

Systematisation of Experiences and its contribution to Action Research: Transformative knowledge in a process of territorial development in Latin America

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Abstract: Systematisation of Experiences (SE) is a methodology originating and widely used in Latin America, which allows for the generation of knowledge from practice. This article seeks to contribute to demonstrating the value of SE for researchers who legitimate experiences and practices as sources of scientific knowledge production, and to recognizing the potential of SE to complement processes addressed through Action Research (AR).

To this end, the main characteristics of the SE methodology are presented and the similarities, differences, and complementarities with AR are analysed. Likewise, the systematisation of a strategically planned participatory territorial development process is presented, which takes place in a medium-sized municipality in the southwest of the Province of Buenos Aires (Argentina). This case demonstrates the capacity of SE to generate collective learning, strengthen local capacities, and improve the future approach to similar experiences in other territories.

Keywords: Systematisation of experiences, action research, territorial development, participatory strategic planning

La Sistematización de Experiencias y su contribución a la Investigación Acción. Conocimiento transformador en un proceso de desarrollo territorial de América Latina

Resumen: La Sistematización de Experiencias (SE) es una metodología originada y muy empleada en América Latina, que permite generar conocimiento a partir de la práctica. Este artículo busca contribuir a evidenciar el valor de la SE para investigadores que legitiman las experiencias y prácticas como fuentes de producción de conocimiento científico, y a reconocer su potencial para complementar los procesos abordados desde el enfoque de la Investigación Acción (IA).

Para ello, se exponen las principales características de la metodología de SE y se analizan las similitudes, diferencias y complementariedades con la IA. Asimismo, se presenta la sistematización de un proceso de desarrollo territorial participativo, planificado estratégicamente, que tiene lugar en un mediano municipio del sudoeste de la Provincia de Buenos Aires (Argentina). A partir de este caso, se demuestra la capacidad de la SE para generar aprendizajes colectivos, fortalecer las capacidades locales y mejorar a futuro el abordaje de experiencias similares en otros territorios.

Palabras clave: Sistematización de experiencias, investigación acción, desarrollo territorial, planificación estratégica participativa

Introduction

Systematisation of Experiences (SE) is a research modality originating in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, in the field of social work (Barragán Cordero & Torres Carrillo, 2017; Jara, 2009, 2012) and increasingly used and accepted in other fields. It builds knowledge from lived experiences, recovering lessons and learning from the reflection of the intervening actors themselves (Sánchez Rodríguez, 2016). Its internationalization took place towards the beginning of the new century (Unday & Valero, 2017). With the ultimate goal of generating a social transformation, SE not only allows the practice to be improved, but also enriches the theoretical-conceptual reflections and proposals (Barnechea & Morgan, 2010).

In turn, one of the globally recognized research approaches is Action Research (AR). In Hernández Sampieri, Fernández Collado & Baptista Lucio (2014) it is considered as a one of the basic designs of qualitative research. Nevertheless, most authors place it within the interpretative and critical paradigms (Sandín, 2003, in Hernández Sampieri et al., 2014). This is due to the fact that, just like SE, AR seeks to understand and solve specific problems of a group of people linked to a certain environment, promoting the transformation of reality and social change. Another salient aspect of AR is to focus on the collaboration of participants and their awareness of their role in such a transformative process. In fact, a variant in which this last aspect becomes more prevalent is in Participatory Action Research (IAP in Spanish), an approach that emerged in Latin America in the 1970s, and whose most referenced exponents are Fals Borda and Freire (Costamagna & Spinelli, 2021a). In this modality, which is even more collaborative and democratic, members of the community involved can even act as co-researchers, actively participating in the research process (Hernández Sampieri et al., 2014; Jara, 2018). As can be seen, this perspective conceives the generation of knowledge as a collective construction process, or as a co-construction process (Costamagna & Larrea, 2015, in Costamagna & Spinelli, 2021a).

Whatever the nuance it takes, the distinctive characteristic of AR designs is that they investigate at the same time as they intervene. In contrast, SE historicizes, that is, it builds collective knowledge from and about lived experiences. Therefore, although there is a close relationship between both methodologies (Jara, 2018; Costamagna & Spinelli, 2021a), there are differences that give rise to a complementarity among them. The following section analyses such similarities, differences, and complementarities.

This paper aims to contribute to making the SE methodology visible as a way of producing scientific knowledge based on action. For this purpose, the systematisation of a participative local development experience is presented. The experience, which takes place in a medium-sized municipality in the southwest of the Province of Buenos Aires (Argentina), has been called “Sustainable Strategic Development Process of Tres Arroyos” (PRODESTA in Spanish). This process, which began in 2013 and is still fully and steadily operating, is promoted by the Municipal Government, methodologically coordinated by the Universidad Provincial del Sudoeste (UPSO), and still maintains an active participation of the civil society organizations throughout the district.

The experience has been systematised since 2019, guaranteeing plurality of voices, achieving collective learning, the empowerment of territorial agents and the strengthening of the way to approach similar experiences in the future.