

In Memoriam of Olav Eikeland

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Even though it is a few years since he passed away, we in the editorial group of IJAR still think that it is not too late, but rather appropriate to commemorate Olav Eikeland as the influential thinker he was. He was deeply involved in the journal, and with this obituary, we wish to honour his memory.

Life

Olav Eikeland was a Norwegian philosopher, work life researcher, and action researcher. In 2008, he became professor of work research and research director for the Program for Research on Education and Work at Oslo Metropolitan University (formerly Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences). From 2012, he was also vice dean of the Faculty of Education and International Studies. He was a researcher at the Work Research Institute (AFIR) from 1985 to 2008, and served as a director of the institute from 2003 to 2004. He died on the 1st of September 2023, at the age of 67.

In the following, I will do my best to do his work justice and to inspire colleagues in action research to take up his work and elaborate on it in the future.

Legacy

Olav Eikeland was a rigorous scholar, a demanding interlocutor, and a formative figure in the development of action research as a philosophical and ethical practice, especially in the Nordic countries, but also in a wider research community, e. g. in this journal, IJAR. His work fundamentally aimed at reshaping how action research understands knowledge, practice, dialogue, and responsibility, drawing deeply and carefully on Aristotle's philosophy.

Eikeland's interpretation of what he terms Aristotle's *gnoseology* (Eikeland et al., 2022; Eikeland, 2007) has been a red thread for his work over the years. Before his account of these wider implications of Aristotle, he was occupied with understanding the concept of *phrónêsis*, notably articulated in his book "*The Ways of Aristotle – Aristotelian phrónêsis, Aristotelian philosophy of dialogue, and action research*" (2008). Against simplified and instrumental use of Aristotle in the social sciences, Eikeland insisted that *phronesis* could not be reduced to either tacit know-how or subjective judgment. Instead, he showed that practical wisdom integrates intellectual virtues, ethical character, experience, and deliberation. For Eikeland,

phronesis was not opposed to theory or science but stood in a productive, dialogical relationship with them.

A central contribution of Eikeland's scholarship was his critique of entrenched dichotomies: theory versus practice, universal versus particular, knowledge versus action. He demonstrated that Aristotle had already offered a sophisticated framework for overcoming these divisions. By situating *phronesis* within Aristotle's broader epistemology, or rather as mentioned, gnoseology, alongside *epistēmē* (systematic knowledge), *sophia* (theoretical wisdom), *technē* (craft), and *nous* (intuitive understanding), Eikeland revealed practical wisdom as an integrative virtue, grounded in experience and ethical action while remaining intellectually demanding (Eikeland, 2007).

Eikeland was sharply critical of contemporary misreadings of Aristotle (Eikeland, 2006). He challenged approaches that opposed *phronesis* to science, collapsed Aristotelian philosophy into modern social theory, or dismissed theory altogether in favor of practice. For instance, he argued that action research must encompass both inquiry and application, reflection and transformation. Action research, in his view, fails when it becomes mere problem-solving, technical intervention, or project work detached from epistemic ambition and ethical reflection.

For Eikeland, action research was best understood as a form of *praxis*: a practical philosophy aimed at ethical and social transformation. He emphasized deliberation as inseparable from dialogue, and he insisted that judgment cannot be delegated to experts or abstract systems. Knowledge, for him, emerged through participation, reflective dialogue, and shared inquiry within concrete communities of practice. This led him to stress the need for institutional and organizational spaces, where reflection, dialogue, and learning could genuinely unfold within everyday practice. His evocative term for this was, with Aristotle, *skholē*, a word we recognize from the term *school* (Eikeland, 2006).

Eikeland's idea that Aristotle could be understood as an early action researcher was neither rhetorical nor nostalgic. He demonstrated how Aristotle's ethics and politics were grounded in experience, participation, and the cultivation of virtue, aligning closely with the transformative and participatory aspirations of action research. Through this reading, Eikeland offered action researchers a demanding intellectual lineage, reminding us that action research is not method alone, but a moral and epistemic commitment. The crowning achievement of this line of thinking was his book from 2022, *På sporet av en syvende forfatning: Aristoteles og den norske samarbeidsmodellen – makt, dialog og organisasjonslæring*. The book only exists in Norwegian language, and the title may be translated to "*In Search of a Seventh Constitution: Aristotle and the Norwegian Model of Cooperation – Power, Dialogue, and Organizational Learning*". In the book, he assembles his ideas from Aristotle and action research with his long experience from the Work Research Institute (AFIR) into a coherent narrative of decades of work as an action researcher, philosopher, and organizational learning theorist.

As a scholar, Olav Eikeland challenged complacency. He urged action researchers to transform not only practice but also the institutional forms of research itself. His work continues to remind the field that practical wisdom requires time, dialogue, experience, moral character, and courage—and that research worthy of the name must unite knowing and doing in ethically grounded ways.

Olav Eikeland leaves behind a body of work that remains uncompromising in its intellectual rigor and enduring in its relevance. His contributions will continue to guide scholars

and practitioners who understand action research not as a technique, but as a reflective, dialogical, and deeply human practice.

My encounters with Olav Eikeland

Along with his unquestionable academic achievements, Olav Eikeland was also an enriching acquaintance in my own early and later professional life. I first met Olav in 2010, when he was visiting Aalborg University as a guest discussant at one of our meetings in the local network for action research in Northern Jutland. I was a PhD student, and I will never forget how he, an established and recognized scholar in action research, listened seriously to what I had to say. I had read quite a few of his articles and book chapters already, and I must admit that, at that time, I could not always follow his refined lines of ideas and arguments. Perhaps, at that time, I did not have the patience to read his texts as slowly as they deserve to unfold. With his deep insight in action research and philosophy, his kindness and care for my unfinished and still quite uncultivated thinking touched me. Then I did not see him for many years, and he probably forgot all about me.

Our more serious collaboration began some years later, when we both were part of founding the Nordic journal for action research called *Research & Change*. In this first and founding editorial board meeting, I introduced myself as affiliated with the Department of Learning and Philosophy at Aalborg University (which was the name of my department back then in 2018). When it was his turn to introduce himself, Olav leaned over the table and said to me: “Department of Learning and Philosophy – that sounds as the place for me. I want to be part of your department”. Everyone around the table laughed, and I thought that he was just referring to his scholarly work that was evolving around philosophy and learning in organizations.

The same evening, however, I received an e-mail from him, saying that of course, he had made the comment as a kind of fun remark, but that he was actually serious. He thought that my department sounded interesting and would like to come for a visit. No sooner said than done, he came to visit Aalborg for a second time. Now, I was no longer a PhD student but head of a research group on capacity building in organizations and could welcome him with more experience and position in my department. This was the beginning of his year-long affiliation with Aalborg University as a visiting professor affiliated with my research group.

This also tells a story about Olav Eikeland. He was a person with high levels of energy and devotion, and when he met responsiveness, he did everything to vary out plans and aspirations, not only for himself, but for many other people. At Aalborg University, he has left his mark on our action research community, making us believe in ourselves and our research, and challenging our thinking about our practices in a way that cannot be overestimated. He organized symposia, he was a keynote speaker at our conferences, he contributed to organize book projects and special issues, among others in this journal, with us as his partners.

Therefore, Olav Eikeland will always have a special place in my heart, and a special place in our action research community at Aalborg University.

May his memory be honoured.

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