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# Bridging between Action Research Communities: A Pathway to Connectivity

*Patricia Canto-Farachala and Miren Estensoro*

## **Abstract**

The dialogic essence of Action Research (AR) poses a challenge of scope when attempting to achieve large-scale change. One way of addressing said challenge is through connectivity, an approach to the external validity of action research that focuses on the workability of new knowledge in other contexts. In this paper we propose bridging between different action research (AR) communities as a pathway to connectivity. We identify the conditions that facilitate connectivity in bridging spaces between different AR communities, and show that change can ripple beyond the group where AR takes place, maintaining its contextual nature. Our research method is comparative case studies based on semi-structured interviews with two AR communities: one in Europe and the other in Latin America.

**Keywords:** action research, connectivity, validity, bridging, action research communities

## **Los espacios de encuentro entre diferentes comunidades de investigación acción pueden ser un camino hacia la conectividad**

### **Resumen**

La naturaleza dialógica de la Investigación Acción (IA) supone un desafío cuando se trata de lograr un cambio a gran escala. Una forma de abordar dicho desafío es a través de la conectividad, un enfoque de la validez externa de la IA orientado a la viabilidad, en la práctica, de conocimiento nuevo en otros contextos. En este documento proponemos el concepto de espacio de encuentro entre diferentes comunidades de IA como un camino hacia la conectividad. Identificamos las condiciones que facilitan la conectividad en dichos espacios de encuentro entre diferentes comunidades de IA y mostramos que el cambio puede extenderse más allá del grupo donde tiene lugar el proceso de IA, manteniendo su naturaleza contextual. Nuestro método de investigación consiste en estudios de caso comparativos basados en entrevistas semiestructuradas a dos comunidades de IA: una en Europa y la otra en América Latina.

**Palabras clave:** investigación acción, conectividad, validez, espacio de encuentro, comunidades de investigación acción

## 1. Introduction

In the current era of Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2030 lies an opportunity for transformative change that calls for relational, collaborative learning processes with experiments to provoke future learning (Bradbury, H., Waddell, S., O'Brien, K., Apgar, M., Teehankee, B., & Fazey, I., 2019). Indeed, action research is well placed to contribute to address some of the world's most pressing challenges. First, because the aim of action research is not to examine reality, but to change it (Nicholas & Hathcoat, 2014) and, second, because action research has an intrinsic transformational pedagogical dimension (Streck, 2014).

However, in order to play a transformative role at a wider scale, action research faces a challenge of scope. Said challenge is directly linked to its dialogical essence which takes place in small groups. The work carried out by Gustavsen (1992; 1996; 2003; 2014) on working life in Scandinavia and by Burns (2007; 2014) who proposes learning architectures able to involve many people in interlocking inquiry processes, are examples of approaches that try to address this challenge.

In this paper we approach the issue from a different perspective. We start with the concept of connectivity, proposed by Karlsen & Larrea (2014) as a measure of external validity of action research. Through connectivity, researchers engage with researchers and practitioners who did not participate in the context of application where the knowledge was created, in order to enhance the workability of said knowledge in other contexts. It therefore extends the learning process beyond the group in which the action research process took place.

Specifically, we propose bridging between different AR communities as a pathway to connectivity. We define bridging as a dialogue that takes place in spaces that bring together different AR communities, where connectivity can occur. We argue however, that connectivity does not occur automatically, but is dependent on several conditions. Our research question is therefore: What conditions facilitate connectivity in bridging between different AR communities?

In order to identify what those conditions are, we analyse the bridging spaces that exist between the AR communities working in two different research institutes: Orkestra-Basque Country (Spain) and Praxis-Rafaela (Argentina). In so doing, we illustrate how connectivity as a measure of external validity occurs in practice, and how it can help action research to play a transformative role at a wider scale.

The paper is divided into 6 sections. Following this introduction, the second section presents a review of the discussion in the literature on validity and connectivity in AR. The third section explains the research method followed; namely comparative case studies based on semi-structured interviews with the two different AR communities that share bridging spaces. The fourth section describes the cases and their different bridging spaces. The fifth section discusses the case, and identifies the conditions that facilitate connectivity in bridging spaces. The sixth section concludes the paper with final reflections.

# Another social research is possible

## From the collaboration between researchers and social movements

Alfonso Torres Carrillo<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The article presents an overview of the relationships between higher education institutions, researchers, and social movements in Colombia. Based on a periodisation of the different modes of alignments or gaps between these 3 social actors, the study focuses on two significant experiences of collaborative research between researchers and social movements. First, an experience with peasant movements from the Atlantic Coast led by Orlando Fals Borda from *La Rosca* Foundation in the 1970s, and which originated Participatory Action Research. Then, a project conducted by the *Subjects and New Narratives in Research and Teaching of the Social Sciences* research group at the *Universidad Pedagógica Nacional* focused on the systematisation of practices with popular organisations and their inputs to the field of critical research. Finally, a balance of the current situation of joint research between social movements and collectives of researchers linked to higher education institutions is presented.

**Keywords:** Knowledge production, university, social movements, participatory research, systematization.

### Otra investigación social es posible. Desde la colaboración entre investigadores y movimientos sociales

**Resumen:** El artículo presenta una mirada de conjunto sobre las relaciones entre universidades, investigadores y movimientos sociales en Colombia. A partir de una periodización de los diferentes modos de articulación o distanciamiento entre estos 3 actores sociales, el estudio se detiene en dos experiencias significativas de investigación colaborativa entre investigadores y movimientos sociales: la liderada por Orlando Fals Borda desde la Fundación La Rosca en la década de 1970 con movimientos campesinos de la Costa Atlántica y que dio origen a la Investigación Acción Participativa, y la llevada a cabo por el grupo de investigación *Sujetos y nuevas narrativas en investigación y enseñanza de las ciencias sociales* de la Universidad Pedagógica Nacional en torno a la sistematización de prácticas con organizaciones populares. Finalmente, se plantean algunos

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1 Translation made by Camilo Torres Barragán

desafíos acerca de la investigación conjunta entre movimientos sociales y colectivos de investigadores vinculados a universidades.

**Palabras clave:** Producción de conocimiento, universidad, movimientos sociales, investigación participativa, sistematización.

## Introduction

The production of knowledge on social movements has been associated with what has been done by specialists in higher education institutions and research centres; inquiries carried out with or by its own protagonists has been less frequent. In Colombia, there has been a tradition of participatory research, initiated half a century ago, which gave rise to what is referred to as Participatory Research and other collaborative methodologies such as Collective recovery of history and Systematisation of experiences.

In this historical research trajectory with social organisations, the role of the Higher Education Institution has varied. Colombian higher education: heir to colonial higher education, has barely had a relationship with civil society movements. The accelerated capitalist modernisation that took place during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, triggered social conflicts in the rural areas and the city; it also brought about the establishment of the social sciences in the country. However, institutional obstacles and the radicalisation of the political environment limited the possibility for researchers to interact with these processes; this led some of them to leave the higher education institution to conduct their research and also to build the first participatory methodologies.

Since the 1980s, the most significant research on social movements was conducted by Non-Governmental Organisations; only in the next decade, were these topics gradually incorporated into higher education institutions. This “late” interest coincided with changes in the country’s social movements; together with the struggles led by peasants and wage workers, others became visible, led by urban inhabitants, women, youth, indigenous peoples, and the LGBTI population. At the beginning of the new century, the Colombian social overview evidenced the consolidation of these movements, as well as their interest in conducting their own research, proposing another type of relationship with researchers and higher education institutions: establishing agreements to jointly develop research projects.

This article presents a joint overview of the links between higher education institutions, researchers, and social movements, focusing on two significant moments in these relationships. The first one refers to the work of Orlando Fals Borda and *La Rosca* Foundation in the 1970s, and the second one, to some collaborative research experiences conducted by the *Subjects and New Narratives in Research and Teaching of the Social Sciences* research group of the *Universidad Pedagógica Nacional* during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Building on those research experiences, a set of methodological criteria for the collaborative production of knowledge between professional researchers and social movements is presented.

# Workplace Innovation Programmes: bridging research and policymaking

*Egoitz Pomares*<sup>1</sup>

## **Abstract**

The article reviews the concept of Workplace Innovation Programmes as public policy tools supported by research. Pursuing a socio-political perspective the text explores programme-level issues. To do this, conceptual definitions are reviewed and the programme's main features, discussed using an analytical model designed by previous researchers. In this sense, programmes underpinned by research as a tool for public policies are presented as mechanisms to link different levels and actors in matters related to productivity and the quality of working life. The article reviews different approaches and strategies for policymaking, aiming at better understand how programmes operate. For this purpose previous European experiences are used. The rationale of this article must be found in a explorative and learning-oriented context to better design and implement programme-based public policies and the use of action-research for policy learning. This is of particular interest in the local context of Gipuzkoa (Basque Country, Spain) where this kind of approach has become of relevance in the policymaking.

**Key words:** programmes; working life reform; policy learning; actionable knowledge.

## **Programas de innovación en contextos de trabajo: vinculando la investigación y la formulación de políticas públicas**

### **Resumen**

El artículo examina el concepto de los programas de innovación en los contextos de trabajo como instrumentos de política pública asistidos por la investigación. Desde una perspectiva sociopolítica el texto explora cuestiones relacionadas con el diseño e implementación de los mismos. Para ello se revisan las definiciones conceptuales y se analizan las principales características de los programas empleando un modelo analítico diseñado por la investigación acción. En este sentido, los programas sustentados en la investigación como herramienta de políticas públicas se presentan como mecanismos para vincular diferentes niveles y actores en temas relacionados con la productividad y la calidad de la vida laboral. En el artículo se examinan diferentes enfoques y estrategias para la formulación de

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1 The author is grateful to the two IJAR reviewers for their comments, as well as to Frank Pot and Richard Ennals for their support on an earlier draft of this article.

políticas, con el fin de comprender mejor el funcionamiento de los programas. Para ello el artículo se apoya en determinadas experiencias europeas. Por todo ello, la fundamentación de este artículo debe encontrarse en un contexto exploratorio y orientado al aprendizaje en diseño de políticas públicas y el uso de la investigación-acción para el aprendizaje político. Lo anterior resulta de particular interés en el contexto local de Gipuzkoa (País Vasco, España), donde este tipo de enfoques ha adquirido relevancia en la formulación de políticas públicas.

**Palabras clave:** programas; reforma de la vida laboral; aprendizaje político; conocimiento práctico.

## 1. Background

*“A good programme is a programme that phases itself fruitfully into ongoing processes, helps improve on them for a period of time, and then waves farewell to processes that continue to gain in momentum, speed, and quality”*

Gustavsen, Finne & Oscarsson, 2001, p. 9.

In Europe, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a series of international seminars and conferences were organised around initiatives and activities focused on working life reform known as programmes. In this context back in 1989, an international conference on action research in relation to new ways of organising work was held in Sweden. In 1991, with the collaboration of institutions and universities from the Netherlands, the action research network itself promoted a second conference with the aim of developing new ideas. Under the title “Action Research and the Future of Work” the meeting was used to discuss matters related to the future of work, the development of new methodologies of action research associated with work and industrial relations, the exchange of trans-national experiences, the strengthening of a collaboration network, and the development of international research programmes. The organisation and contents presented and discussed contain many of the proposals and progress made by researchers, with a strong emphasis on aspects linked to organisational changes. The third conference was held in 1993, in Finland, under the title “Active Society with Action Research” and was hosted by the Ministry of Labour and the Finnish Labour Relations Association. The content of this conference was used for the presentation of several assessment reports and other studies on the experiences of implemented programmes and their links to action research. In general, the idea of addressing development programmes was the main focus. The materials are included in the book “National Action Research Programmes in the 1990’s” edited by Kaupinnen & Lahtonen (1994). Recently, after 25 years, these matters related to the future of work and action research have been re-launched in Norway. In 2018, “Coping with the Future: Business, Work and Science in the Age of Digitalisation and Sustainability” was organised with the aim of bringing together separate discourses that concern the future of work (Johnsen, 2018). The materials are accessible in the “International Journal of Action Research” (2018, Vol. 14-2/3) and the “European Journal of Workplace Innovation” (2018, Vol. 4-1). This will be followed by a symposium held in 2020 in the Basque Country (Spain), focused on the support provided by action research for the design and preparation of public policies and organised by Orkestra, the Basque Institute of Competitiveness.

In one way or another, the conferences and meetings mentioned show, in addition to the fact that there is an action research network, the need to identify bridges between research and social challenges for the design and implementation of public policies. From a European perspective as indicated by Pot, Totterdill and Dhondt (2017) this issues gained a recognition with the Commission's Green Paper "Partnership for a new organisation of work" and the policy document "Modernising the organisation of work – a positive approach to change" (See Ennals, 1998). Another good example of networking can be found in the European Workplace Innovation Network (EUWIN), created under request of the European Commission (2013-2017), to exchange good practices and stablish alliances of employers, trade unions, governments, knowledge agents and research organisations. As pointed by Dhondt, Totterdill and Van Hootgem (2019, p. 37) "the European Commission wanted to spread the idea that innovation in companies not only was the result of R&D investments but needed to be supported by the work practices in companies too!". Nowadays EUWIN remains functioning as a loosely coupled network to support any action at the EU-level on the topic.

## 2. Context

Many of the efforts made in favour of adopting new forms of work organisation have been expressed in the shape of activities organised jointly by public institutions, actors from the labour market and research. From among the different experiences developed during the last half century, we can identify some where action research has played a role. I am referring, specifically, to initiatives that have been described on several occasions (Gustavsen, Hansson & Qvale, 2008). First it was the LOM (Leadership, Organisation and Management) programme in Sweden (1985-90) organised by the Work Environment Fund in cooperation with agents from the labour market (Gustavsen, 1992; Naschold et al., 1993). This programme offered financial support to many interventions in companies and organisations by providing tax reinvestment schemes in jobs at national level (Gustavsen et al., 1996). Then came the Enterprise Development 2000 programme (1994–2000) organised by the Norwegian Work Research Institute, a programme with a regional focus and deployment that was supported by the labour market parties (employers and trade unions), involving both researchers and other development actors (Gustavsen et al., 1998; Levin [Ed.], 2002). Value Creation 2010 is a third example, a programme developed between 2001-2007 also in Norway (Gustavsen, 2001, 2008). These Nordic experiences are proof of the interest in creating development coalitions (Ennals & Gustavsen, 1999) through action research (Gustavsen, 2007b, 2011; Pålshaugen, 2014; Greenwood [Ed.], 1999). To these three references, with widespread recognition in the action research community due to their use of research methodology, I should add the Humanization of Work/Work and Technology programme and the Finnish National Workplace Development Programme. Both experiences were respectively launched by governments of Germany (Fricke, 1997, 2000, 2011) and Finland (Alasoini, 1997, 2004, 2014, 2015). It should be mentioned that all the programmes indicated have been developed based on national agreements, and that these actions have been integrated into broad institutional frameworks.



# Systematisation of Experiences: New paths to academic work in universities

Oscar Jara Holliday

*The social sciences we have inherited – its disciplines, methodologies, theories and concepts – do not reflect our times adequately and, therefore, we cannot trust them to guide us in the ongoing social transformation processes (Boaventura de Sousa Santos)*

## Abstract

This article presents systematisation of experiences as a proposal for the production of knowledge from and about educational, organisational, and social and community practices. It particularly highlights the interest arising from experiences in the field of University Extension. It is argued that systematisation of experiences in University Extension can help to strengthen the transforming commitment of the university work, and contribute to the production of academic knowledge informed by the richness of the economic, social, political and cultural reality in which the university is inserted. Concrete steps to implement the systematisation of experiences in the university context, based on his experiences at the Universidad de Costa Rica and others, are presented here.

**Keywords:** systematisation of experiences, university extension, social action, popular education, Latin America

## La sistematización de experiencias: nuevas rutas para el quehacer académico en las universidades

### Resumen

El artículo presenta la sistematización de experiencias, como propuesta de producción de conocimiento sobre y desde prácticas educativas, organizativas, sociales y comunitarias. Resalta particularmente el interés surgido en el campo de las experiencias de Extensión Universitaria. Se argumenta que la sistematización de experiencias de Extensión Universitaria puede contribuir a reforzar el compromiso transformador del quehacer universitario y, además, aportar en la producción de un conocimiento académico nutrido de la riqueza de la realidad económica, social, política y cultural en la que la Universidad está inserta. Basándose en su práctica en la Universidad de Costa Rica y otras, se presentan pasos concretos para llevar a cabo Sistematizaciones de Experiencias en el ámbito universitario.

**Palabras claves:** sistematización de experiencias, extensión universitária, acción social, educación popular, América Latina.

## Introduction

The new challenges for the creation of knowledge, that we face when recognising the complexity of unknown situations presented by the current context, increasingly demand the renewal of approaches, categories and methodologies with which we work. This is due, on the one hand, to the need to fuel the processes of democratisation of knowledge, both regarding their production and their flow, which implies the recognition of the importance to rely on various viewpoints from different practices by various individuals; and, on the other hand, because it is fundamental to dig deeper and rigorously into the novelty of events produced by recent situations. This means the development of the ability to transcend the descriptive and narrative, in order to generate from it an interpretative and theoretical exercise, that goes beyond the mechanical application of predefined conceptual frameworks, and that also has, as a component, the vitality of the emotional strength. This openness to a personal and collective “sentipensamiento” means definitively, according to Fals Borda, a radical break from traditional positivism and adherence to its methodological rules, as well as a critical detachment from an individualistic and encapsulated production, which has been the dominant characteristic of the academic work .

It is thus a matter of looking at the source of these renewed processes of knowledge production: concrete experiences that are performed by collectives, social movements, institutions, research and social action teams, and others. In them and from them it is possible to deal with these new challenges and design relevant epistemological and methodological strategies. Let us look at a few characteristics of one of the proposals that have become more relevant in recent times: The Systematisation of Experiences (Jara 2013, Ghiso, 2010, Torres Carrillo 2010, Falckemback & Torres, 2015, Streck & Jara ,2015).

Systematisation of experiences, as a proposal for the production of knowledge about and based on educational, organizational and social and community practices, has become, since the nineties of the last century, a focus of interest in academic and non-academic circles, in public entities, in social movements, in non-governmental organisations or international co-operation agencies. We can highlight particularly the interest arising from the field of experiences from University Extension, also called Social Action or Social Projection at different universities in Latin America, with which we have had the opportunity to work in recent years.

A common concern in these practices involves the need to strengthen the production and flow of academic knowledge at universities, resulting from extension projects, programs and activities. Despite the recognised and too-often heard statement that extension is a substantive dimension of university work, equal to research and teaching, the fact is that it is not treated in the same way. It is still considered an area or dimension of lesser importance, even expendable

# Action research and the problem of the single case<sup>1</sup>

*Bjørn Gustavsen (1938-2018)*

## **Abstract**

In his article in Volume 7, No.2 of *Concepts and Transformation*, Greenwood lays the ground for a self-critical review of action research. This is very much called for, but there is a need to avoid this review becoming a revival of yesterdays “famous cases”. Major parts of today’s action research is oriented towards social movements, learning regions and other levels of organisation far beyond the small group. The associated research challenges can be met only by developing new research platforms and seeking new alliances with other branches of research.

**Key words:** Action research, social constructivism, development programs

## **Investigación Acción y el problema de los casos únicos**

### **Resumen**

En su artículo Volumen 7, nº2 de *Conceptos y Transformaciones*, Greenwood plantea una autocrítica de la investigación acción. Se trata de una reflexión necesaria ligada a los problemas derivados de los casos únicos pero no deberíamos caer en revivir los 'casos de éxito' del pasado. La mayoría de los procesos de investigación acción actuales están orientados a los movimientos sociales, los territorios que aprenden y otro tipo de organizaciones que van más allá de grupos reducidos. Los retos derivados de dichos procesos se pueden abordar mediante nuevas plataformas de investigación y alianzas con otras disciplinas de investigación.

**Palabras clave:** investigación acción, constructivismo social, programas de desarrollo

Action research may be something that the world needs, but it is also something that the world seldom wants. This is the point of departure for a recent article by Greenwood where the purpose is to look into why this is so (Greenwood 2002). Some of the reasons he places at the door of action research itself, for instance much sloppy reporting and even when the reporting is adequate it often pertains to issues of limited interest outside the action research community itself. Among the last are the epistemological and moral reasons why action research is superior to all other forms of research and detailed presentations of all the whys and hows of action research on project level. This focus is, it can be argued, akin to a sur-

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1 Published in “*Concepts and Transformation. International Journal of Action Research and Organizational Renewal*”, vol. 8, no. 1 (2003), pp. 93-99. The *International Journal of Action Research*, now published by Barbara Budrich Verlag succeeded this journal.

vey researcher continuously discussing the epistemological challenges of survey research and the construction of items, scales and questions, without ever doing any survey.

The purpose of this note is not primarily to disagree but rather to see to what extent some of the problems of action research can be even further highlighted. In this contribution, focus is on the last of the themes covered in the Greenwood article: the issue of scale (page 136):

While most people interested in society level issues tend to pose their questions and concerns in more or less general terms: what to do about poverty; participation in work, the process of globalization, the answers provided by action research are generally based on “local cases”. The cases are, furthermore, not only local; they tend to be very local in the sense that the great majority of action research studies pertain to processes between one or a few action researchers and very small groups of other people, often even during fairly short periods of time. Can, however, questions of concern to other actors than those directly involved in the project be answered on the basis of cases of this kind?

The standard research response to this challenge is to write a report where experiences from the case are set down, often in terms of theoretical and methodological reflections. This is what the researchers bring with them when facing the next group with which to do action research. The knowledge gained from the previous situation will help understand the new one better, it will enable the researcher to move faster to the point of identifying appropriate action, and so on. However, what is to emerge from the *second* case if the knowledge from the first is sufficient to do the right things? Theory and methods can always be improved on and the second case can help do that. This can continue with a third case, a fourth case, and so on.

But is there a limit? Do we ever reach a stage when action can be *suspended* and texts take over? Can a number reports from a number of cases eventually provide a reasonably “full” theoretical-methodological package? It will, of course, never be 100 % , but can it be completed to such an extent that further development can be converted to implementation of theory rather than continued action research?

Most action researchers would say no: Each new situation will always be more open than the idea of “applied research” presupposes and the need for action research will never end. But if the need for action never ends it means that no “complete theory” can ever be delivered. All the answers that action research can provide will be of the type: We can give you some points for consideration, some ways you can take but you have to add a strategy for action in your own context. Only through going into action is it possible to gain those additional insights and understandings that are necessary to act fully appropriate in your own context.

Most action researchers: and certainly Greenwood, would argue that if what action research delivers is limited, so is what other kinds of research deliver: The difference is that while action research sometimes admits that all conclusions are inputs into new action rather than self-contained theories, other kinds of research generally pretend to offer texts that in themselves give, if not a full, so at least an adequate understanding of the situation.

So far, however, the balance between action research and other research is at a draw. Both deliver limited products, the difference may be that action research does it in a way that is slower, more expensive and generally even more limited in terms of number of peo-