

Tensions between academic rigour and the politics of action research: Learning from differences

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Abstract: The article analyses how the framework of *learning from differences* fosters learning spaces across diverse traditions of action research for territorial development. Drawing on self-inquiry and long-term collaboration between Agder (Norway), Rafaela (Argentina), and Orkestra in the Basque Country (Spain), the study examines tensions between academic rigour and political engagement. The authors show how such tensions can become productive by making differences explicit, building trust, encouraging structured reflection, and facilitating mutual apprenticeship. The article introduces the concept of *politicidad* to capture the inherent political nature of action research and argues that difference can facilitate, rather than hinder, knowledge development and institutional transformation.

Keywords: action research for territorial development; learning from differences; *politicidad*.

Tensiones entre el rigor académico y la politicidad de la investigación-acción: aprender de las diferencias

Resumen: Este artículo analiza cómo el marco del aprendizaje a partir de las diferencias fomenta espacios de aprendizaje en diversas tradiciones de investigación-acción para el desarrollo territorial. A partir de la autoindagación y la colaboración a largo plazo entre Agder (Noruega), Rafaela (Argentina) y Orkestra en el País Vasco (España), el estudio examina las tensiones entre el rigor académico y el compromiso político. Los autores demuestran cómo estas tensiones pueden volverse productivas al explicitar las diferencias, generar confianza, fomentar la reflexión estructurada y facilitar el aprendizaje mutuo. El artículo introduce el concepto de *politicidad* para capturar la naturaleza política inherente a la investigación-acción y argumenta que la diferencia puede facilitar, en lugar de obstaculizar, el desarrollo del conocimiento y la transformación institucional.

Palabras clave: investigación-acción para el desarrollo territorial; aprendizaje a partir de las diferencias; *politicidad*.

1. Introduction

Over many years, we [two of the authors of this paper] had the pleasure of meeting Richard Ennals and engaging in inspiring discussions with him about action research. Through these

interactions, we saw how deeply he was involved in activist initiatives and in supporting other activists in their efforts, while remaining firmly rooted in academic research. On several occasions, he even remarked, half in jest, that we were doing action research too close to politicians, perhaps implying that we were more like activists than action researchers. His words resonated with us, and this article honours his legacy in action research for territorial development (ARTD), the action research approach we [the three authors of this paper] have practised since 2008, when the initial collaboration between Agder and Orkestra began.

In the article, we engage with one of Richard Ennals's central concepts: learning from differences. We do so by sharing and reflecting on the learning process between Argentinian, Norwegian, and Basque action researchers. The two European environments use the term *action research*, while the Latin American environment uses the term *pedagogical approach*. We framed our shared learning process as learning from differences in a seminar held in 2012 in Buenos Aires, when the collaboration shifted from practical exchange towards an explicit conceptual framing of learning from differences. The seminar was entitled 'Learning from differences: diverse approaches to the generation of capabilities for territorial development'. While looking for frameworks to reflect on our shared learning process, we found the concept of learning from differences, which helped us understand and systematise our processes.

This shared initial framing transformed into a tripartite collaboration to learn together (Karlsen & Larrea, 2016). The following is an extract from Costamagna and Larrea (2016, p. 46):

"“Learning from differences” is the context where the pedagogical approach and action research are developing. It is a mutual learning process between the National Technological University (NTU) in Rafaela, Argentina, Agder University in Norway and Orkestra- Basque Institute of Competitiveness in the Basque Country (Spain). Following Ennals (2014), the learning from differences process occurs when researchers with work experience in certain environments interact and integrate themselves in contexts that are different from theirs, initially only as observers, to later share their insights with the other territorial actors”.

The rationale of the paper is that the concept of learning from differences allows for learning spaces, such as the one described in the previous paragraph, which make progress possible even when confronted with diverse and seemingly contradictory positions. This paper was inspired by the following research question: *How does the learning from differences framework foster learning spaces among diverse participants, enabling progress when positions seem contradictory?*

We consider this question relevant to action research and its literature because, amid the multiple crises facing the world, making action research a pertinent response will require action researchers from different families, traditions, and schools to learn together.

To answer the research question, we conducted self-inquiry processes based on our thirteen-year experience of learning from differences. We define self-inquiry as a first-person action research process conducted by second-person action researchers to experience themselves as subjects with direct awareness of how they act and learn (Larrea, 2020). Each author of this paper has developed their own inquiry into how we have learnt from differences and how this has affected our colleagues and respective research environments. Writing together served as a means to facilitate each other's inquiry and to intertwine the three narratives into one. Writing together was not merely a way of integrating individual accounts but constituted the mutual inquiry space in which our self-inquiries were challenged, deepened, and developed through dialogue. Differences were made explicit and worked with in the writing process itself, making collective writing a core methodological element of the study.