

Action Research as Understood and Practiced by Olav Eikeland: An Appreciation

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Re-publishing this essay by Olav Eikeland is an invitation, not to remember him and move on, but to engage or re-engage with his comprehensive critique of careless commonplaces often found in writing and practice in action research.

Olav's combination of world-class philosophical expertise with particular emphasis on Aristotle, combined with his decades of practice in action research in multiple organizations, and his extensive critical corpus aimed at both setting higher conceptual standards for action research was motivated by his lifelong aims for action research: "Mainstreaming action research needs more and more adequate distinctions. What I have presented, are some suggestions to think through."

Olav's vision of action research is, as it should be, demanding and it is easy to shy away from his emphasis on making clear conceptual distinctions, anchoring them in competent histories of ideas and practices, and banishing loose commonplaces about action research and change. By mainstreaming action research, he meant achieving both intellectual and practical clarity, leaving commonplaces aside, and engaging action research as the central practice of a genuine "social science". This ambitious agenda was central to his entire corpus and is, in fact, as any good set of philosophical and practical critiques, quite challenging to current action research practice, including my own.

Among other things, this means an encounter with Olav's work requires willingness to engage complex conceptual distinctions, critique and self-critique of many current action research practices, and using his writing to strengthen our own work and that of action research in general.

From personal experience I can say that many of the things I have written about action research would have been better and more thoughtful had I encountered Olav's work earlier. For example, my over-reliance on a Baconian justification for action research, as will be seen in his essay, was far too simple to carry the weight I put on it. But, as Olav and I shared a commitment to the development of action research, I took this as a way of improving my work. Most of us will find multiple stimuli to improve our concepts and practices in his extensive body of work. (see his extensive entries in ResearchGate and Academia.edu where many of his essays are available for download (<https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Olav-Eikeland> and <https://independent.academia.edu/EikelandO>).

Robert Redfield, a famous mid-twentieth century anthropologist and Dean of the Social Sciences at the University of Chicago is reputed to have said "Anthropology does not solve problems. It merely abandons them." This is a risk with the work of Olav Eikeland but it is a risk we cannot afford to take. In the face of the global climate crisis, massive global and national inequality, a continuing migration and refugee crisis, declining health indicators in

various wealthy countries, and more, we need more and better action research. We cannot afford to ignore Olav's call to deepen and broaden our work. Few legacies offer us so much wise counsel going forward.

From the following article, I call particular attention to these lines:

Action research itself challenges most taken-for-granted prejudices concerning both research and learning/teaching. Novices in action research tend to start thinking uncritically from such prejudices unexamined, however, as do other conventionalists not prone to critical reflection "outside given frames".

I do not agree that action research necessarily must change whatever is studied, neither to deserve the title "action research" nor to produce interesting and important learning and knowledge.

I have used most of my career and energy on doing action research, and on trying to understand the relationships between theory and practice or theory and experience, not only in action research but more generally in understanding and researching human beings, culture, and society (cf. Eikeland 1997; 2008).

What does this mean, then? Apparently, these are arguments strongly in favour of involvement and participation in the practices studied. There are no arguments for abstention or disengagement of a modern kind in Aristotle, neither concerning the study of nature nor the study of human beings. On the other hand, there are clear arguments against intervention and against reducing ethics and politics, including organisational studies, to a tekhnê or craft as depicted by Francis Bacon.

Mainstreaming action research needs more and more adequate distinctions. What I have presented, are some suggestions to think through.

Read on and accept Olav Eikeland's constructive challenges. We will all be the better for doing this.