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First Person Action Research in Complex Social Systems: three stories of praxis

Patricia A. Wilson, Elizabeth Walsh, and Alan Bush

Abstract

In a world increasingly characterised by uncertainty, social inequality, and ecological degradation, how can action researchers engage in ways that support regenerative systems change in the living systems of which they are part? How can the inhabitants of living systems co-create experiences and conditions of thriving? These questions animated the reflective practice of the authors as they each engaged in collaborative action research projects in three different, socially complex and contested contexts.

The article explores the dialogic methodologies the authors employed, the impacts and outcomes experienced by the participants, and the evolution of the authors' own practices as action researchers and catalysts of change. Wilson draws on a three-year action research project in peri-urban Mexico on sustainable community development. Bush explores a year of engagement fostering resilient urban systems in Asheville, North Carolina. Walsh reflects on her ten-year praxis of fostering regenerative dialogue amid social conflict and vulnerability in a gentrifying neighbourhood of Austin, Texas. The comparative analysis of the three stories concludes with propositions for action research praxis in the context of social complexity.

Keywords: action research, distributed leadership, generative dialogue, thriving, regenerative design, complex social systems, situated spiritual practice.

Investigación-acción en primera persona en sistemas sociales complejos: Tres historias de praxis

Resumen

En un mundo caracterizado cada vez más por la incertidumbre, la inequidad social y la degradación ecológica, ¿cómo los investigadores de acción pueden involucrarse de forma que apoyen el cambio de los sistemas regenerativos en los sistemas vivos de los que forman parte? ¿Cómo pueden los habitantes de los sistemas vivos co-crear experiencias y condiciones de *thriving*? Estas preguntas animaron la práctica reflexiva de los autores, ya que cada uno participó en proyectos de investigación-acción colaborativa en tres contextos diferentes, socialmente complejos y disputados.

El artículo explora las metodologías dialógicas que los autores emplearon, los impactos y resultados experimentados por los participantes, y la evolución de las propias prácticas de los autores como investigadores de acción y catalizadores del cambio. Wilson se basa en un proyecto de investigación-acción de tres años en la zona periurbana de México sobre el desarrollo sostenible de la comunidad. Bush explora un año de compromiso fomentando sistemas urbanos resilientes en

Asheville, Carolina del Norte. Walsh reflexiona sobre su praxis de diez años de fomento de diálogo regenerativo en medio de conflictos sociales y vulnerabilidad en un barrio gentrificado de Austin, Texas. El análisis comparativo de las tres historias concluye con propuestas para la praxis de la investigación-acción en el contexto de la complejidad social.

Palabras clave: investigación-acción, liderazgo distribuido, diálogo generativo, *thrivability*, diseño regenerativo, sistemas sociales complejos, práctica espiritual situada.

Introduction

In a world increasingly characterised by uncertainty, social inequality, and ecological degradation, how can action researchers engage in ways that support regenerative systems change in the living systems of which they are part? How can the inhabitants of living systems co-create experiences and conditions of *thrivability*? These questions animated the reflective practice of the authors of this paper as they each engaged in collaborative action research projects in three different, socially complex and contested contexts. This paper explores the dialogic methodologies they employed, the impacts and outcomes experienced by the participants as leaders and innovators of systemic change, and the evolution of the authors' own practices as action researchers and catalysts of change.

The emphasis on personal reflective practice in this paper is consistent with the emergent discourse on *thrivability*, which embraces a “spirituality that re-instills a sense of the sacred in the universe” and calls for integrating multiple systems perspectives in the process of making meaning and initiating transformational change (Laszlo 2014). As Laszlo (2014) has asserted, “By keeping the four levels of systemic *thrivability*: the intra-personal, the interpersonal, the trans-species, and the trans-generational, present in our thoughts and perceptions throughout our individual and collective meaning-making efforts, we will be able to create a shared sense of meaningfulness, and this will further emerge the conditions of hyper-connectivity and flow” (Laszlo 2014, p. 589).

This is easier said than done. We find that while practices for *thrivability* are in many ways transferable, they are also inherently contextual and experiential. As such, we offer three personal, contextual stories of praxis from which we offer four propositions that may be useful to others in cultivating situated leadership practices for *thrivability*.

Wilson's Story: Emancipatory Practice in Peri-Urban Mexico

Setting the Stage

Clinging to the edges of deep ravines or clustered near abandoned landfills on the peri-urban fringe of the sprawling Mexico City conurbation, the self-built homes of some 15,000 settlers, mostly refugees from gentrification in Mexico City, comprise the so-called ‘irregular’ communities of El Tráfico and Llano Grande. With neither clear title nor basic water and wastewater services, the occupants have made these contested landscapes home over the last ten to twenty years, with more arrivals every year.

The Dynamics of Providing Support to Crack Cocaine Addicts in Open-Air Drug Scenes: the lessons learned by the 'Helpers' intervention project

João Alberto Arantes do Amaral, and Aurélio Hess

Abstract

Providing support to crack cocaine drug addicts who inhabit open-air drug scenes is a challenge requiring a multidisciplinary support team with the necessary resources and capabilities to provide effective help. The dynamics of interactions between the support team and the addicts can be very complex, and may involve several stakeholders with different perspectives and, sometimes, conflicting goals. We describe the Helper's project, an intervention project which worked with a group of seventy people: most of them crack cocaine addicts, between February 2009 and November 2009 in Cracolândia (a very run-down open-air drug area of downtown Sao Paulo, Brazil); the project was delivered by a group of fifteen volunteers. We discuss the nature of the intervention from a systemic perspective. We present our findings related to the dynamics of the intervention that influences and is influenced by several other dynamics. We discuss the interrelationships among these dynamics, to provide a deeper understanding of the intervention process.

Keywords: Systemic intervention, Crack cocaine addicts' dynamics, System Dynamics, Cracolândia, Open-air drug scene.

La dinámica de brindar apoyo a los adictos al crack cocaína en escenas de drogas al aire libre: las lecciones aprendidas por el proyecto de intervención 'Ayudantes'

Resumen

Proporcionar apoyo a los adictos al crack cocaína que habitan en escenas de drogas al aire libre, es un desafío que requiere un equipo de apoyo multidisciplinario con los recursos y capacidades necesarias para proporcionar una ayuda efectiva. La dinámica de las interacciones entre el equipo de apoyo y los adictos puede ser muy compleja y puede involucrar a varios actores interesados con diferentes perspectivas y, a veces, objetivos conflictivos. Describimos el proyecto Ayudantes, un proyecto de intervención que trabajó con un grupo de setenta personas – la mayoría de ellos adictos al crack cocaína – entre febrero de 2009 y noviembre de 2009 en Cracolândia (un área de drogas al aire libre muy degradada del centro de São Paulo, Brasil); el proyecto fue realizado por un grupo de quince voluntarios. Discutimos la naturaleza de la intervención desde una perspectiva sistémica. Presentamos nuestros hallazgos relacionados con la dinámica de la intervención que influye y es influenciada por otras dinámicas. Discutimos las interrelaciones entre esas dinámicas, para proporcionar una comprensión más profunda del proceso de intervención.

Palabras clave: Intervención sistémica, Dinámica de adictos al crack cocaína, Dinámica de sistemas, Cracolândia, Escena de drogas al aire libre.

1. Introduction

Crack cocaine addiction is a problem that concerns governments and communities all over the world. It may ruin the lives of the addicted and their families; it can bring harmful effects to the economy and to the health system. Researchers (Ribeiro et al. 2015, p. 571) point out that “Brazil has the largest cocaine market the world, with 1 million users”.

Crack cocaine addicts may lose control of their own lives; they can be at the mercy of drug traffickers, suffering all kinds of abuse and violence. This kind of drug addiction is a difficult problem to solve: the dynamic is very complicated once there are many stakeholders involved (the addicted, their families, drug traffickers, the law enforcement authorities, the communities affected, governments, the institutions that provide help to the addicted) with different and, sometimes, antagonistic goals.

Our research took place in the downtown area of Sao Paulo city, an open-air drug region known as ‘Cracolândia’ (‘land of crack’). It is a region occupied by hundreds of crack cocaine addicts, who spend their days roving around the streets, consuming drugs, wrapped in dirty and ragged blankets. It is the scene of crack cocaine consumption and dealing. The dynamics of drug dealing triggers a wide range of illegal and criminal activities. It also a place of prostitution, therefore also bringing a proliferation of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

Cracolândia is a problem for the City of Sao Paulo; in recent years there were several interventions accomplished by NGOs, Sao Paulo State Government and the City Municipality of Sao Paulo in order to find a solution to it, by trying to stop the drug dealers’ activities and to help the addicts to recover from addiction.

Our research focuses on the analysis of the systemic aspects of one intervention, named ‘The Helpers intervention project’. The intervention project was delivered by a multidisciplinary team (physicians, lawyers, academics, economists, engineers, students and home-makers) and the targets of the intervention were seventy people (most of them drug addicts, but also small children and babies). The intervention purposes were to provide them food, medical care and guidance about the addiction recovery programmes available. The intervention project followed action research strategy.

We planned to accomplish an initial intervention in order to diagnose the problem and, after that, perform a series of weekly action research cycles. In each cycle, we would plan the intervention, accomplish the intervention, reflect on the results of the intervention and, based on the results, plan the improvements to be made in the following cycle (Figure 1). The process would be repeated until we figure out that we have achieved the results expected.

A Practical Model for Integrating Action Research Time into Second Language Education Schedule

Vahid Rahmani Doqaruni, Behzad Ghonsooly, Reza Pishghadam

Abstract

Time limitation has always been considered a major problem in conducting action research (AR) in the field of second/foreign language teacher education. In order to overcome the lack of time obstacle to research engagement, a comprehensive framework was set up in this study that allowed teachers the flexibility to plan and incorporate research activities into their current teaching schedule. Seven Iranian teachers of a private English language teaching institute participated in the present study. The structure of first- and second-order AR was used in this collaborative AR study. Qualitative modes of inquiry, including reflective journal and semi-structured interview, were used to elicit teachers' views about conducting their AR projects. Analysis of the data revealed three major themes about AR that concerned issues such as empowering teachers in dealing with a particular problem, creating a sense of belonging to a professional community, and helping them to value time allotment.

Key Words: first-order action research, second-order action research, reflective journal, semi-structured interview, teachers' views

Un modelo práctico para integrar el tiempo de la investigación-acción en el programa de educación de segunda lengua

Resumen

La limitación de tiempo siempre fue considerada el mayor problema en la realización de la *Action Research* (AR) en el campo de la formación de profesores de segunda lengua/ lengua extranjera. Con el fin de superar el obstáculo de la falta de tiempo para el compromiso investigativo, en este estudio se estableció un marco integral que permitió a los docentes la flexibilidad para planificar e incorporar actividades de investigación en su programa de enseñanza habitual. Siete profesores iraníes de un instituto privado de enseñanza de lengua inglesa participaron en el presente estudio. La estructura de la AR de primer – y segundo orden- se usó en este estudio colaborativo de AR. Modalidades cualitativas de investigación, incluyendo el diario reflexivo y la entrevista semi-estructurada, se utilizaron para obtener la visión de los profesores sobre la realización de sus proyectos de AR. El análisis de los datos reveló tres temas principales sobre la AR que se referían a cuestiones tales como empoderar a los profesores para enfrentar un problema en particular, crear un sentido de pertenencia a una comunidad profesional, y ayudarlos a valorar el tiempo disponible.

Palabras clave: investigación-acción de primer orden, investigación-acción de segundo orden, diario reflexivo, entrevista semi-estructurada, visión de los profesores.

Introduction

In recent years, applied linguists have paid special attention to foreign/second language (L2) teacher education and practice (e.g., Bartels 2005; Burns & Richards 2009; Johnson 2000, 2009; Tedick 2004). Classroom discourse has thus been a locus of interest for quite some time, as the literature has tended to focus on teacher development far more than teacher training. Richards and Farrell (2005) argue that the former aims at helping teachers understand themselves and their teaching, while the latter deals with basic concepts, strategies, and methodology, and therefore aims at short-term and immediate goals. Thus, since the issue of teacher development has become central to the field of L2 teacher education (Edge 2005; Richards & Farrell 2005), action research (AR) has gained its reputation as a reliable tool to this end (e.g., Atay 2006, 2008; Burns 2005, 2009; Campbell & Tovar 2006; Chou 2011; McDonough 2006; Poon 2008).

In spite of the fact that AR is a primary “vehicle for practitioners’ personal and professional development” (Burns 2005, p. 70), time limitation has always been considered a major problem in conducting AR in the field of L2 education. Although time is more of a structural factor, which will not in and of itself guarantee that high standards of professional development will be fulfilled, reviewing the related literature shows that there has not been provision made for time within the workload of teachers to accommodate the necessary ingredients for conducting AR (see the literature review section). Dealing with the prominent dimensions of research communities, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) consider time to be one of the most important dimensions when teachers come together as researchers because they “need sufficient chunks of time in which to work and sufficient longevity as a group over time” (p. 294). At the same line, Firkins and Wong (2005), recognising research as a sign of professionalism of teachers, also assert that “educational authorities need to allocate resources to schools by way of time and funds” (p. 69). However, although many previous studies have introduced and blamed lack of time as a major obstacle in conducting AR, less has been said about how the kinds of conditions might be created in teachers’ workplaces and workloads to support them in terms of time for carrying out their AR projects.

Clearly, unless teachers are presented with more concrete advice on how they might achieve this, they will struggle to apply the invaluable suggestions related literature offers. As Atay (2008, p. 140) rightly asserts, “although there is a growing literature on the positive outcomes associated with teachers doing [action] research, not much information is provided about the specific characteristics and stages of the [action] research process”. This study is thus an attempt to provide teachers with a practical model for integrating action research time (ART) into their work so that it minimizes the extra burden it might create and maximizes the joy of a new journey in their professional development. In this way, the research questions that form the basis of the present study are as the following:

- 1) What practical model can be used to incorporate ART in the workloads of L2 teachers despite their busy schedule?
- 2) What might be the possible benefits of such a model for teachers?

Participation and Democratization of Knowledge: new convergences for reconciliation: a report from the 5th Conference of the Action Research Network of the Americas

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Alfonso Torres Carrillo, Danilo R. Streck*

Abstract

In 1977 in Cartagena de las Indias, Colombia, an international conference was held gathering leading personalities in action research from all continents. The fifth conference of the Action Research Network of the Americas (ARNA), held in the same city, June 12-16 2017, sought to bring back the memory of this meeting and identify advances and obstacles to action research today. Under the title “Participation and Democratisation of Knowledge: new convergences for reconciliation”, the event gathered people from different social contexts and fields of action from 60 countries, representing all continents. This report is based on notes taken by the authors during the conference. Fifty-two key words were identified that provided the base to systematise a few central topics of the conference, including the consolidation of values and principles of participatory research, decolonisation as an ethical, political and esthetic commitment, the role of universities in relation to innovative and transgressive practices, epistemology from below and the transforming potential of systematising experiences.

Key words: ARNA (Action Research Network of the Americas); IAP (Investigación Acción Participativa); decolonization; epistemological ruptures; popular education

Participación y Democratización del Conocimiento: nuevas convergencias para la reconciliación: un relato de la 5ta Conferencia de la Red de Investigación-Acción de las Américas

Resumen

En el año 1977 se realizó en Cartagena de Indias, Colombia, una conferencia internacional que reunió exponentes de la investigación-acción de todos los continentes. La quinta conferencia de la Action Research Network of the Americas (ARNA), realizada en la misma ciudad, entre los días 12 y 16 de junio de 2017, buscó rescatar la memoria de este encuentro e identificar avances y obstáculos para la investigación-acción. Con el título “Participación y Democratización del Conocimiento: nuevas convergencias para la reconciliación”, el evento reunió personas de diferentes contextos sociales y áreas de actuación, procedentes de 60 países, representando todos los continentes. Este relato está basado en anotaciones realizadas por los autores en el transcurso de la conferencia. Fueron identificadas 52 palabras clave que sirvieron de base para la sistematización de algunos temas centrales de la conferencia, entre los cuales se encuentran la consolidación de valores y principios de la investigación participativa, la descolonización como compromiso ético, político y estético, el papel de las universidades frente a las prácticas innovadoras y transgresoras, la epistemología desde abajo y el potencial transformador de la sistematización de experiencias.

Palabras clave: ARNA (Action Research Network of the Americas); IAP (Investigación Acción Participativa); descolonización; rupturas epistemológicas; educación popular.

Introduction

The fifth conference of the Action Research Network of the Americas (ARNA) was held at Cartagena de Índias, Colombia, between the 12th and 16th of June, 2017.¹ Under the title: “Participation and Democratisation of Knowledge: new convergences for reconciliation”, the event gathered people from different social contexts and fields of action, from 60 countries, representing all the continents. The central theme focused on reconciliation, considering the movement of approach between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Forças Armadas Revolucionárias da Colômbia – Exército do Povo (FARC-EP))². Reconciliation is thus directed at the promotion of a peace process in the country, that began in 2016, when a ceasefire was signed between both sides.

With a massive international presence, the event appears to have achieved its objectives, above all the fourth and fifth which aimed respectively at: promoting the sharing of proceedings and results of the participatory approaches to research developed worldwide, reflecting the commitment to democracy and social justice to the dignity of individuals and communities, to the promotion of sustainability on Earth and to the promotion of peace and reconciliation between people and nations (4); also to dialogically connect interested people and researchers of the different theoretical and methodological frameworks and different approaches to research that are characterised by a relation between research, participation and action (5).

Considering the objectives proposed, especially the two presented above, the conference covered five thematic lines: (1) Participatory methodologies and epistemological issues, approaching both the legitimacy and the validity of cultural and intercultural modes of construction of knowledge worldwide, emphasising their diversity. This theme sought to problematise, among other issues, the types of data that could be obtained by means of participatory methodologies; the multiple aspects involved in the process of rendering a participatory methodology; the positioning on the academic allegation that participatory research is biased; (2) Transforming practices and policies, a line that, beginning with the connection between participatory investigation and the generation of knowledge for understanding reality and social change questioned, for instance, how the professionals could participate in the research processes in order to better understand and transform their practices, and how this can promote their political framework; (3) Promotion of the development of the community, educating popular movements, considering that people can improve their situation by knowing and analysing their own living conditions. These themes attempted to ask about the role played by the local activities regarding problems such as discrimination and social injustice, and also forms of expressing solidarity in the processes of community development through participatory actions; (4) Participatory approaches for the resolution of con-

1 Site of the event: Available at: <http://www.arna2017.unal.edu.co/> accessed on Mar.2018.

2 Currently it is organized as a political party, maintaining the same acronym, but with a new name: *Fuerzas Alternativas Revolucionarias del Común* (FARC).