

Action research for learning, development and change around the world

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This issue of IJAR deals with different themes such as interorganizational exchange, development in public health care, improvement of teaching at universities and in primary schools and assessment in higher education – all within the framework of action research. It is composed of articles written by authors from many different countries such as Argentina, Norway, The Basque Country in Northern Spain, Indonesia, Pakistan, Vietnam, The Netherlands and Denmark. This geographical spread bears witness to the widespread use of action research around the world. This issue of IJAR also reflects that there are many ways to work with action research, and that there is a constant development in the field, where action researchers are continuously developing new approaches and ways of facilitating action research. Something that connects us as action researchers is the belief in the importance of communities, dialogue, inclusion and democratization, and the experience that action research is suitable to create development, change, learning and contribute to important knowledge production. It is our hope that the articles can inspire both experienced and new action researchers.

The first article in this issue carries the title: “Tensions between academic rigour and the politics of action research: Learning from differences”. It is written by James Karlsen (Norway), Miren Larrea (The Basque Country in Northern Spain and Pablo Costamagna (Argentina). This article highlights a very special approach to learning and knowledge production between individuals and organizations inspired by the social scientist and activist Richard Ennals (to whom we dedicated a commemorative article in the previous edition of IJAR written by James Karlsen). Richard Ennals dedicated much of his time to establish relationships and networks between action researchers and advocated for *learning through differences* (Ennals 2014), which can happen when researchers engage in other research environments – initially as observers and over time as active participants, dialogue partners and contributors. This kind of mutual learning through exchange of knowledge and experience does not happen by itself but needs to be supported organizationally and relationally. Here it is crucial to build up trust and nurturing relationships.

The three authors of this article share their experience from the meeting between three different action research environments and organizations located in three different countries: Norway, Argentina and The Basque Country in the Northern Spain and a process that spanned several years, where they set out to learn from each other through dialogues, visits and exchange of research experience in a mutual learning process. Rather than telling a smooth, hegemonic narrative of this exchange, the authors describe the challenges, tensions and differences they experienced along the way, which both strengthened their own self-awareness but also contributed to new development and learning among themselves and in their

respective research environments. The learning process has furthermore contributed to the creation of an inter-cultural and inter-organizational network focusing on action research and related approaches to the creation of territorial development, local development and organizational learning. The article describes how, through the building of trusting relationships, action researchers can create the basis for an inter-cultural and inter-organizational research and learning environment across large geographical distances, different research traditions, cultural differences and language barriers.

The second article is titled “Action research and polyphony: Learning from an Art & Philosophy Lab in a primary school” and is written by Nathalie Beekman and Jacques Zeelen from the Netherlands. This article shares the experience from a participatory action research project concerning the development of a lab dedicated to art and philosophy for and among students at a multicultural primary school in the Netherlands. The establishment of the lab was a counterreaction to the prevailing education system in the Netherlands, which according to the authors, is characterized by a primary focus on control, evidence and narrow learning goals. The project aimed to explore a creative and liberating alternative to the dominant educational policies by the creation of a space for diverse voices and free action inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of *polyphony* and Gert Biesta’s notion of *subjectification*. The project also draws inspiration from two theoretical contributions in recent action research literature: The notions of *conversational spaces* in situations of power imbalances described by Catrine Halås (Halås 2022) and *wonder-based action research* inspired by Finn Thorbjørn Hansen (Hansen 2022) and presented in a previous special issue of IJAR (in 2022).

The third article is written by Ridwan and Tutik Rachmawati from Indonesia. It is titled: “Action research for the co-production of public health services: Stakeholder collaboration in improving the quality of maternal and child health services at community health centers”. This article sheds light on initiatives for co-production in public health services in Indonesia with focus on the improvement of maternal and child health (MCH) services at community health center. Within the frame of participatory action research, the article explores the significance of stakeholder collaboration to address challenges in health service delivery. The authors describe four critical stages of co-production: problem identification, intervention planning, intervention implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. The findings from their project indicate that integrating co-production principles with participatory action research can foster stakeholder empowerment, enhance service delivery processes, and significantly improve the quality of MCH services. Their research contributes to the debate on co-production as a transformative approach to public service innovation and provides a model for developing and improving community health centres through stakeholder collaboration.

The fourth article has the title “Using action research to improve ESL students’ social bonding through cooperative learning” and is written by Abdul Hameed Panhwar (principal author) and Muhammad Khan Sangi from Pakistan. The article shares the insights from an action research project focusing on the renewal and improvement of learning environments by use of *cooperative learning*. The project took place at a Pakistani university and focused on the teaching of English as a foreign language. The authors explain that in Pakistani universities, the class quota is usually very high, which makes teaching difficult and impairs the students’ learning outcomes. The article describes how the principal author, Abdul Hameed Panhwar, worked with the improvement and renewal of the learning environment through cooperative learning approaches. Panhwar explains how he went through a transformative learning journey himself while moving from traditional teacher-centred methods to a student-

centred cooperative and facilitative pedagogy, where he became a mentor and facilitator of student learning. The project demonstrates how cooperative learning approaches focusing on interaction and dialogues in smaller groups improved students' active participation, confidence, and their motivation to take responsibility for their own and others' learning. Through group work the students developed social skills and social bonding which laid the foundation for building trust and friendships that fostered a more trust-based and nurturing learning environment which in the end enhanced the learning outcomes among the students. Not only did the students develop their relationships; they also created new relationships in the classroom, and the relationship between student and teacher became more confident.

The fifth article in this issue is written by Anh Tu Nguyen and has the title "Inclusive assessment as participatory action: A longitudinal critical action research study in higher education". The article discusses a longitudinal action research project which took place in a period of six years at a public university in Vietnam. The article and the project demonstrate how action research can support the transformation of assessment practices in higher education while maintaining academic standards. The project was facilitated within an international undergraduate business programme, which had the aim of providing students with internationally oriented business education. The programme enrolled students from many different linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds from no less than thirteen countries, and most of the teaching was conducted in English.

Through action research, the participating teachers, undergraduate students, and employers collaboratively examined and reconfigured assessment practices to support inclusive participation and the development of employability-related capabilities among the students. The process went on through iterative action research cycles, where they worked with collaborative planning, enactment, and reflection, and in this way engaged in redesigning assessment practices at programme level. The findings of the project demonstrate not only that assessment was socially situated, but also how the process of rethinking and re-designing assessment tools and approaches reconfigured the conditions of participation and recognition in ways that supported more inclusive and professionally oriented learning trajectories.

Furthermore, in this issue we present a commemorative article in honour of Olav Eikeland, titled, "In memoriam of Olav Eikeland" written by Julie Borup Jensen who is a member of the editorial group of IJAR. Olav Eikeland was born the 10th of October 1955 and passed away the 1st of September 2023. Eikeland was a professor of educational and work life research at Oslomet University in Norway. He contributed to IJAR with several articles and as a peer reviewer and guest editor. He had his PhD in Ancient Greek philosophy, and besides ancient philosophy, his research was centred on theories of knowledge, philosophical and methodological aspects of social science and research, action research and organizational learning. With this tribute, on behalf of IJAR, we wish to honour his memory and express our recognition of his work and our pleasure in having had the opportunity to work with him on this journal and in other contexts as well.

In addition, this issue also brings an interview with Associate Professor, Søren Frimann from Aalborg University in Denmark. Since Søren Frimann has recently joined the group of editors of IJAR, we decided to bring an interview with him to introduce him to the readers. The interview is headlined: "Creating collective learning spaces: Action research from within" and has been conducted by Lone Hersted. In the interview Søren Frimann tells us about his professional learning trajectory and how he moved into to action research.

In addition, we bring a review of Miren Larreas' book *The Art of Facilitating Action Research: A first-person account in policymaking*. The review is written by Julie Borup Jensen and introduce the readers to this interesting book which we highly recommend to everybody interested in action research and the facilitation of processes for societal and territorial development and policymaking.

Finally, as editor-in-chief I wish to thank all the authors and the blind peer reviewers who have contributed to this issue. I hope that the contributions in this issue can inspire our readers, and I look very much forward to the continuation and further development of our exchange and dialogue concerning action research in this journal and in our action research community in general.

References

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