition of action research and principles for assessing quality in action research. I thought it was necessary. I am happy to see the definition and principles I helped create now used so widely.

**Danilo and Miren:**

You have long experience with self-inquiry and first-person action research. Why did you make this choice? How do they relate to second or third person forms of action research? What is your experience about the relationship between action researchers with different practices?

**Hilary:**

My abiding interest in ecological and feminist thinking had me understand that the world is not simply “out there.” Instead, how we perceive the world shapes our understanding of reality. And in turn that shapes the actions we take, or do not take. We can call this a constructivist perspective on life and learning. Practically, though, it also implies that we are called to more conscious awareness of the choices we make. To be simple about it, in any interaction I can choose reciprocal versus extractive. The partnership way is the more action researchy way. But I don’t think it is the easy choice. Therefore, developing more conscious action requires inquiry. From that a new repertoire for partnership and collaboration becomes possible. This has wide implications. Mother Earth is sending us loud and clear signals that we need to partner in ecological processes and stop our extraction. Obviously there are obstacles – cultural and personal – that make a partnership orientation difficult. “Consciousness raising” helps. In action researching terms, I call for a *praxis of reflexivity with self and one another*. We need a reflexivity that is not just cerebral but can help us meet the emotional complexity of partnership. If we are to come to collaborative action together, having big ideas is not enough. I remain interested in learning and teaching to use power differently. That takes practice. It takes what I now call developmental friends. Action research is such an excellent vehicle for development of self in the context of sustainable development of a collective!

**Danilo and Miren:**

You are the lead author of a 2019 article entitled “A call to Action Research for Transformations: The times demand it”. What do the times demand from action research?

**Hilary:**

It starts with the words, “Our beautiful Earth is becoming inhospitable to us.” To put it simply, the whole paper is a polite demand of educators change-leaders to get serious about the demise of our Mother Earth which is deeply linked to extractive social policies. It lays out how more of us can play a conscious role in accepting that we too often continue with processes of knowledge creation that keep us separate from what we ought to care about. I say it is time to think about how to better reconnect our heads, hearts and hands. We cannot get there from there, we get there from here, writes Freire. I feel that so many educational resources are wasted on analysis paralysis that calls people to ignore their own experience and engage in abstractions. I looked for partnership with other authors who care about transformation also beyond the field of action researchers. For example, Karen O’Brien is a Nobel Laureate for IPCC work on climate change. My sense is that it is time to reach out to the sustainability scientists who want to make a difference with their research. So many more scientists can be liberated by action research. I hope the essay helped reach those who are not usually labelled action researchers.

**Danilo and Miren:**

Recently you published a new book, “How to do Action Research for Transformations at a Time of Eco-social Crisis”. Could you tell us what is your core message with the book?

**Hilary:**

In a way it is the book length version of that 2019 editorial. The foundational idea is that humans can continue to learn and evolve after we grow up physically. I define *learning* as the transformation of experience through reflection AND action, in other words I take a pragmatic or consequentialist approach and see conscious action as what directs learning and evolution. Unfortunately, many of us were never told the key secret, that action *is part of* learning from experience. Too few of us know we can continue to grow and evolve if we cultivate our capacities for partnership through life.

The book makes the case for linking personal development to sustainable development and hence an emphasis on reflexivity. Then it sketches working along a pathway of seven choice points for quality in action research. These start with intention, move through participative process and end with the idea of actioning our work through next groups of stakeholders. Some of the examples are taken from a huge and enduring piece of work I did with the Port of Los Angeles. Some are more recent, with today’s work to support the efforts of other action researchers through the Action Research Plus Foundation.

I give lots of examples, big and small, of what a more transformative approach to knowledge creation, i. e., action research for transformations, ART, looks like. I say it is an approach in which we develop ourselves and our world as a response to the eco-social polycrisis around us.

**Danilo and Miren:**

Let us now focus on AR+. Could you briefly introduce what it is and tell us about your ambitions and hopes with this project?

**Hilary:**

AR+ is a global community that grew out of the now three Handbooks. It was funded by my royalties, as we needed seed capital for the website and basic administration. The idea was to convene a community space around the authors and readers so more of us, seniors and novices could interact. Then the idea of meetings online took hold. We seemed to attract people interested in the edgier work that includes personal development. We were early adopters of Zoom. I found that very engaging personally. By 2018 or so, I became more focused on AR+ than academia and AR+ is a space that explicitly develops and extends transformative action research, ART. We have, for example, helped develop a tool for self assessment which helps people notice their use of power, feedback and collaboration. And we especially like ambitious action researchers – like the work you do, Miren, in the Basque region, like the work Svante Lifvergren does in Sweden. We have good participation from the Global South too. We have a Gathering in November this year in the Italian Alps, hosted by the Free University of Bolzano. We will see what wants to evolve for us as a community. I hold a vision for linking ambitious action researchers across the globe.

**Danilo and Miren:**

How would you like your work to have an impact in the multiple crises we are experiencing?

**Hilary:**

It seems to me we have a choice. We can hide from our eco-social calamities, or grow ourselves by helping transformations happen. I recommend the latter. The bonus is that we feel more alive when we are not pretending there are no calamities. We may also feel more useful when we are making a small difference even with a small community. I certainly doubt that we will reverse climate change in our lifetime. However, we can learn to live better in an unstable world. And in so doing grow ourselves up as human beings. Our default mindset evolved in the Paleolithic era, no wonder we have problems with diversity and future forming! We have to learn to use our godlike technology to create a world that works for all beings. Action research is ideal for that. Happily, I get to see its fruits every day in papers sent for publication to ARJ.

**Danilo and Miren:**

Considering the previous and other experiences, what would you highlight (positive and/or negative) from your lifelong AR practices?

**Hilary:**

I often think the key question is why we *don't* succeed in planting and nurturing seeds for real change. As an organizational psychologist by training, I ponder about so many of us who struggle with the destabilization of contemporary life. Its not a stretch to suggest so many people feel traumatized. We see suicide rates climb. Yet our institutions offer defensiveness against innovation. Our universities continue with their 16<sup>th</sup> Century processes of Ivory Tower. We cannot simply assume that people can learn, much less engage in change work, without healing the growing personal and interpersonal anxiety. Our work needs to be more emotionally attuned, more psychologically sensitive. Maybe then we can add value. We all grew up in some kind of power-over, we might say, supremacist system. In Spain Franco is not a distant memory. For me our theocracy is still an echo. Change work that happens on top of

this trauma is unable to grow. So let us understand that our work is not easy. How can we simply expect that those who have had upper caste status – which includes all men and all of us of European descent – can easily meet the demands for more equitable arrangements. I am more and more interested in what it takes to co-create higher quality relational spaces, with more trust, more fun, more sense of community, as we accomplish good things.

**Danilo and Miren:**

Considering today's multifaceted crisis (economic, political, cultural, environmental, among others) does action research have a special role? How can action research become (more) relevant?

**Hilary:**

I ask myself something a little different. When it is good, action research is particularly good for producing transformative change. For example, Gustavsen's work helped change organizational life. We see that continue through organizational learning efforts and Otto Scharmer's work today. Yet action research remains too marginal. Why? The work is hard and requires multiple skills. I see a system of education not fit for purpose. Too many grad students don't even know about action research. All people now need to learn how to mobilize change for their own lives and with others. All students at university ought to learn about action research, and do some small projects to get the hang of it, before they are sent into the world!

I also see the field of action research itself remaining too disorganized and lacking discipline. Perhaps it remains so until there is more support and sponsorship. That said, my insights from adult development have me think that reflexivity is not easy for most adults. We prefer to know and be right, than to learn and muddle along together.

**Danilo and Miren:**

To close the interview, we always ask interviewees about the *International Journal of Action Research* (IJAR). What do you see? What are your wishes regarding IJAR's future development?

**Hilary:**

I was just reading IJAR's recent call to work on new forms of capitalism with implications for impact on climate and sustainability. You are noticing the stagnation of global democratization and general dehumanization. Bravo, Brava! The call to work around capitalism seems like a space for beginning to overcome the Global North versus Global South relationship. Certainly the Global South has something to teach us in the north about new experiments with capitalism. I hope to see IJAR fomenting more of a spirit of Global North *with* Global South. I also wonder about the practical issue of accessibility of your articles; the so-called pay wall problem. I understand that journals need to make money and I wonder if there is a way to share, within your constraints, more materials currently locked behind your paywall. Maybe there is a way AR+ can help with some of this too. Let's talk more about what we might accomplish together!

**Danilo and Miren:**

Thanks very much, Hilary, for taking the time to share your perspective with the readers of IJAR.