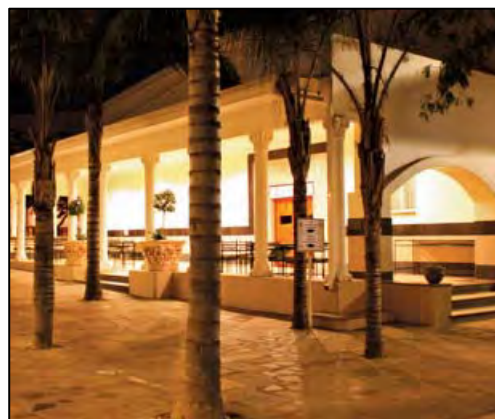# Collaborative and Sustainable Learning for a Fairer World: Rhetoric or Reality

Proceedings of the
9th Action Learning Action Research
and
13th Participatory Action Research
World Congress 2015

Pretoria, South Africa

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Preface

Colin Bradley

On behalf of the Organising Committee, Academic Review Committee, paper reviewers and the ALARA Management Committee, I welcome you to the Proceedings of the ALARA 9th Action Learning, Action Research and 13th Participatory Action Research World Congress.

This Congress represented twenty-five years since the first World Congress organised by ALARA's predecessor in Brisbane, Australia, and thirty-eight years since the first PAR World Congress. The Congress was also five years after the previous World Congress in Melbourne, Australia. As indicated in the Acknowledgements on page ix, the Congress was successful because of the hard work, experience, skills and dedication of Prof Lesley Wood and her team in South Africa. Over 200 delegates attended the Congress in Centurion (Pretoria) South Africa, and participated in dozens of participatory presentations, workshops and activities over three days in November 2015.

The Proceedings contains a small sample of the papers that commenced as presentations at the Congress. There are many of those presentations on the ALARA website, most of which are the slideshows from the presentations (https://www.alarassociation.org/about-us/conferences-and-congresses/congresses/ALARA-world-congress-2015). This book contains the full papers arising from presentations by delegates from Denmark, Greenland, Ireland, South Africa and the United Kingdom. The path to publication was long, but the time taken represents ALARA's insistence on gaining double blind reviews of papers presented for publication in its Proceedings and other publications and the need to involve authors in revisions.

The Congress asked the question about rhetoric or reality for a fairer world through collaborative and sustainable learning. The various presentations, and the papers included in this Proceedings book, indicate that action learning, action research, participatory action research and similar methodologies offer collaborative and sustainable learning. These presentations and papers also indicate that the practitioners involved in their delivery are working to help develop a fairer world. They do their work in a very broad range of professions and circumstances, as demonstrated by the diversity of participants in an

ALARA event. Those practitioners are working on projects with communities in developing countries, convincing government representatives in the United Nations, influencing water policies in many countries and developing organisations and their personnel. Most importantly, they are doing so with the participation of those involved in the projects.

This diversity, and the impact of the work by those practitioners, is inspiring and exciting, as you will see in the papers contained in these Proceedings. For this reason, I believe that action learning and action research practitioners are working towards a fairer world, rather than exhibiting some pretence or rhetoric. Unfortunately, given the state of the world, there is much more for we practitioners to do. This further work is one reason why ALARA will continue to facilitate networking, like this World Congress and the next, now scheduled for June 2018, amongst members and others to further develop projects, research, teaching or learning in action learning, action research and process management and related approaches.

I invite you to read the papers that interest you, and contact the authors to discuss their work, and yours. I also invite feedback, and of course, contributions to ALARA's work, by submissions to its publications (https://www.alarassociation.org/publications) or at an event, be it a local conversation or the next World Congress.

In the following pages, I provide a small description of each of the papers. The papers are from authors from five countries, about subjects such as mental health, health centres, water resources and education and ICT curricula. I hope you find the papers interesting, inspiring and the genesis of more conversations.

The first of these papers is by Jacqui Lovell and Jacqui Akhurst, who present *Whose PARty is this? Problematizing a participatory evaluation process in a community cooperative*. They describe a participatory action research approach to evaluate *developing partners*, a socially inclusive workers' co-operative established in the United Kingdom to enable skills development amongst members who had experienced challenges to their mental health. The authors faced a number of ethical considerations, such how to evaluate the impact of the organisation in a way that reflected the lived experience of its members, in a way that would fit with the organisation's psychology approach. They adopted a multi-cycle PAR approach to undertake the evaluation, and they describe the challenges and problems they had to negotiate to complete the research.

In addition to the ethical challenges they faced, they found standard verbal research methods did not suit the participants. They began the cycles using video recordings, but found that triangulation of the data to be problematic, while participant observation was not viable. They identified body mapping as a possibility. They 'expanded these body maps to include the past, present and hoped for future of the person, the organisation and the communities in which we reside and work' (p. 6). The researchers and participants had to work through other issues, such as anonymity when videoing and the apparent contradiction of participation in action research and the isolation of writing a PhD thesis. However, they found that 'there is the exchange of two different types of knowledge: the

knowledge and know-how of the people; and the knowledge and know-how of the researcher' (p. 10).

Our second paper is from John Andersen and Annette Bilfeldt: *Social innovation in public institutions in Denmark – the role of action research*. They use two case studies to show how action research can contribute to social innovation and empowerment in public welfare and cultural institutions. They first introduce concepts of empowerment, action research and social innovation, highlighting that action research is not only the analysis of how the world works, but also the mobilisation of knowledge. They analyse action research in two different situations: nursing homes, aimed at improving elder care, and the transformation of a public library into a community centre. In the nursing homes, the use of future workshops 'provides an opportunity to "think outside the box": to develop utopias that are not limited by the reality of power in everyday comprehensions of what actually can or cannot be done' (p. 20). The workshops have a critique phase (what is wrong?), utopian phase (what could be?) and a realisation phase (what will be done by whom?).

The research followed a request by the employees about working conditions and a lack of satisfaction expressed by residents and relatives. Amongst a range of ideas, the project opened more respectful dialogue between employees, and between employees and residents and their relatives.

The community centre case is

> an example of how action research can facilitate social innovation projects in which different actors and institutions must be mobilized and be committed to create and consolidate a long-lasting organizational model based on key values such as active citizenship and empowerment (p. 27).

The authors used empowerment evaluation, which helps people to help themselves and improve their projects through self-evaluation and reflection. The two cases aimed 'to eliminate or modify various forms of exclusion by promoting the organization and the employees' capacity to support concrete empowerment of citizens in everyday life' (p. 32).

Steven Arnfjord and John Andersen present our third paper: *Participatory action research with social workers in Greenland*. Social workers were a disorganised group without a trade union before their research project conducted between 2010 and 2014. Greenland has a small population with some significant social problems. The project aimed to facilitate professional capacity building of social workers.

While there have been many successful action research projects in Greenland over the last 50 years, social workers have experienced frequent large surveys that did not lead to noticeable change. There was clearly a need for research that was closer to them, and which recognised their dispersed locations. Importantly, there was a need for empowerment of the social workers, both by strengthening their professional identity and their voice in the social policy field at a national level. A pilot program in 2010 using interviews and focus groups identified a range of problems. In 2011, the authors used future-creating workshops to generate prioritized key points during the critique phase and many suggestions on those points during the utopian phase. This process led to the recognition for a national union

representing the needs of the social workers. That union became visible in the media, established a website, was asked by the Government to have a representative on the Equal Opportunities Commission, and invited to begin wage negotiations with the Government. The action research 'empowered [the social workers] to navigate the trade union field and social policy fields through an understanding of the importance of a professional organization' (p. 49).

Our fourth paper is by Rene Loewenson, Therese Boulle and Clara Mbwili-Muleya: *Sustaining participatory action research approaches in institutional practice: Learning from working with health centre committees*. Community participation in health systems is an element of health policies in east and southern African countries, however, participation 'can take many forms, ranging from manipulation, informing and consultation through to partnership and co-determination' (p. 54). The authors used a participatory action research approach to explore and engage in the question of how the processes of the health centres build forms of participation that were more meaningful.

Using a range of evidence sources, such as learning network meeting reports, literature reviews and deeper case study evidence, they analysed key themes of health centre features. These features included contexts affecting the centres, the levels of, and processes for, building an informed community, strength of community members in representing the communities' voices, dialogue and consultation and their use as inputs to budgets, plans and actions, and the oversight of the centres and strategic review with the community. They found evidence that PAR processes 'appeared to have improved relations between frontline health workers and communities in some settings' and 'improved information sharing, dialogue and shared understanding between community members and health workers' (p. 65). The use of PAR at system level, however, can be over-ridden by 'disease programmes and campaigns that gave focus to performance targets' (p. 68). The shift in power (a topic raised in other papers in these Proceedings) is also an area requiring further work within health centres.

Patrick Doyle, Pip Bruce Ferguson, Aisling McKenna and Deirdre O'Sullivan present *Collaborative approaches to seeking sustainability in student engagement online* in our next paper. They discuss student resistance to engagement surveys, presenting a case study of one of their initiatives. They found that the literature was unclear on identifying what works for and against gaining student engagement. Highlighting their own varying levels of technical engagement, they decided on a video to encourage student participation, which brought its own hurdles to overcome. They approached the Student Union for feedback on the video, which had a theme based on 'The Hobbit'. The Student Union representatives suggested it would not have the desired effect as the Hobbit theme was seen as dated. A second attempt and a different theme led to the production of a new video that they hoped would influence the students. This second video contained comments by lecturers in short segments, based on a 'Saturday Night Live' theme, a link to which is available to allow readers to see the outcome.

They analysed the impact of the video using a small sample of modules. While the 'results were distinctly underwhelming' (p. 82), their analysis and plans for further iterations reflect the cyclical approach to solving problems. They have identified several possible changes, such as including the video on the Learning Management System, greater engagement with the Student Union and engagement with the lecturers.

The sixth paper is *Using information communication technologies for teaching and learning in a South African secondary school: A participatory action research study* by Molaodi Tshelane. Using the lens of critical leadership studies, the author highlights the gap between the desire to increase Information Communication Technology (ICT) use and education and capabilities of teachers and principals with their available resources in several countries including Nigeria, Botswana and South Africa. He notes that principals must have good ICT knowledge. Nigerian policy appears vague in defining the role of principals, while Botswana seems to have pushed the responsibility to school inspectors. In South Africa, the principal's role is clearer, but the change in ICT curriculum appears to be slow. In Russia, ICT teacher training is part of the national ICT strategies, but the principal's role is not fully emphasised.

He describes the PAR project that looked at ICT at a South African secondary school. The analysis of the school's approach showed a lack of agreed objectives and vision, which was epitomised in the principal's lack of use of ICT in his teaching. The development of the common vision requires strong leadership, and as described by the author, can be done 'amicably in a collective and communal way' (p. 99). He concludes that 'principals, as leaders and mediators of learning, have to exercise their responsibility in a relational way and allow stakeholders to take the lead where necessary' (p. 100).

Changing Practice: A course to support water activists in South Africa by Jane Burt and Jessica Wilson is the next paper. They worked with the Changing Practice participants from the South African Water Caucus, where they 'learnt how to explore their context and practices relating to local water governance, as well as how to build and use a knowledge network' (p. 106).

The introduction of the new National Water Resources Strategy produced a redistribution of water resources. The monitoring of the implementation of the Strategy assumed equal weight and consideration of all forms of knowledge. 'There is a danger in reducing knowledge to empirical information rather than knowing being understood as something that exists within contexts and environments' (pp. 110-111). The authors describe a course participants (often employees of organisations associated with the South African Water Caucus – a network of organisations active in the water sector) undertake to develop their competency in improving local natural resource management practices, water governance and environmental justice. The course involves a Change Project in which the participants work with their communities. 'By focusing on practices, participants broaden their attention to considering how to change what we do rather than just critiquing an issue or representing a problem' (p. 115). The authors present examples of these Change Projects to demonstrate the impact of the course. Amongst other learnings, 'the project provides

insights into what changed within individuals, between people, at the level of structure and between people and the natural world' (p. 119).

Our eighth paper is by Charles Chikunda: *Mediating sensemaking: Enriching social learning for resilience in natural resources management learning*. The author uses the lenses of systems thinking, resilience and social learning, describing each, to discuss sensemaking within the Resilience in the Olifants Basin project. This project aimed at reducing vulnerability to climate change through improved management of the Olifants Basin.

The project used novel ways 'to strengthen social learning by mediating sensemaking during various stakeholder engagement processes' (p. 131), including VSTEEP (values, social, technological, environmental, economic and politico-legal characteristics), concept maps and causal loop diagrams. The sensemaking process involved identifying the problem space for the participants – the real world situation they faced – followed by a second stimulus, such as a participatory concept map and collaboratively drawn causal loop diagrams that showed the issues were complex and interrelated. 'The aim of such a mediated sensemaking process is to stimulate participants face the complexity in their socio-ecological context in a systemic manner' (p. 134). It assumes

> that any form of learning is for a purpose and it takes place in a context characterised by the knowledge people have, their values, history, identity, agency, challenges and aspirations. For that reason, sensemaking to strengthen social learning in this project was based on understanding stakeholders as potential managers of their own contexts (pp. 134-135).

The author includes several comments from participants that emphasize the impact of the approach to sensemaking. They found that strengthening 'sensemaking through the use of different mediating artefacts, from various disciplinary traditions, can be rewarding' (p. 136).

Victor Munnik presents our ninth paper: *Making space for cognitive justice: Creating a level playing field for catchment forums in South Africa*. Historically, disadvantaged South African voices and agendas have been missing in catchment management forums. The author discusses one set of participants at a Forum of Forums. Prior to the work by the author and his research team, forums had been dominated by white, middle class, well-informed citizens, who tended to influence discussions and maintain the status quo.As echoed in the ALARA World Congress call for proposals 'What are the factors that keep injustice in place, and how do we remove them?' (p.145)

The first challenge for the research team was ensuring a balanced, proportional participation in the forum, followed by a logistics challenge bringing the people together. The forum participants were invited to a WAT-Indaba (a Zulu word for both a meeting and an issue), where they would compare experiences, engage with current plans, comment on current research and co-create recommendations. After the welcomes and setting the scene, the forum used Open Space Technology to allow the participants to identify inputs and create responses to the government policy proposals.

The research team had identified historical patterns of exclusion. To maximise the input of participants, they

> had to consciously, and at times forcefully, work against those patterns, to invite participants into a workshop that modelled what an ideal forum may look like. The Forum of Forums in October 2015 was an attempt to embody this spirit of dialogue, and a first step towards a practice of cognitive justice (p. 153).

Our final paper is *Beyond the boundary: Is there something called 'real knowledge'?* by David Davies, Reem Shamshoum, James Nyland and Emer Clarke. ALARA originally published a version of this paper as a Monograph in 2016, but, as it arose from the World Congress, it seemed appropriate to include here.

This paper begins by reminding the reader of the instantaneous communication through the Internet and the speed at which one can access "knowledge." The implication is that knowledge, which one used to gain through school and university, now has much broader sources. That knowledge has also expanded to international and transcultural sources, and has reduced reliance on, and involvement with, local communities. The paper explores this knowledge gained outside the classroom and focusses on 'how learning needs to engage with our lives and identities as individuals who live within communities of interdependence' (p. 159).

The first section of the paper examines six themes: neo-liberal marketization of the world economy, poverty, the marginalisation of young people, digital technology, loss of community and the need for a sense of self-identity. These themes are influencing student learning and choice of careers and, according to the authors, necessitate a new direction in curriculum thinking.

To illustrate their call, the authors include extracts from a case study that explores the impact of therapeutic arts on members of the Arab community in Nazareth. The case study, an action research thesis by one of the authors, considered how dance could transform, empower and bring change. The thesis

> is about learning and development at work as an alternative to the formal educational system. It focusses on creative learning and thinking through music, dance and drama in a community which is economically deprived and socially and politically marginalised (p. 177).

The thesis describes dramatherapy as an example of how learning can occur through a variety of methods. The authors contend that all forms of learning need to incorporate the capacity to transfer skills and expertise between differing, complex contexts and circumstances.

> It is our contention that a new professional learning programme can offer a theorised and practical curriculum for social knowledge and enquiry. This could facilitate the creation of new knowledge(s) and give people better access to the learning solutions to the issues and challenges that govern their lives (p. 188).

I now invite you to read the papers in this World Congress Proceedings and to share your views on their content with your colleagues and with the authors. ALARA encourages networking amongst members of the Action Learning and Action Research community and this book is just one way to support this networking.

A further way is participation in an ALARA event, so I also invite you to the next ALARA World Congress in Northfield, Vermont USA in June 2018 (see page 14).

Colin Bradley
President ALARA Inc.
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