

From working with theatre to action research for more regenerative ways of living and organizing: Interview with Lone Hersted

Lone Hersted, Danilo R. Streck, Miren Larrea

Danilo and Miren:

Thanks, Lone, for this interview in International Journal of Action Research (IJAR). Considering you have recently joined us as an editor of IJAR, it is exciting for us to have the opportunity to get to know you better and share that with the readers of IJAR.

As an introduction to the interview, could you give the reader a perspective of your trajectory?

Lone:

Thanks Danilo and Miren for inviting me to this interview! You asked about my trajectory... Well, to make a long story short... I was born in Denmark in 1969 where I grew up. At the age of 16 I went to Peru as an exchange student and did theatre with a local theatre group. As a young woman in my early twenties, I was educated as an actress at an experimental theatre school and afterwards I studied dramaturgy for five years at Aarhus University (in Denmark) where I took a Master's degree in theatre studies. I worked with experimental theatre for around ten years in Denmark, Norway, Peru, Colombia, and Ecuador, and for a short period I was also involved with actors from Poland from whom I've learned a lot. My work has always been driven by curiosity, a strong social commitment, and the urge to experiment with new approaches and new ways of expression. I've never been interested in just reproducing the old tradition. For a period, I also worked with interactive digital media in relation to performance theatre and installation art. That was several years before the use of digital media in the art world became more widespread.

After becoming a mother to a lovely son, I started working as a consultant in the field of organizational development informed by systemic, narrative and social constructionist ideas and practices. In particular, I worked with team development based on dialogue and creative approaches to learning and collaboration, including the use of roleplaying. I also worked for a period at Aarhus Municipality as a family therapist with refugee families from many different countries.

In 2016 I submitted my PhD dissertation on relational leading and dialogical processes at Aalborg University. The American professor in social psychology, Kenneth Gergen, was my PhD supervisor. My PhD project was carried out within the frame of action research combining roleplaying with reflexive dialogues and reflecting team in small groups of leaders and employees. The aim was to enhance relational and dialogical competences among leaders and

employees through the use of roleplaying. The project was carried out in 10 public schools and at a residential institution for adolescents.

My PhD dissertation was inspired by the theoretical work of, among others, Kenneth Gergen, John Shotter, Mikhail Bakhtin, Lev Vygotsky and Ann Cunliffe. The writings of Gergen and Shotter let me to action research. In particular, an essay written by Kenneth Gergen on research as future forming and the writings on action research, “witness-thinking” and “knowing from within” by John Shotter captured my interest and inspired me in my work with action research.

In addition, I became very inspired by the work of Professor Louise Phillips from Roskilde University (Denmark), who had developed an analytical framework for the analysis of action research processes inspired by Bakhtin and Foucault. Here, emphasis was put on dialogue, discourse, power and ethics in collaborative research.

After the PhD, I achieved a position as assistant professor at Aalborg University (Denmark) and continued working with action research, mainly in institutions and schools in the public sector, and a few years later I achieved a position as associate professor at Aalborg University. I still develop and facilitate action research projects, and if appropriate, I combine it with creative elements such as theatre, poetry, drawings, singing etc. Recently I did an action research project in the financial sector with 12 bank managers with the aim of helping these managers move their organization into a more sustainable and regenerative direction. I was happy to experience their openness towards more creative and alternative approaches. For instance, we did meditation and a series of exercises in nature, which helped them to relax and open up their minds towards new perspectives.

Danilo and Miren:

We got to know you as an action researcher and were surprised to learn that you were educated as an actress, however, we probably shouldn't have been. How does your education and experience as an actress emerge in your action research? What is the connection between art and action research?

Lone:

I'm very interested in building bridges and finding ways to continue developing the field of action research by creative and aesthetical elements. As mentioned earlier, I try to include theatre, poetry, drawing, singing and sometimes as well sculpturing in my work with action research and as well activities in nature. I do this to create space for different kinds of learning, different ways of experiencing, which open up new ways of relating and new ways of knowing. It usually makes the process more joyful and more inspiring for the participants/co-researchers, as it opens up new perspectives and new ways of understanding.

Danilo and Miren:

IJAR has explored the connections between action researchers in Europe and Latin America. You are Danish, but you lived in Latin America for some time. Could you tell us about that experience and what you learnt that is significant to understand your perspective on action research?

Lone:

I think that action research is a very useful inquiry to work with complex problems – in our societies and communities, but also in our organizations and institutions. Action research is a powerful way of engaging people in transforming their lives, their workplaces and communities. In Latin America there is a strong tradition of participatory action research inspired by Paolo Freire, Orlando Fals Borda, Agosto Boal and many others, where emphasis is put on social justice, democracy, freedom of expression, emancipation, social equality, human rights and the improvement of the fundamental conditions for life, education and work etc.

When I worked with theatre in Latin America, I was very young, and I wasn't familiar with action research as such, but there were some similarities in the ways how we were engaged in collecting material and creating artistic expressions based on our own and other peoples lived experience. For instance, when I worked with a Peruvian theatre group or directed a theatre project with indigenous people living in the Ecuadorian rainforest, it was not just a matter of creating a beautiful piece of art, but as well a matter of raising important questions, sustaining identity work and revealing social injustice. The inspiration and material for the performances originated from the reality of the people living in these circumstances.

Danilo and Miren:

You are now part of an action researcher environment in Aalborg University where, especially through Marianne Kristiansen and Joergen Bloch Poulsen, IJAR received important contributions. Could you tell us about this environment and the kind of action research you do?

Lone:

We have a relatively small, but quite strong action research community at Aalborg University, and we're engaged in a larger action research network at a national level called Danish Action research Network (DAN). At Aalborg University, we work with many different approaches to action research in various kinds of organizations and environments. Particularly, in public organizations in the areas of health care, childcare, education, elder care, but we do as well facilitate action research projects in the private sector. For instance, as I mentioned, I recently facilitated an action research project on regenerative leadership with managers from the financial sector. Some of the researchers at Aalborg University work with systemic or narrative inquiries, others work with arts-based and aesthetically informed approaches, some work from a philosophical approach combining action research with existential, Socratic dialogues, and several of us try to combine some of these approaches and find new ways of doing action research. There are different approaches with roots in different paradigms: phenomenology, hermeneutics, critical theory, pragmatism and social constructionism. Right now, I experience that action researchers at Aalborg University are less dogmatic and more openminded towards approaches, which are different from their own, which has led to an enormous diversity in the field, where people are experimenting with many different ways of practicing action research and carrying out action research projects in many different contexts, which I find very life affirming and liberating.

In addition, several of our educational programs, in particular at master level, are built around problem-based learning and action research, which means that, our master students are encouraged to work with real problems in society inspired by action research for instance in the field of healthcare, social care, education, public administration, business development, green transition, sustainability etc. The fact that several of our educational programs are

integrating action research also contributes to maintain a strong action research environment among the staff. In addition, we meet and exchange our experience with action researchers from other parts of the country, for instance from Roskilde University and several university colleges in different areas of the country.

Danilo and Miren:

We want to go a bit deeper into what you have just described. Who do you think are the authors that have most influenced the action research environment in Aalborg? And who have been the authors that have most influenced you?

Lone:

Concerning the research environment at Aalborg University in general, I think it's difficult to answer this question, because people are inspired by many different traditions. As mentioned, some of my colleagues work from a phenomenological-hermeneutic approach, others from a pragmatic orientation, others from a critical perspective and others from a systemic or social constructionist orientation.

But maybe, some of the most influential sources of inspiration at Aalborg University have been Bjørn Gustavsen, Øyvind Pålshaugen, Jørgen Bloch Poulsen, Marianne Kristiansen, Olav Eikeland, David Coghlan, Davydd Greenwood, Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury, and in my case, particularly the social constructionists, Kenneth Gergen and John Shotter.

Actually, these years there is a strong movement in sustainability and more regenerative ways of organizing, working and producing services and goods, and I think that this movement could benefit from action research in order to involve citizens, decision makers, city planners, students, local entrepreneurs, local businesses in transforming our society into a more sustainable and regenerative direction. Therefore, I believe that action research will experience a kind of renaissance over the coming years, which probably also will contribute to new ways of doing and theorizing about action research.

Danilo and Miren:

There are several concepts we found interesting in your work, but let's pick one up. What is relational leading and how do you develop that through action research?

Lone:

Well, relational leading is an understanding of leadership where the capability of building up relationships and involving employees in dialogical processes are seen as essential. This is a move away from the authoritarian, heroic leader figure towards understanding leading as a relational, collective capacity involving all the members of an organization.

Some years ago, Kenneth Gergen and I started discussing this theme, and we decided to write a little book with the title *Relational Leading: Practices for Dialogically Based Collaboration*, which was published in 2013. The book was based on a series of workshops where we involved leaders, employees and consultants in roleplaying for the enhancement of dialogic and relational capabilities. My notion of relational leading builds on the understanding that through dialogical interaction and collaboration we can create new ways of moving forward together, while accepting that, in an organization, there will always be different voices and interpretations at stake. In our book we view organizations as webs of conversations,

conversational flows, or a confluence of conversations, which contrasts with the view of the organization as an ultimately rational and efficient machine.

My approach to relational leading is built on an understanding of leading and organizing, where communication is seen as a continuing process, emergent and open, and where people attempt to construct meaning together. In this view, meaning is not something preconceived and preplanned, but something which emerges through dialogue, interplay, and co-creation. Here we see many elements, which are also found in action research such as for instance the idea of polyvocality and democratic involvement.

Danilo and Miren:

We have often heard speak about a “Nordic” or “Scandinavian” approach to action research. How do you experience this? What does it mean for you? Is action research strong in these countries nowadays?

Lone:

I may disappoint you here, because personally, I’m not so much inspired by a so-called Nordic or Scandinavian tradition of action research, probably because my theoretical orientation mainly has been Anglo-Saxon, and I was just a little child in the seventies, when the action research movement was really strong in the Scandinavian countries. But of course, I acknowledge the work of Bjørn Gustavsen, Øyvind Pålshaugen, Olav Eikeland and others, who have influenced the action research communities in the Nordic countries. But as mentioned earlier, I myself work from a more systemic, narrative and social constructionist orientation to action research, which is another tradition.

Danilo and Miren:

We have met you not only in the IJAR environment, but also in AR+. What is your experience on how different action research communities relate to each other? There are multiple calls now for action researchers to come together to make action research significant in the face of eco-social challenges, how do you imagine we can do this?

Lone:

I think that it’s quite interesting that there is a certain overlap between these environments, which creates opportunities to work together, sharing experience and uniting our resources and creative forces. There is a strong potential for collaboration and synergy.

Danilo and Miren:

You are preparing a special issue for IJAR now that will focus on action research and environmental sustainability. Tell us a bit more about this project.

Lone:

All right. We’ve made a call for papers on action research in favor of more sustainable and regenerative ways of living, organizing, producing etc. With this call for papers, we are interested in figuring out whether and how action research can further eco-social change for the better of our environment and society. As we point out in the call, when we talk about sustainability, we must also take in consideration social justice and equality. When we talk about green transition, we must also take in consideration political, economic, and social

change etc. In the guest editorial group, we consider that there is a huge need for research, which conceptualizes ideas, projects, and initiatives for sustainability, through the integration of both ecological and social perspectives. Therefore, we were calling for papers concerning action research projects dealing with complex eco-social problems with the aim of transforming our society towards a more sustainable and regenerative direction by the active involvement of citizens and practitioners.

Danilo and Miren:

Let's continue talking about IJAR. As we pointed out in the introduction, you have recently joined the group of editors. What are your expectations for the journal?

Lone:

I think that IJAR is a very important journal in the debate and dissemination of action research, and my hope is that the journal can continue to encourage and inspire the development of action research in relation to the eco-social problems that we are confronting both in this moment of history but also in a future perspective while taking in consideration future generations. We must think globally and act locally and, as I see it, action research is a very inspiring and effective approach to engage people in working with eco-social challenges and societal change.

Danilo and Miren:

To close the interview, we always ask interviewees what they see as the distinctive role of IJAR in the action research community. Do you want to add anything to what you already said about the journal?

Lone:

I think that IJAR fulfills a very important role of debating and disseminating action research, and also that it contributes to the continuous renewal in the field. I look very much forward to continuing our collaboration in the editorial group, and I also hope that we can engage and encourage young researchers from all around the world to get more involved in action research. I wish to thank you, Miren and Danilo, and the other members of the editorial board, for inviting me into this exciting community, and I look very much forward to getting to know you even better and to our future dialogues about action research.

Danilo and Miren:

Thanks very much, Lone, for the time you have dedicated to this interview and the readers of IJAR.