

Bradbury, Hilary (2023). *How to do action research for transformations at a time of eco-social crisis*. Edward Elgar Publishing (paperback edition)

By Patricia Canto-Farachala

I met Hilary Bradbury in person right before the pandemic at the AR+ Transformations Gathering convened by her and hosted by Chalmers University in Gothenburg, Sweden. I knew her before through, her writing, which I found mesmerizing. It seemed to me so untroubled, clear, and catchy; effortless in telling layered stories of transformation from which she learned and conceptualized, drawing from action research theory and from many disciplines. Her writing also seemed to me radical and sophisticated in that she so easily reached out to connect with current or past events, other philosophies, other ways of knowing and expression and then back to herself and to how she experiences the world. Here was someone who saw no walls, no borders and if she saw them, didn't mind them. Someone who seemed both very observant of her immediate reality, and attuned with the wider world.

I have not said that when I travelled to Sweden, I was writing my action research doctoral dissertation and had experienced academic tribunals and conferences. Chalmers was therefore a gift. Participants (fifty or so) included action researchers, consultants, and activists from Africa, America, Asia and Europe. Many of them were working on healthcare, development, and environmental issues, some were stewards of the Sustainable Development Goals Transformation Forum. The agenda was packed with activities and offered early morning slots for those wishing to practice yoga or meditate. Bach Flowers bottles were passed around enthusiastically. Time for pausing to connect with oneself and with others was embedded throughout. The meeting room was luminous, felt warm and full of colour, despite the cold dark days outside. We worked in plenaries and split into different groups several times a day. In one group, I shared experiences of vulnerability with a politician preparing to run for president in an American country. In another, an academic woman from a Nordic country expressed the need to know my name after having held hands in a shared activity. I found that intriguing. We harvested key learning points in a world cafe format and wrapped up discussing proposals for action to address the climate emergency. Before we all rushed out to catch planes and trains, we sat in a circle, held together by the beautiful voice of a woman and the soft chords from her guitar. There had been conflict and tears the day before, and issues of power and privilege had emerged. But, as Bradbury shares in page 121 of her book: "...we managed to hang in enough to learn together. Deep rupture allowed for deep repair."

How to do action research for transformations at a time of eco-social crisis is not about the Chalmers Gathering, it is about a lot more. The book does include a chronicle about Chalmers, halfway through, as it does many others that bring to life a wide array of characters in dissimilar scenarios from Bradbury's past, present (and even future!) experiences. Through

her chronicles she shows us how she learns and how she has harvested, over the years the conceptual underpinnings of ART. I bring Chalmers to this review because it captures how I experienced her art and, through her quote, a core theme in her book: rupture and repair. Rupture with self, rupture with others and rupture that scales beyond... rupture with our planet. Repair with self, repair with others and repair beyond... repair of our planet. Bradbury explains that the theory of change in ART is microworlds proliferating. From this perspective she defines sustainable development as personal development at scale. But one must make the effort to engage in relational processes, because how would personal development be possible without others? How would we become aware of what needs repairing?

Bradbury acknowledges that she must summon the will to fight against her own individualistic instincts to work with others and that doing collaborative processes can be surprisingly lonely. Moreover, as ARTists we must show up whole, working with our full-spectrum selves bringing in our emotions together with our intellect. We must also cultivate a flexible stance, developing a capacity for collaborative inquiry and accepting a fluid relational self-more than the safety of a fixed identity. As ARTists we are called upon to integrate, to defragment our self and our social worlds. ART, as you can tell, is not for snowflakes.

In her essays on art, sex and the mind, Siri Hustvedt (2017) tells a story of when she was invited by Columbia University to facilitate a dialogue between neuroscientists working on visual perception, and artists. The dialogue did not go well despite her noting that amid different vocabularies and methods dialogue was possible. The artists were angry because the event was framed in a way that made their art look inferior to the science of the experts. The neuroscientists were puzzled by all the fuss. The story sets the stage for Hustvedt's reflections on the fragmentation of knowledge, the unavoidable gulfs of incomprehension among people in various disciplines and on how without mutual respect no dialogue is at all possible. I wonder how her story would have unfolded if they had been able to hang in enough to learn together. In an interview about his book *Tyranny of the Minority* Steven Levitsky describes a chasm in western democracies between cosmopolitans and ethnonationalists. The former he says, are still a majority, but their diversity makes them more vulnerable to fragmentation and any issue that fragments it stands as a threat to democracy. We must try very hard to hang in together, which is why Bradbury's book is such a timely contribution.

When reading *How to do action research for transformations at a time of eco-social crisis*, I used a yellow fluorescent marker to highlight the parts that spoke to me for this review. I used a pink one to highlight the parts that spoke to me of a paper I am working on. And I dog-eared all the pages that spoke of my opportunities for personal development. Many learning chronicles and their characters, concepts, guidelines, and tools are now yellow, pink, dog-eared or all three, to the point that I no longer understand the difference. It all comes together, you see. That is how to do action research for transformations. But don't mind me. Experience the book yourself, see what it speaks to you, identify your developmental edges, check out all its resources and go back to it again and again as I know I will. The invitation in this book is to commit to a journey of life-long learning, making sure that our microworlds proliferate to a scale that repairs our ailing democracies and makes, as Bradbury puts it, our planet beautiful and hospitable again.

References

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