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Editorial

With this issue of the *International Journal of Action Research* we join the worldwide movement celebrating the centennial of Paulo Freire's birthday (1921–2021). The Brazilian educator, who started his educational work with an innovative literacy methodology in the Northeast of his home country, soon also became a reference for participatory research methodologies in Latin America and elsewhere. That is because in his work he used to see teaching/educating and investigating as dimensions, although with distinct roles and characteristics, of the same act of knowing. The investigation of the generative themes and words for learning how to read were to be identified not only by an interdisciplinary team of professionals (sociologists, linguists, psychologists, and others), but with the participation of members of the local communities. It was a process that went beyond listing words while trying to understand how people think and construct their worldview.

Doing research, in the Freirean perspective, means pronouncing the world, which is always a collective endeavour that involves action and reflection. Reading the world, as a prerogative we have as humans, actually precedes the reading of the word. That's why alphabetisation or education in general cannot be reduced to a merely technical activity. There is a political and ethical dimension built into the process of "saying one's word". This applies to research, particularly to action research. From Freire we also learn that there is a dialogical imperative in action and participatory research. Dialogue, he tells us, has some preconditions that research shares with education, such as trust in people as companions in the process of understanding and changing the world, love to people and the world, and hope that allows working towards a different and better future for all.

In this issue we present an interview with Richard Ennals, whose experience exemplifies these preconditions of trust, love and hope, and has witnessed the development of the *International Journal of Action Research* as a member of the editorial team. In the interview we have an account of the many facets of Richard's professional activities in various parts of the world. He grants us a testimony of how to learn from and with different cultural situations, and how to make sense of life and deal creatively in difficult situations. Life, as he tells us, can be itself a project of action research, of acting to understand and to change. As editors of this issue and interviewers, we thank Richard for the interview, as well as for his collaboration with the journal over these more than two decades.

The three articles that integrate this issue come again from different fields of practice and cultural contexts. Pablo Costamagna and Eleonora Spinelli, in "Systematisation of experiences within the framework of the pedagogical approach towards territorial development: a contribution to action research from the Latin American tradition", attempt to link different approaches to action research by sharing a concept that holds an important place in the processes related to participatory action research in Latin America. Drawing on concepts of Paulo Freire, Orlando Fals Borda and other Latin American researchers, systematisation of experiences indicates that it is a particular research method generated from popular education and social work, and that it shares the same commitments regarding social transformation.

Besides the theoretical foundations of systematisation of experiences, the article presents and analyses didactically the 7 moments of systematisation of experiences in Territorial Development: 1) Gather the systematisation team; 2) The definition of what to systematise (core of systematisation); 3) Reconstruction of experience (Memory); 4) Analysis and in-

terpretation of events: learning from dialogue processes in systematisation; 5) Development of transformative proposals: stage of co-construction; 6) Learning from experience: construction of new knowledge and the “return to academia”; 7) The communication of the experience. Action researchers from different traditions will find important insights for their practice.

The next two articles address the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in action research. The article “A Creative Framework of Online Teaching of Public Relations Modules during Covid-19 Pandemic: An Action Research Approach,” by Layla AlSaqer, uses a reflective action research methodology to improve the on-line teaching of skill-oriented modules of public relations at the university-level in Bahrain during Covid-19. The instructor/researcher developed two action research cycles where she planned and implemented new teaching strategies based on the students’ needs, observed, evaluated, and reflected. The paper finds that action research has been useful in creating a collaborative relationship between the instructor and the student and has helped to reflect on the e-learning process of public relations modules during Covid-19 pandemic. The study recommends that the instructor should develop a strategic framework to develop e-learning during Covid-19 pandemic taking into consideration the opportunities and challenges provided by virtual teaching. Teachers as well as researchers concerned with action research will benefit from Layla AlSaqer’s experience.

Zainoriza Zainun and Mohd Syafiq Aiman Mat Noor, in “The implementation of a bakery sales project during the Covid-19 pandemic to improve the employability of Semai indigenous students”, describe and analyse an action research process by running a bakery sales project with Semai indigenous students, in Malaysia. The authors attempt to address the following research question: How can the practitioner enhance her practice as a special education teacher of Specific Vocational Skills (Bread Making), to improve the employability of Semai indigenous students through a bakery sales project? The analysis makes clear the difficulty of teaching vocational skills during the pandemic of Covid-19, when teaching went online. It was particularly difficult for the practitioner to assess the level of employability gained by the students. At the same time the authors identify possibilities that may help to redesign teaching procedures after the pandemic.

In this issue of the *International Journal of Action Research* we are also glad to announce the continuation of the journal with a new editor-in-chief. Miren Larrea, who co-edited this issue, will take on the position as editor-in-chief in January 2022.

Danilo Streck
Miren Larrea

Systematisation of experiences within the framework of the pedagogical approach towards territorial development: a contribution to action research from the Latin American tradition

Pablo Costamagna and Eleonora Spinelli

Abstract This article attempts to link different approaches to action research by sharing a concept that holds an important place in the processes related to participatory action research in Latin America. Such a concept is systematisation.

In Latin America, the framework of the systematisation of experiences indicates that it is a particular research method generated from popular education and social work, and that it shares its commitments regarding social transformation. Systematisation arises as a proposal that is based on and learns from accumulated experiences, along with new forms of participatory research and evaluation. Thus, one of the ever-present challenges is to define knowledge production methodologies appropriate to the way of thinking and acting of those who depart from practice, from action (Centro de Estudios para la Educación Popular CEPEP, 2010).

Within this framework, the concept of systematisation and its challenges in the specific context of territorial development in Argentina are addressed in order to integrate new learning into action research debates, not only in Latin America, but also outside its boundaries. To this purpose, we rely on the lessons learned by a team from the Universidad Tecnológica Nacional (UTN) from Argentina based in Rafaela (Santa Fe, Argentina) working for the Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales Praxis. This team has been interacting with action research teams from the Basque Country (Spain) and the University of Agder (Norway), a space where the systematisation of experiences has emerged as a relevant and unknown methodological element in the aforementioned European contexts.

Keywords: Systematisation; Action research; Territorial development; lessons learned

Sistematización de experiencias en el marco del enfoque pedagógico del desarrollo territorial: un aporte a la investigación acción desde la tradición Latino Americana

Resumen En este artículo se intenta construir un puente entre distintas aproximaciones a la investigación acción compartiendo un concepto que ocupa un lugar importante en los procesos vinculados a la investigación acción participativa en América Latina. Este concepto es el de la sistematización.

En América Latina, el marco del trabajo de sistematización de experiencias indica que es una manera particular de investigar, generada desde la educación popular y el trabajo social y que comparte sus compromisos en torno de la transformación social. La sistematización surge como una propuesta que recupera y aprende de las experiencias acumuladas, junto con las nuevas formas de investigación y evaluación participativa. Es así que uno de los desafíos

siempre presentes es el de definir metodologías de producción de conocimiento adecuadas a la forma de pensar y actuar de aquellos y aquellas que parten de la práctica, de la acción (Centro de Estudios para la Educación Popular CEPEP, 2010).

En este marco, se aborda el concepto de sistematización y sus retos en el contexto específico del desarrollo territorial en Argentina con el objeto de integrar nuevos aprendizajes en los debates de la investigación acción no sólo dentro, sino también fuera de América Latina. Para ello nos basamos en los aprendizajes de un equipo de la Universidad Tecnológica Nacional de Argentina (UTN) con sede en Rafaela (Santa Fe, Argentina) desde el Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales Praxis. Este equipo ya viene interactuando con equipos de investigación acción del País Vasco (España) y la Universidad de Agder (Noruega), espacio donde la sistematización de experiencias ha emergido como un elemento metodológico relevante y desconocido en los contextos europeos citados.

Palabras claves: Sistematización; Investigación Acción; Desarrollo Territorial; aprendizajes

Introduction

Action research has often been defined as the convergence of various approaches that often even have different epistemological bases (Greenwood and Levin, 2007). Among them, participatory action research is widely recognised in the way it has been developed in Latin America. The authors who have been most referenced in this area are Paulo Freire (1996) and Orlando Fals Borda (2009). However, in publications that cover action research at the international level and are frequently published in English, Latin American experiences are not as present as one would expect given this referentiality. Language can be one of the reasons, since frequently, the people involved in these processes are connected to literature in Spanish and English, that are disseminated in parallel circuits.

In this article, we want to link, in a publication aimed at readers of English, different approaches to action research by sharing a methodology that holds an important place in the processes related to participatory action research in Latin America, yet it is not mentioned, for example, in the *Encyclopedia of Action Research* (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014). Such a concept is systematisation.

The interest that this concept may raise outside Latin America is derived from the lessons learned by a team from the Universidad Tecnológica Nacional (UTN) from Argentina based in Rafaela (Santa Fe, Argentina) and the Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales Praxis with teams of action research from the Basque Country (Spain) and the University of Agder (Norway) (Costamagna and Larrea, 2015; Canto and Estensoro, 2020). In these international collaborations, the systematisation of experiences has emerged as a relevant methodological element specifically used in the Latin American context and whose equivalent was not easy to find in the European experiences which were analysed. Consequently, this article addresses the concept of systematisation and its challenges in the specific context of territorial development in Argentina, in order to integrate new learnings into action research debates not only within, but also outside Latin America.

In Latin America, the framework of the systematisation of experiences has been developed, fundamentally, from the experiences of popular education and as part of a conglomerate

of the so-called critical methodologies. Graciela Messina (2005), in “Conceptions on Systematisation”, says that it is a particular method of doing research, generated from popular education in Latin America and that it shares its commitments to social transformation. A key point is that systematisation started in the 80 s, in a period of great political mobilisations also linked to participatory research, in part, as a continuity and as a replica to it. In this context, systematisation arises as a proposal that is based on and learns from accumulated experiences, along with new forms of participatory research and evaluation. Thus, one of the ever-present challenges is to define knowledge production methodologies appropriate to the way of thinking and acting of those who depart from practice, from action (Centro de Estudios para la Educación Popular CEPEP, 2010).

In order to respond to this challenge, this article is based on the systematisation experience in the specific context of the Master of Territorial Development programme of the UTN and the Instituto de Investigación Praxis, in order to propose an approach to systematisation based on the learnings they promote that responds to the needs of territorial development. These learnings are intended to be a contribution, first, for the people linked to systematisation processes in Latin America and, also, for all those linked to action research outside Latin America who have an interest in better understanding this methodology.

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework of this article is based largely on the authors’ participation in debates on Latin American critical epistemology and the participatory methodologies in territorial processes developed in the CLACSO Working Groups (Jara, 1994, 2008, 2012; Torres 2021, Rebola et al. 2020; Yanes et al. 2019¹)

As proposed by Palma (1992), popular education and other related practices are activities that constantly engage and interact with the groups and organizations to which they refer, coinciding with them in a political intention to transform the world towards fairer conditions. Hence, some reflections propose systematisation as an alternative method to produce knowledge and traditional research based on the most positivist perspectives, more typical of the hard sciences and which, in many cases, have operated and extrapolated methods and techniques to social research. It is a need that becomes evident when theoretical frameworks become inoperative to support actions. Systematising is organising a practice to intervene more efficiently and effectively in a given situation.

Following the proposal of the Centro de Estudios para la Educación Popular (2010) we can identify and highlight at least four fundamental purposes of the systematisation of experiences that represent a clear and specific manifestation of the presence of the principles of popular education, which is proposed based on practice or experience: learning, producing knowledge, building transformative proposals and sharing the results.

1 This framework does not imply ignoring other contributions in the field of systematisation in Latin America as explained by Alfonso Torres Carrillo (2021) in “Hacer lo que se sabe, pensar lo que se hace. La sistematización como modalidad investigativa”. *Prospectiva. Revista de Trabajo Social e intervención social*.

1. Learning from experience: practice becomes an inexhaustible source of learning that must be socially constructed through the leading participation of the systematisation team that has been formed.
2. Producing knowledge from experience: the systematisation of experiences is in itself a research method based on critical interpretation as a way of building knowledge.
3. Building transformative proposals from experience: in a systematisation process, new learning and knowledge must be used to transform reality and the political, social, economic contexts of the protagonists. These transformative proposals must be built in participatory settings, together with the actors of the experience.
4. Sharing the results: any systematisation process entails specific products or results that generate learning, knowledge (theory) and transformative proposals.

When understood in such a way, systematisation has strong connections with other approaches to action research oriented towards social transformation (Greenwood and Levin, 2007; Bradbury et al., 2019). However, systematising is generally associated with “ordering information”. For this reason, it is important to emphasise that the concept refers to a more complex process where ordering information is just one part. Thus, for Oscar Jara (1994), sociologist and popular educator who has been and is one of the main references in the methodology and praxis of the systematisation of experiences in Latin America, systematisation can be understood from two perspectives, the second being more important than the first:

As systematisation of information: refers to the ordering and classification of data. In our case, we usually also call this modality “Memory of experience”.

As systematisation of experiences: an attempt is made to go beyond the ordering of information and considering experiences as complex historical processes in which different actors intervene in a given socio-economic context and in an institutional moment of which we are part in order to reflect on the information, understand it, extract meaning and produce learning from it.

In this sense, Jara states that systematising experiences means “understanding why a certain process developed in one way instead of another, and interpreting what happened based on an ordering and reconstruction of the process. The first step is a reconstruction of what happened and an ordering of the different objective and subjective elements that have intervened, to understand, interpret and thus learn from the practices themselves” (Jara, 1994, p. 55).

When applied as methodology, systematisation does not only seek to evaluate results, it also tries to identify the lessons learned from the development process of experience on the basis of dialogue with actors. It attempts to reveal the “small” actions that made an instance of experience possible or that made it difficult to obtain results.

In the field of territorial development, the contribution of systematisation is relevant to action research and as pedagogical approach, because it promotes an interest in deepening capacity building in the territory and, to this end, adopting a critical perspective towards experience allows us to develop forward-looking thinking, in order to make better decisions in relation to the dynamics of the projects, the modification of designs, the establishment of networks and alliances, among other aspects, sharing knowledge with others. Thus, the knowledge generated through this process contributes to a better understanding of our work and the way in which changes occur (Tapella and Rodríguez, 2014).

A characteristic of this type of practice is that they tend to have instances of reflection on the learning achieved, although they are characterised by two common circumstances: they tend to be informal and fortuitous, with difficulties to overcome the merely anecdotal and, on the other hand, they are limited to the internal projects and program teams, and they fail to become more widely known, documented and valued (Tapella and Rodríguez, 2014).

To address systematisation with the depth described in this framework, and avoid its interpretation as a mere ordering of information, Spinelli (2020) points out that it is important to take into account some elements at the beginning:

1. The actors who are part of the experiences are the ones who mainly pursue a reflective perspective on their actions, analyse them in that context and produce their own, as well as others' learning. To them, external actors are added on certain occasions to help build that perspective through a group view.
2. It is important to determine what is systematised, but also how it is systematised. It is important that the process is as participatory and pluralistic as possible, capturing, incorporating and leveraging the knowledge and opinions that the various actors linked to the experience have about the experience. This is why we say that as we are working on a systematisation process we are building capacities in those who participate, and in ourselves as facilitators of the process.
3. Much of the sense of systematisation is found in critically learning from experiences in order to: – Improve our own practices (experience as an instance of learning). – Share our learnings with those of other similar experiences (sharing the experiences). – Contribute to the production of new knowledge.

The systematisation carried out in this way helps to overcome the common idea that one can only learn from books or lessons and to consider one's own experience as a fundamental source of learning. Therefore, developing this perspective implies a break with a mindset and that is why it must be done in a conscious way, motivating us to learn from what we do (Peiretti, 2017).

Case presentation

The case that we take as a starting point to discuss systematisation in this article is that of the Master of Territorial Development program at the UTN and its integration of systematisation in its teaching methodologies, transforming students into researchers.

This incorporation of systematisation takes place largely because the Master's Degree programme integrates the so-called Pedagogical Approach for Territorial Development (EPDT in Spanish), with a strong influence of Paulo Freire's work. The pedagogical approach originated in the formative processes, but with the development of our practices, it began to question the traditional spaces accompanying territorial development elaborated up to now: unidirectional, implying a transference of knowledge, absence of dialogue and/or denial of conflict, and where capacity building focused almost exclusively on the classroom realm. The EPDT is a way of understanding and acting in the construction of learning processes for change in the territory that entails a way of understanding knowledge, the link between theory

and practice, the acknowledgement of the other (local knowledge, practices and experiences), the connection based on dialogue and conflict resolution promoting democratic instances (Costamagna, Spinelli and Pérez, 2013).

In this way, from its inception, the Master's Degree programme raises a broad and deep conception about the Territorial Development (TD) approach, centred on the idea that TD is a process of social and political construction with multidimensional characteristics. This includes economic, social, urban, environmental and institutional development, and complex governance with an active role of the State (Costamagna, 2015). In addition, it incorporates other elements such as the following:

- This approach discusses a view that focuses only on the macro and the sectoral, and also the idea that growth equals development.
- The key is in the people and the issue of capabilities must be worked on. Emphasis is placed on endogenous potentialities.
- It is an approach to action in which the way you do things matters.
- It raises the importance of local productive systems, decent employment, distribution and change in the production and consumption model, but also educational, health, infrastructure, environment, and gender issues, among others.
- It promotes the incorporation of productive innovations, social institutions and the importance of tangible infrastructure, but also intangible assets to facilitate the dissemination of knowledge.

This proposal is also influenced by “the ideas of complexity as an integrating framework for research and training in the territory, and proposes some breaks and new elements to obtain qualitative leaps in the relationship between the construction of individual and collective capacities. The construction of individual and collective capacities is pursued. This path promotes a process of deconstruction on our practice, which divided training and research” (Costamagna, 2020, p. 110).

Within this framework, the Master's Degree programme has included systematisation as a methodology for student learning, but also for the involvement of students in the transformation of the territory. Since 2017, 70 students of the Master's Degree programme have used this approach in projects included in their curriculum development. The lessons learned from this experience are presented in the following sections in the form of a specific systematisation approach aimed at territorial development.

Systematisation in the pedagogical approach for territorial development

As we have mentioned, there are different approaches to develop a process of systematisation of experiences in TD. Our proposal is structured around the following 7 moments.

1) Gather the systematisation team:

The first aspect to take into account is to gather the systematisation team. Although there is usually a facilitator who coordinates the process, it is important to plan and enlist the par-

ticipation of the actors involved in the initiatives. The coordinator should be part of the experience.

The starting point of the systematisation does not necessarily occur, chronologically, once the experience object of the systematisation is finished. That is, the registration can happen as of the beginning (if systematisation is defined as part of a project from the beginning), it unfolds during the process or when it has finished. However, it is recommended that this dimension should be present as of the design stage of an experience (whether it is a project or a training process). It is important to note that systematising is a participatory process, which is expected to be carried out by the direct actors of the experience.

2) The definition of what to systematise (core of systematisation):

At this time we define the purpose of the systematisation, what central aspects of that experience we are interested in recovering. Sometimes not everything can be systematised, but we choose/prioritise some dimension that is more meaningful to us. In territorial development, microprocesses matter. This implies specifying a core concept that will function as a common thread that runs through the experience and clearly links it with the TD approach from which it will be addressed, it can be linked, for example, to new territorial capacities, new organisation and management processes, a level of citizen participation, communication or conflict management models, new practices and innovations in productive and/or social processes, collaborative management models, among others.

The core concept(s) of the systematisation are not defined from the classroom realm only in an analytical way, as if it were almost simulated and according to our own interests, but rather it/they is/are co-constructed together with the participants of these processes according to their needs, desires, their critical view of the process, thinking about how it/they contribute(s) to analyse that dimension and not another one in relation with the projects, policies and programmes that are being carried out, specifying where to focus in order to better understand, learn and transform collectively.

3) Reconstruction of experience (Memory):

At this time, what happened and how it happened is retrieved in an orderly manner (chronologically, in stages, by themes as defined by the team), the available information is classified and the stages of the process are identified. For this purpose, it is essential to organise the records in a clear and simple way, based on all possible sources. The records created during the experience can be used, or new information can be produced.

We emphasise here the relevance of generating tools that make the voices of the participants be heard, taking notes during the experience, but also comparing it with a retrospective look at it. The sources of information at this stage can be: written reports, interviews, newspaper articles, magazines, meeting minutes, statements, audiovisual documentaries, radio and television programmes, testimonials, key informants, photographs, etc. (this is also pointed out by Jara). All sources must be duly referenced in the writing of the report.

Elements to take into account when writing the report:

- Title of the experience.

- Geographic location
- Background
- Identification of participating actors (mapping)
- Rationale from the Territorial Development approach
- General and specific objectives of the experience: What problem were you trying to solve? Who were the actions aimed at?
- Intervention process: description of the activities carried out/lines of action.
- Main results of the experience: quantitative and qualitative.

4) Analysis and interpretation of events: learning from dialogue processes in systematisation

From our perspective, this stage is the most relevant moment of systematisation. It is here when a reflective and analytical instance of the experience that we are systematising comes into play, but clearly it depends on previous moments.

To this purpose, once again, we adopt the perspective of Participatory Action-Research (IAP in Spanish), which emphasises that this type of learning process is not achieved by researchers alone, drawing conclusions from our observations, but that knowledge is a collective construction, a process of co-construction (Costamagna and Larrea, 2015).

From this framework, thus, to work on the analysis, interpretation and learning generated in each experience, it is essential to construct opportunities for dialogue with the actors, where it is impossible to separate reflection from action, which is praxis (Freire, 1997). Dialogue as such is constituted as a central dimension, working as key to the recognition (Huergo, 2003) of the knowledge of the territory.

Methodologically, at this moment, what we are trying to do is understand why events happened, which implies a critical reflection on the process, while examining the relationships, tensions and contradictions, and identifying the lessons learned from the process more clearly. An important point here is not to reduce learning to results (although it is important to detail how these have been achieved), nor to consider that learning is only those aspects that have been successful; we also need to problematise conflicts.

Another aspect to be developed in this section is the forward-looking perspective. This means, that, on the basis of the lessons learned, new projects, ideas and initiatives can be carried out in that territory, and that “seeds” have been sown which can be turned into new actions and continuities of projects carried out or in progress.

5) Development of transformative proposals: stage of co-construction

The connection between theory and practice, knowledge and doing, is specified in the systematisation of experiences through the development of transformative proposals (CEPEP, 2010).

A transformative proposal formulated in the context of a process of systematisation of experiences is much more than a phrase or idea that expresses an intention. It must be a structured body of ideas with a clear transformative orientation elaborated by the systematisation team in dialogue with the main actors of the experience.

In this sense, once the process of dialogue with actors has been generated and the learning and knowledge produced during the process of analysis, and critical interpretation of the experience have been identified, transformative proposals emerge.

6) Learning from experience: construction of new knowledge and the “return to the academia”

During the process of critical reflection of the experience, new knowledge and learning will be generated. It is important that, once identified, we can document them to capture what we have learned throughout the process, identifying and describing aspects such as theories, concepts, approaches, paradigms, attitudes, values, etc.

As we have already mentioned, from the pedagogical approach perspective towards action-research (AI) and territorial development (TD), it is interesting to share these processes of action, reflection, action in the classroom, in our case, in the process of the Master’s Degree in Territorial Development programme itself. We emphasise that we are dealing with new knowledge, and that academia is one more actor in the process of collective construction where the learning generated in the territory is enriched.

In addition, these processes are taken as the basis for postgraduate theses and also as final work for diplomas or courses, and this is generating new volume in terms of learning from the territory.

7) The communication of the experience:

This stage is of great importance because it is useless to systematise a process if we do not communicate the learnings to those who have been part of it, and to others who are in processes with similar characteristics. Therefore, we must work hard to “make them communicable” and on the development of various communication products that facilitate knowledge management, for which we need to resort to diverse, creative and appropriate ways of thinking about the interlocutors.

Upon reaching this last stage, each of the individuals who have participated in the different moments of the systematisation that precede the sharing of the results, own the learnings and knowledge obtained by being part of the entire process. The challenge is to define a set of activities that favour the social appropriation of the results by other social actors who did not participate in their construction, attempting to make them contribute to promote processes that transform their realities, spaces or contexts (knowing that these spaces or contexts are different and that the transformative proposals are not transferable from one territory to another).

Both the communication processes and the systematisation from TD have an important differential if both are directly linked with the actors, who are participants and protagonists, and not just spectators. It requires permanent practice and opening of spaces in which to approach this perspective, since we are used to being recipients rather than producers of new meanings and learnings. Something that requires us to collectively assume the challenges that these tools offer to us, obtaining training and leading processes.

Case discussion

In this last section, on the basis of the conceptual framework presented and the specific experience of the Master in Territorial Development programme, we address a series of reflections derived from reviewing, rethinking and understanding our practice of systematisation processes in the classroom with students, but also with other experiences based on building and deepening the relationship between the university and the territory.

For this purpose, we are going to take a series of core concepts for analysis that allow us to make the learnings visible. Not all of them have been resolved, but they do intend to transform themselves into new challenges and actions that allow us to build new elements to strengthen these methodologies and their dialogues with the training and research processes from the TD approach.

As we have already mentioned in the first paragraphs of this document, systematising appears at the beginning of our journey as a tool, a methodology, but also as a strategy in the construction of capacities. Now, if we consider the practices that we carry out from the university, new strengths are detected that invite us to rethink the potential of systematisation in conjunction with other processes such as research, with a strong connection with action research, training and its close and powerful link with our perspective of TD and the pedagogical approach of TD. In the following paragraphs, we address, first, our reflection on the methodology proposed in the previous section and its stages. Then we complement this reflection with our learnings grouped in relation with eight core concepts.

Learnings at each of the moments of systematisation

On the basis of the journey we have taken, we retrieve some of our learnings regarding the systematisation methodology, emphasising the difficulties and complexities inherent to the practice process that have made us delve into the idea that the methodology, as we mentioned, is a path that is modified in the doing, transforming even the theoretical construction itself. To carry out this exercise, we will return to the stages or moments that we have described to critically review them, establishing some conclusions regarding their implementation.

At the beginning of these processes, although we have never considered it in a linear way, comes the formation of the systematisation team. Based on our experience, it seems relevant to us to add new elements, such as a sort of zero stage, which we call “the negotiation process”. By this we mean that in the literature we have studied, and in the implementation of the methodology, this moment does not appear explicitly because, in our understanding, it comes from different actions, programmes and policies in TD, and therefore, it is something that was already present in process.

It seems that the will to carry out the systematisation appears as something that does not require prior negotiations, a process in which the commitment and involvement of the actors that manage the policies and processes is assumed. In our experience, the opposite happens many times, or there are views that are more associated with technical assistance and consulting aimed at providing certain solutions from an external, aseptic view.

A lesson in this sense has been the importance of taking the time to establish these negotiations, meeting with the people involved in the processes to tell them what we want to do, the type of work that we are going to face. This instance is already in itself a formative experience for students in which we create spaces for dialogue that emphasise the perspective that we address and engage the participation of key actors of the experience and their institutions. This is also key to later work in the dialogue instances for the identification of learnings and for moments of co-construction of future proposals.

Likewise, there is another element that was not so explicit either: during the systematisation process, not only do we form ourselves from the scope of the Master's Degree programme, but also so do the actors who participate in this process.

The experience helps us to think about the negotiation instance as a key process where it is also necessary to take time to discuss the approach and the political sense of moving towards the collective production of a material that is not only a document for the dissemination of the successful aspects. Knowing that, on some occasions, until the process begins to unfold, many actors consider these dialogues as only "theory".

Regarding the reconstruction of the experience, which we call in this work "Report", we find it interesting to highlight the importance given to it by the different actors linked to systematisation.

In our practice, it constituted, at the beginning, another aspect of a documentary type, a precedent for spaces for dialogue and mapping of actors, and it turns out to be an almost fundamental input in terms of historical recovery for many of the experiences that we systematise. This happens, in the first place, because we are not in the habit of documenting a process, and sometimes seeing it embodied in a working document allows us to see the potentialities, the trajectories in time, and to trace the traditions that generated the conditions of possibility for those experiences to have taken place, originated in a particular territory and not in another. For this reason, we consider that the Report is a stage that must be given a different entity, and even within the dynamics of greater dialogues.

The moment of analysis and reflective interpretation of the experience and the processes of dialogue in the systematisation has been one of the greatest challenges in the methodological construction and in the relationship between theory and practice. In this sense, an important lesson learned has been working in acknowledgement key, "listening before talking", as Mario Kaplún (2002) says, adding the need to recognise knowledge as a collective construction, as a co-construction process (Costamagna and Larrea, 2015).

Therefore, it is absolutely essential to build spaces for dialogue with the actors. With spaces for dialogue, we do not refer only to conducting interviews or workshops where conversations are generated on these issues, or where the definitions that are constructed a priori and out of practice are "validated". When we speak of dialogue, we understand that our horizons must be oriented towards reflection and action, which is praxis (Freire, 1997). Dialogue is then constituted as a central dimension, working as key of recognition (Huergo, 2003) of the actors' knowledge in the territory, and it becomes the "heart" of systematisation.

Understanding that, as we move forward, we are building capacities in multi-stakeholder dialogue processes, in those who we systematise and to whom we facilitate the experience, and in other protagonists of it. The greatest difficulty we face in this regard is that, on many occasions, the first thing that arises is that learnings are downgraded to results, or only to aspects that have been successful. For this reason, we insist that in this type of processes, while

we advance along the methodological path, we are training without a plan, building moments to work together on the type of reflections that we want to generate.

There is a point of complexity here when we work on the training of our students who carry out a systematisation from this approach, which has to do with the difficulties in going from the descriptive to the analytical, to generate dialogue processes in practice and later transform them into learnings. Often, we come across situations in which questions arise about how learning is detected, how spaces for dialogue are built, and there are no recipes for this, there are convictions of being there, in the territory, linking ourselves and from that place we accompany in the training process. There are tools to put into use that are worked on in the classroom, such as conducting in-depth interviews or group interviews and designing workshops.

The stage of development of transformative proposals and co-construction was also constituted as a relevant and novel stage of the process. From our conceptual and methodological framework in the Master in Territorial Development programme, in the Reflection Workshops on Praxis I and II, we had not been working on this dimension but rather we only reached the reflective stage of identification of learnings.

The moment of co-construction was clearly a contribution that we took from the literature of Participatory Action Research for Territorial Development (IAP in Spanish) that we had been retrieving from the aforementioned exchange with Orkestra. It is from these learnings and exchanges that we incorporate the co-construction stage, also under the political sense that systematisation should not remain in the diagnostic and/or analytical perspective but should also be committed to the future.

Learnings about systematisation

In this section we present our learnings around eight aspects of systematisation.

1) Linking systematisation, research and facilitation as part of the capacity building strategy and TD process

One of the most important challenges ahead has to do with deepening the links that strengthen TD. Work is being done, but we had not made the articulations and complementarity that these practices imply sufficiently explicit. Understanding systematisation as only reduced to a tool or a methodology gave us a partial perspective of its potential to accompany processes in the territory. That is why generating bridges between systematisation, action research, facilitation and training processes as part of a capacity building strategy, invites us to broaden our perspective and, in that sense, at present, we find ourselves thinking, reviewing and enriching the approaches.

If we concentrate only on the tool, the extent of the process, and its use as a training and research space in emerging instances of territorial complexity, are lost in some way.

A clear case is the combination of past, present and future that allows us to jointly achieve systematisation and action research. Our experience and the exchange with Action Research for Territorial Development (ARTD) and Orkestra views mentioned in the introduction, leads

us to think that when we systematise, a retrospective perspective about the past prevails, and memory has to do with that, with the recovery and historization of each process and the view on the present moment. However, ARTD is oriented to the present and more strongly to the forward-looking perspective. It is interesting to think about how systematisation becomes an input for action-research, retrieving the collective memory of the processes that take place in the territories.

2) The lack of a method or uncertainty in the systematisation process

The reviews of the systematisation methodology of experiences from the territorial development approach is, undoubtedly, an aspect that we have been working on in our journey, and we have established a series of adaptations both in the training proposal for the students who systematise experiences within the framework of the Master's Degree programme, and from the research processes in which we promote the systematisation of experiences as a basis for the construction and exchange of knowledge.

A point of tension has to do with understanding the methodology as a path without certainty, as a process that is built as we move forward. There, we find the demand for the "method", a more rigid planning, the steps to follow, which is also related with a strong presence in the training trajectories of the most traditional modes of knowledge production, sustained and reinforced with traditional evaluation logic. This does not mean that tools are not brought to the training proposal to systematise experiences, but they are just that: tools such as in-depth interviews, maps of actors, workshops, among others.

Therefore, a lesson learned from this situation is how important it is that the teaching team accompanies this other logic regarding what the path of building and co-constructing a methodology implies as we move forward in the process. Here we highlight the importance of working to accompany each group in its uniqueness, which takes a great effort in relation to the teaching task in the workshop space, and a collective commitment in terms of the learning community.

3) Facilitation roles

We highlight the importance of deepening the facilitation of processes in the systematisation, both with regard to our roles as lecturers of the Praxis Workshop space, and to the students who also become trainers and facilitators when they systematise experiences. In TD, there are people who work to make things happen and, in systematisation, training is part of the training of facilitators, and systematisation is a great help in building capacities.

In addition, when we work on systematisation, we are developing networks, articulating actions with other sectors, building capacities. Thus, our students assume the role of process facilitators.

From the teaching coordination, it is essential to monitor each process, with its peculiarities, with the diversity of starting and ending points, sometimes making explicit dimensions that appear as we advance in the course of the methodological process.

4) The State and systematisation

The tradition of systematisation that we describe and know comes from sectors more closely linked to social and community organisations and, from our perspective and experience, it is important to place them in local State policies, trying to involve a diverse and complex number of sectors that, at times, even imply contradictions and conflicts among themselves in connection to particular, sectoral, political and institutional interests.

That is why we also insist on the approach, assuming the challenge of systematisation as a reflective and collective practice, as a formative process, with the footprint and voices of those who play a leading role in it on a day-to-day basis, and pointing out those who should be decision-makers and are not present in the discussions today. The methodology and the conceptual perspective then become a political plot, which is not built on its own.

In this sense, systematisation has great power as a tool that allows us to detach from the dynamics of the public sector and that, in our opinion, is one of the many elements on which we should work in order to achieve new transformations. Some interesting initiatives in this regard are connected with the incorporation of experiences logs and meetings minutes that some of the local areas, within the scope of the Rafaela Town Hall, have begun to carry out frequently to document and share their processes linked directly to the presence of students of the Master's Degree programme, or with accompaniments from the Instituto Praxis. In some cases, as stated, we have adapted the tools to continue accompanying processes.

5) Relations between University and Territory

Another lesson learned has to do with the relationships that we aim to build between the university and the territory, where there is a type and a mode of approach that is far from an enlightened perspective, in which, in many cases, the trajectories and knowledge of the communities are not recognised, but what people need is defined. In our case, we have been working with other modalities that imply building other approaches that start from recognition and dialogue (in Paulo Freire's terms) and on which we also need to elaborate in our post-graduate training processes, where, in most cases, approaches to the territory derive from a technical point of view or are based on the logic of "expert" knowledge.

It is also necessary to work on the deconstruction of the ways in which people from the local communities, institutions and organisations with which we are linked recognise the university and the type of interventions they expect (legitimate knowledge, technical and qualified interventions, solutions to problems), and this is a type of learning that we put into practice when applying systematisation, in action-research and during accompaniment.

Another issue that invites us to reflect are the time frames in practice, which are not the same as the academic time frames, and that are often tied to the times of public policy management or the strong needs of the people, and this, again, implies handling complexities. In this sense, this type of initiative with processes of dialogue, negotiation, management and reworking at its origins takes much longer than the time available in a training process. We go through the practice with this tension, understanding the need for the logic of public management or of the people, but with the need to build and promote spaces for reflection and analysis that respect the times of the territory.

6) The shift inward

Another element at stake is the link with learnings that arise at the individual academic space, and in that logic, it is important to highlight other modes of knowledge construction and research that have been on the margins, at least for us, in the areas of territorial development, as is the case of the systematisation of experiences and action research.

From this perspective, we introduce modifications in the approach to the contents and methodologies used in the Praxis Workshops incorporating new concepts and flexibility regarding both the assembly of teams and the definition of the core of the systematisation process. This seems simple, but it requires a lot of energy due to the resistance it generates in the traditional academia realm and also, with groups that have their own stand on “going out of the classroom” and getting involved in the territory. From the pedagogical dimension, this has become an epistemological horizon, transforming the way of building knowledge, in this case, together with people who belong to organisations and institutions with territorial dynamics.

Another modification we made, in addition to the methodological ones, was on the contents, since we introduced a unit strongly influenced by Paulo Freire. Although we had been working on it more methodologically, getting to the heart of the Freirean thought regarding the notions of problematising education, the vocabulary range (“universo vocabular” in Spanish), dialogue and praxis, as well as the political sense, opened up new spaces for conversation and action with our students who come from diverse career paths, institutional affiliations, age groups and disciplinary backgrounds. Many of them had read Freire, for others he was an unknown author, but we dare to say that for all of them it was meaningful reading that made sense in their practices and biographies and that it became, at least, a leading light in the systematisation process.

There remains a great journey and debates about the teaching career, the way of carrying out extension activities and research that are part of these challenges.

7) About the ways of narrating experiences and difficulties for writing

There is another complexity that we point out in our process in relation with the exercise of writing experiences and the complexity that it implies. It often happens to us that, as part of the reflections that arise during debates in the classroom and the writing of experiences, there appears a gap, which leads us to question ourselves, and review what we can do to promote the narration of experiences, what new formats we can explore for those who are not comfortable with writing (narratives, life stories, but also tools such as short videos, podcasts, among others, leveraging the emergence of virtual tools and the new communication skills we have developed). We also need to work on strengthening individual capacities to systematise: writing, interviews, conversation.

This challenge calls for teachers giving greater support, especially if we take into account the Master’s Degree programme students’ profile, the majority of whom do not have much writing experience, but vast field work experience.

8) Systematising experiences in times of a pandemic

Finally, there is one last aspect in terms of learning that we would like to mention, and it relates to the challenges our work team faced when generating a training process on systematising experiences based on distance education in the context of a pandemic. Considering that none of us had chosen virtual tools as a method for training, but quite the opposite, we prioritised meetings, exchanges, orality and the warmth created by being in the classroom, altogether.

Even with these complexities, we dare to say that the Praxis Workshop, with its systematisation process, became a place to “connect”, to support the learning community space that we so much long for. And despite all the difficulties that came up, students were able to generate spaces for dialogue with actors from the experiences with tools other than the usual ones, and they explored the virtual tools available, holding workshops and meetings that encouraged collaborative work.

Our meetings were also the ideal space to put into play the sensibilities, the pedagogy of tenderness (Maya Betancourt, 2009), as we mentioned at some point in class, the affection, knowing that everyone was willing to share. Rethinking the experiences on which we worked, where the core concept of the analysis was exploring how the pandemic had modified the processes and how, in part, the exercise of systematisation related to observing those situations, which had been totally transformed, we could not keep thinking about them as if the context did not penetrate us.

Undoubtedly, the strategies put in place, the resources, the closest accompaniment to the group and the meetings to talk especially with some groups or people, the WhatsApp audios, the “being there” were also part of the facilitation.

Final thoughts

The experience of systematisation constitutes, in the field of action research, a contribution developed in Latin America which offers interesting learnings to other approaches to action research developed in other contexts. This last section focuses on adding, based on the concepts presented in this article: what was learned in the context of the collaboration between teams in Argentina, the Basque Country and Norway regarding systematisation.

There are four basic elements that have been observed in relation to systematisation in the context of territorial development in Rafaela:

- a) The focus on the pedagogical dimension, and the incorporation of students as action researchers in the territory
- b) The debate on going beyond information management, but, in turn, the relevance of structured information management exercises
- c) The exploration of systematisation as a curricular exercise that integrates training and research
- d) The role of facilitators in systematisation as people who strengthen capacities in these processes

We conclude, in this regard, that these are specificities that possibly respond to the contextual characteristics of the experience in Rafaela (Santa Fe, Argentina) largely influenced by the experiences of territorial development in other areas of Latin America. Deepening these elements in future research can help to continue strengthening the contributions that have been made from Latin America to the international community interested in action research.

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A Creative Framework of Online Teaching of Public Relations Modules during the Covid-19 Pandemic: An Action Research Approach

Layla AlSaqr

Abstract The education of public relations and media modules has been tied in the literature to the professionalism of these disciplines. The contribution of this paper is that it is the first paper that has used a reflective action research methodology to improve the on-line teaching of skill-oriented modules of public relations at the university-level in Bahrain during Covid-19. The instructor/researcher developed two action research cycles where she planned and implemented new teaching strategies based on the students' needs, observed, evaluated, and reflected. The paper finds that action research has been useful in creating a collaborative relationship with the students, and helped to reflect on the e-learning process of public relations modules. The paper recommends the use of action research to improve new creative strategies of teaching other media and mass communication modules at the university-level during the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, the researcher invites future scholars to take the results of this research further, and use action research to improve creative educational methods that would improve high education in Bahrain after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Key words: Public relations/media education; action research; e-learning; Covid-19 pandemic; participatory communication

Un marco creativo para la enseñanza en línea de los módulos de relaciones públicas durante la pandemia de Covid-19: un enfoque de Investigación-Acción

Resumen La educación de relaciones públicas y medios de comunicación se ha vinculado en la literatura al profesionalismo de estas disciplinas. La contribución de este artículo radica en que es el primer artículo que utilizó una metodología de investigación-acción reflexiva para mejorar la enseñanza en línea de módulos orientados a habilidades de relaciones públicas a nivel universitario en Bahrein durante el Covid-19. La instructora/ investigadora desarrolló dos ciclos de investigación-acción donde planificó e implementó nuevas estrategias de enseñanza con base en las necesidades de los estudiantes, observadas, evaluadas y reflexionadas. El resultado del artículo es que la investigación-acción ha sido útil para crear una relación de colaboración con los estudiantes y ayudó a reflexionar sobre el proceso de aprendizaje electrónico de los módulos de relaciones públicas. El artículo recomienda el uso de la investigación-acción para mejorar nuevas estrategias creativas de enseñar a partir de otros módulos y medios de comunicación masiva a nivel universitario durante la pandemia de Covid-19. Además, la investigadora invita a futuros académicos a llevar los resultados de esta investigación más lejos y utilizar la investigación-acción para mejorar los métodos educativos creativos que podrían mejorar la educación superior en Bahrein después de la pandemia de Covid-19.

Palabras clave: Relaciones públicas/educación en medios de comunicación; investigación-acción; aprendizaje electrónico; pandemia de Covid-19; comunicación participativa.

1. Introduction

The education of public relations and media modules has been tied in the literature to the professionalism of mass communication disciplines. Thus, this study addresses the challenges and opportunities accompanied with on-line teaching of public relations modules at the university-level during the Covid-19 pandemic in Bahrain. Teaching public relations includes enhancing both theoretical and practical skills. However, the rapid transfer towards distance learning during the Covid-19 pandemic challenges the traditional teaching and evaluation methods. Therefore, the author recommends a strategic plan for teaching public relations modules during the pandemic that is based on using creative problem-solving approaches that focus on encouraging the active participation of the students in the e-learning process. In addition, the paper stresses the significance of ensuring a flexible learning environment, and offering sufficient learning technologies. The paper argues that e-learning offers new opportunities for creativity and thinking out of the box, and enhances the need for psychological and technical support to encounter potential challenges in the e-learning environment. The contribution of this paper is that it is the first paper that used a reflective methodology to improve the on-line teaching of skill-oriented modules of public relations at the university-level in Bahrain. The paper aims to bring new theoretical and practical insights of improving e-learning strategies of public relations modules during the Covid-19 pandemic.

2. Literature review

Several studies have connected public relations education to public relations professionalism (Newsom, Turk & Kuruckeberg, 1999; L'Etang & Pieczka, 1996). However, only a few studies have addressed teaching public relations in the Arab Gulf region (AlSaqr, 2016). Moreover, there is a lack of studies that have addressed on-line teaching of public relations and media modules at the university-level in the Arab Gulf region during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In other disciplines, various studies addressed teaching issues during the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, Vlasov (2020) raised the question: "What forms of education and teaching technology can create the most effective learning environment for students?" The study focused on the legal and psychological-pedagogical aspects of distance and classroom teaching in a historical perspective. It argues that e-learning can facilitate a new level of education in the context of the computer revolution.

Alam, Changjae & Chai (2020) suggested that a systematic approach can be an alternative laboratory assessment (ALA) for Multimedia Engineering modules in the Transnational Education (TNE) program between Queen Mary University of London (QMUL) and Beijing University of Post and Telecommunications (BUPT).

Won, et al. (2020) described teacher and student experiences in an upper-level communication course on virtual worlds at a large United States university. This paper argued that while lectures moved to video conferencing, field trips and guest lectures became opportunities for students and teachers to connect remotely using desktops and headsets.

Li & Li (2020) used virtual experimental environment, recorded video courseware, live broadcast, operational instruction video, classroom activities and homework as “an auxiliary to explore the teaching pattern of Autonomous Learning, Cooperation, Guidance”. They found that this approach has achieved “good learning effect and high student satisfaction, which has certain referential significance for the teaching design of online home schooling of skill-oriented courses” (Li & Li, 2020, p.743).

Ma, Bai, Dai & Wang (2020) adopted the teaching design of stages before, during and after class, and diversified teaching methods and multiple dimensional teaching evaluation through encouragement and punishment. They claimed that “this method has achieved good teaching effect in the process of teaching practice and can be extended to other online teaching courses for a long time” (Ma, Bai, Dai & Wang, 2020, p. 568).

Peng, Li & Fan (2020) analysed the characteristics of information-based teaching under the epidemic situation, and discussed the solution of integrating information techniques with teaching in combining the advantages of “Internet + Education” and traditional classroom teaching. They argued that “Affected by the COVID-19 epidemic in 2020, the traditional teaching mode is going to be broken, while “Internet + Education” is becoming a hot topic again” (Peng, Li & Fan, 2020, p. 340).

Kasyadi, Lapasau, & Virgana (2020) used an action research approach to enhance learning developments in Mathematics, through online learning systems using multiple cycles. The research found that there was a considerable increase in the learning outcomes, from the first cycle to the following cycles. The researchers recommended the use of the cooperative learning model of the Jigsaw type, with an additional assignment of homework to enhance online learning of mathematics. Chang & Fang (2020) summarised the responses from online instructors, and analysed the difficulties and solutions of the online learning and instructions. They outlined implications for practice and ideas for future research.

These studies have emphasised that teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic requires setting a new teaching framework that takes into consideration students’ needs, and helps the instructor to overcome the potential challenges and achieve e-learning goals. Therefore, this paper aims to study the role of action research in developing teaching during this transformation. The contribution of this paper is that it is the first study that has used action research to develop e-learning of public relations modules in the Arab-Gulf context during the Covid-19 pandemic.

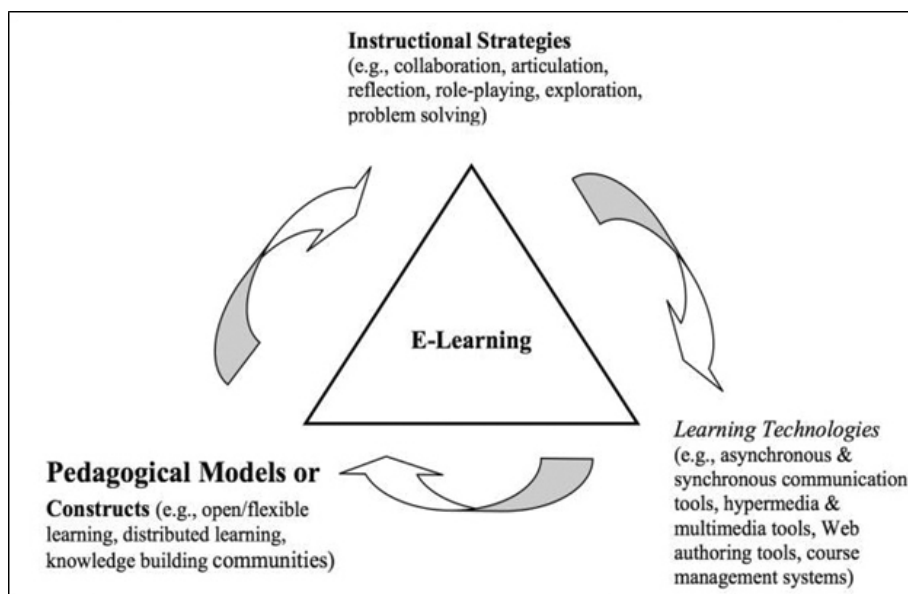
3. Methodology

3.1 Theoretical model of PR e-learning and the need for reflective methodological approach

Dabbagh’s model of e-learning (2005) shows that e-learning consists of three significant combined elements: instructional strategies, pedagogical models and learning technologies

(Figure 1). Based on this model, e-learning requires that the instructor develops constant interactive and reflective strategies, ensures that every student acquires open learning environment in addition to offering sufficient technological resources. Therefore, the researcher used action research to reflect on learning strategies, through taking into consideration facilitating flexible learning environment and learning technologies. The action research started with strategic situation analysis that considers the environmental factors that would affect the reflective process of action research.

Figure 1: Theory-based e-learning framework model (Dabbagh, 2005)



3.2 The use of action research

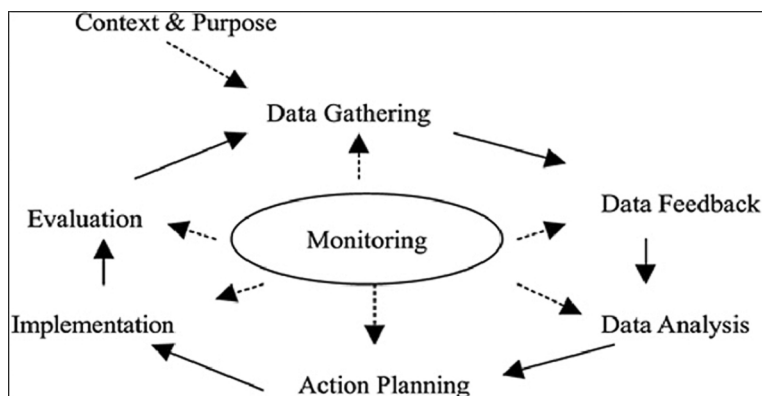
Action research was first introduced by Lewin (1946) as “a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action” (Lewin, 1946, p. 206). In the last decades, several scholars recognised action research as a distinctive methodological process of social and education research (Bossio, Loch, Schier & Mazzolini 2014; Chigeza & Halbert 2014). Action research was considered as “a methodology that provides an effective way of delivering a conscious change in a partly controlled surrounding” (Duffield & Whitty, 2016, p. 433). Thus, the researcher used this reflective process to improve creative methods of online teaching in such a changing context from traditional learning towards distance learning.

Shani & Pasmore (1985) defined action research as “an emergent inquiry process in which applied behavioural science knowledge is integrated with existing organisational knowledge and applied to solve real organisational problems”. Formentinia, Ellram, Boemc & Da Re (2019, p. 182) argued that action research “involves actively participating in a change situation, often via an existing organisation, whilst simultaneously conducting research”.

Since the experience of the transfer from traditional learning towards distance learning was new for both the instructor/researcher and the students, action research was the most appropriate method to plan, act and reflect on on-line teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Action research cycles consist of specific stages, such as those specified by Coughlan and Coughlan (2002): diagnosis, planning, action, and evaluation (Figure 2). As part of the action research process, the research team engages with practitioners, and participates in the solution development and feedback process on the interim outcomes (Coughlan & Coughlan, 2002).

Figure 2: Action research cycles specified by Coughlan and Coughlan (2002)



3.3 Research questions

The paper uses an action research approach to bring better understanding of the use of e-learning in teaching public relation modules during the Covid-19 pandemic. The paper raises the following qualitative questions:

- What are the most appropriate evaluation methods to teach on-line public relations modules during the Covid-19 pandemic?
- What are the creative teaching approaches that can be used to teach public relations modules during the Covid-19 pandemic?
- How can teachers encourage the active participation of students during distance learning?
- What are the opportunities and challenges of using distance learning in teaching skill-oriented public relations modules?

3.4 Sampling

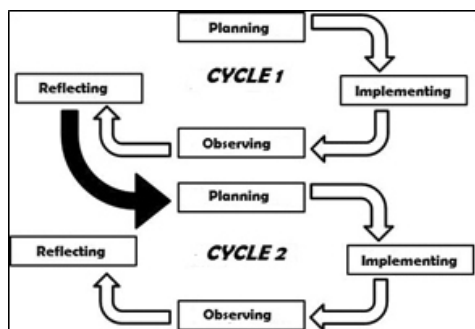
The researcher used a purposeful sample of two public relations modules at the university-level that are described in the curriculum as skill-oriented modules. Li & Li (2020) explained that what distinguishes the skill-oriented course is that it is a combination of theory and practice. The sample includes all the (52) students who are taking these two public relations modules. 82.69% of the sample are female where 17.3% of the sample are male. The researcher used two main research methods. First, the researcher used anonymous on-line

questionnaire that consists of both closed and open questions to make sure that the students express their opinions frankly. Second, the researcher used observation to observe the students' participation and involvement in live online lectures.

3.5 Action research cycles

The researcher/instructor has implemented two cycles that lasted two academic semesters (from mid-September 2020 to mid-May 2021). The researcher aims to improve the on-line teaching methods, and develop creative teaching approaches based on the Classroom Action Research (CAR) that used four steps stated in Arikunto, Suhardjono & Supardi (2010, p. 42). These steps include: (1) planning, (2) implementing, (3) observing, and (4) evaluating or reflecting. This CAR was conducted in two cycles (Figure 3). The students take an active role in all the steps in the two cycles.

Figure 3: Classroom Action Research (CAR) (Arikunto, Suhardjono & Supardi, 2010)



4. Findings

4.1 The role of action research in the process of transformation from traditional learning towards e-learning in Bahrain

The transformation from traditional learning to online learning is not an easy process. Both the instructor and the students must adapt to a new educational context that is completely new and different from what they have experienced before. The instructor must reflect constantly on this new educational context to develop new teaching and evaluation methods. In traditional teaching context, the instructor used to establish face-to-face communication where he/she can communicate directly with the students. The students can share their views and raise questions directly. Moreover, traditional teaching allows the teacher to evaluate the students' strengths and weaknesses in a better way. The continuous interaction between the instructor and the student in traditional learning provides a supportive environment to develop the learning process. Therefore, the rapid transformation to e-learning during the Covid-19 pandemic raises the fears of both the instructor and the student, regarding how the learning

goals can be achieved in this new educational context. The students expressed this challenge as follow: “It was really shocking for us to transfer from our traditional classroom to virtual class where we can’t see the instructor and our colleagues face-to-face”; “It’s really disappointing for me to lose this direct connection I used to establish with my teacher and colleagues”; “For me, it is really difficult to interact and understand the lesson virtually; It’s totally a hard experience”.

Therefore, the instructor was aware that this transformation requires a cooperative reflection between the instructor and the students to develop new teaching and evaluation methods. The role of action research is significant in facilitating this change process, where the instructor aims to learn through this experience and develop her teaching and evaluation methods. Action research has helped the instructor/researcher to recognise the challenges and improve teaching in this new educational context.

4.2 Stage 1: planning of a strategic approach for e-learning during the Covid-19 pandemic

To establish a reflective collaborative process, the instructor started the action research first cycle. At the beginning of the semester in mid-September 2020, the instructor/researcher assigned a live discussion session that lasted one hour with the students in each class to discuss with them their concerns, problems, and goals during the pandemic. Some students explained their perspectives as follow: “It is a totally a new (sometimes scary) experience for us to transfer from traditional class to virtual class in such a short time”; “The thing I’m really worried about is the absence of face-to-face communication with the instructor which makes it difficult for me sometimes to understand the lesson and interact actively”; “I have sometimes technical problems which makes me miss some live sessions”; “It is difficult to have my own quiet space at home to study; there are a lot of distractions and interruptions... it is really difficult”; “The instructors cannot use the same approaches they used to implement in traditional teaching; they have to use creative teaching approaches”; “My biggest problem that I lose attention if I don’t see the teacher face-to-face”; “We really need motivating activities that would involve us in live sessions”; “I think the instructors have to pay more efforts to involve students during distance learning”.

After these discussion sessions, the researcher/instructor started a strategic planning approach to develop creative teaching methods of public relations modules. The strategic process started with situation analysis through developing a PEST analysis of the political, economic, social, and technological factors affecting e-learning during the pandemic. As for political factors: the government of Bahrain facilitates and supports distance learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. As for economic factors, the use of distance learning can save money because it decreases electricity and fees of the facilities. As for social factors, some students and instructors are still not familiar with distance learning and prefer traditional learning process. As for technological factors, the university supports the technological environment through providing technological system and technical support for students and instructors who face problems. The university has acquired a specialised e-learning centre that offers technological support and training to facilitate e-learning.

4.2.1 SWOT Analysis of PR e-learning during the pandemic

The strategic process includes developing a SWOT analysis, where the strengths and weaknesses of teaching experience were laid alongside the opportunities and threats as follow:

Strengths

- The university owns a strong technological database and system.
- The university offers training workshops for the instructors to build virtual classes.
- The university provides constant technical support by a specialised center.

Weaknesses

- There was a short period that the teachers and students acquire to move from traditional teaching to virtual teaching.
- Some instructors prefer traditional teaching methods.
- Some students faced technical problems because of the new experience.

Opportunities

- The instructor can utilise the technology to develop creative teaching methods to involve the students as active participants in the learning process.
- The flexibility of e-learning environment can facilitate learning in multiple methods.

Threats

- The psychological barrier of fear that some students and instructors face since they are used to use traditional face-to-face learning.
- The rumours that widespread about the negative effects of e-learning during the pandemic.

This strategic situation analysis enables the instructor to recognise the potential opportunities and challenges of the new e-learning environment.

4.2.2 Goals and objectives

Based on the students' perspectives, the instructor acquires a critical awareness of the problem. The instructor develops the following goals:

- Achieving the course learning objectives using new creative problem-solving interactive activities.
- Facilitating the open learning process, through offering multiple communication channels to overcome students' psychological, pedagogical, and technical challenges.
- Motivating students to be involved in the e-learning process as active participants.

4.3 Stage 2: Implementation of creative problem-solving activities

Based on the discussion sessions, the students explained their problems of e-learning, such as the lack of interaction and motivation, lack of direct communication and their difficulties to adapt with virtual classes. Thus, the instructor has developed new problem-solving and interactive activities to involve the students as active participants in the virtual classes. The instructor was aware that involving the students in the e-learning process is essential to

achieve the teaching goals. The instructor/teacher seeks to establish two-way communication and constant interaction with the students where they can express their voices and get constant feedback. Ping, Fudong & Zheng (2020) recommends a teaching model based on the idea of problem-based learning (PBL). Based on the Ripple Model of Learning presented by Race (2005), there are five factors underpinning successful learning: wanting to learn, needing to learn, learning by doing (practice, trial & repetition), learning through feedback, and making sense of things (Race, 2005). Race (2005) suggested that if the students lack the want and need to learn, the teacher can start from facilitating learning-by-doing activities, and get the students to make sense of what they have been doing.

To achieve these goals, the instructor arranged constant virtual discussion forums with the students to give them the opportunity to share their perspectives in how to develop interactive activities that would motivate them in virtual classes. The students explained their perspectives as follow: “The student should be part of e-learning classes”; “The student should be given more time to talk and reflect on virtual lectures”; “We need to exercise more live activities where we can practice what we have learnt in virtual classes and get instant feedback from the lecturer”; “We need to practice what we are learning in real-life cases in a creative way”. The students suggested a variety of involving activities such as interactive case studies, problem-solving activities, competitions, and live forums. Based on the students’ suggestions, the instructor designed a variety of creative problem-solving activities to motivate the students to play interactive role in the virtual classes (Figure 4; 5).

To encourage students to take part in these activities, the instructor has facilitated open communication with the students and allocated time to hear their feedback and suggestions. The instructor aims to empower the students to take part in the new e-learning activities as the centre of education process through various procedures such as: allocating time in the virtual classes for the students to present their opinions and discuss their thoughts, arranging constant meetings and discussion forums after the class with the students, to develop appropriate activities that would fulfill the students’ needs; giving the students practical assignments that are based on real-life cases, and providing the students with direct feedback on their assignments in the live sessions.

The students explained, “It is important for us to be involved in this new e-learning environment”; “Listening to our voices has empowered us to adapt to this new e-learning process”; “In virtual classes, we need to feel that we are real people who are interacting with each other directly through listening to our voices constantly”; “E-learning needs continuous reflection and sharing views between us and the instructor”; “It is a new challenging learning context and we should cooperate to develop new solutions and methods to overcome these challenges”. Therefore, the instructor/researcher adopts an action research methodology to establish a cooperative, reflective process. Action research has been useful in this process as it has enabled the instructor and the students to reflect on their work and to be involved in the e-learning process. Action research has been used as an empowerment tool for both the instructor and the student to adapt to the new e-learning environment and overcome their fears and challenges.

Figure 4: Transferring campaigns exhibitions that used to be held on campus to virtual campaigns



Figure 5: Examples of problem-solving activities

Problem-solving activities:

- As a PR team, you are working to develop a strategic campaign to encourage the youth to stay at home during the wide spread of Covid-19. Develop three PR creative strategies and tactics.
- Write a feature article that encourages the youth to volunteer in a Covid-19 campaign in Bahrain.
- Develop some strategic creative solutions to participate in Bahrain Campaign against Covid-19.

4.4 Stage of observation and evaluation

After conducting constant discussion forums with the students, the researcher/instructor developed problem-solving activities based on real-life cases in Bahrain to motivate the students to develop creative solutions based on what they have studied in the virtual lessons. The researcher allocated specific time in virtual lectures to provide the students with feedback on their interactive activities. The instructor observed the students' involvement in the new interactive activities. The instructor observed the followings:

- The students' participation and involvement have increased in live virtual lectures.
- The attendance to the live lectures has increased from 62 % to 94 %.
- The students were more involved in live discussion and debatable questions.

On the other hand, few students explained some challenges they have faced in e-learning context as follow, "I still have problems with online communication"; "Sometimes I have problems with the Internet which make me miss some lectures"; "I really like interaction in live lectures, but I still need time to get used to this new environment"; "It's good that we can share our voices, but the interactive activities should be increased". The instructor contacted the students who had problems and listened to their perspectives. The instructor was aware that she must establish open, flexible environment where all the students should take part in the new e-learning process. The instructor/researcher used different direct communication channels with the students such as direct live communication, discussion forums and emails. Besides, the instructor contacted the students who had technological problems to provide them with solutions and alternatives. Action research has been used to observe this process, reflect, and develop a supporting environment for e-learning.

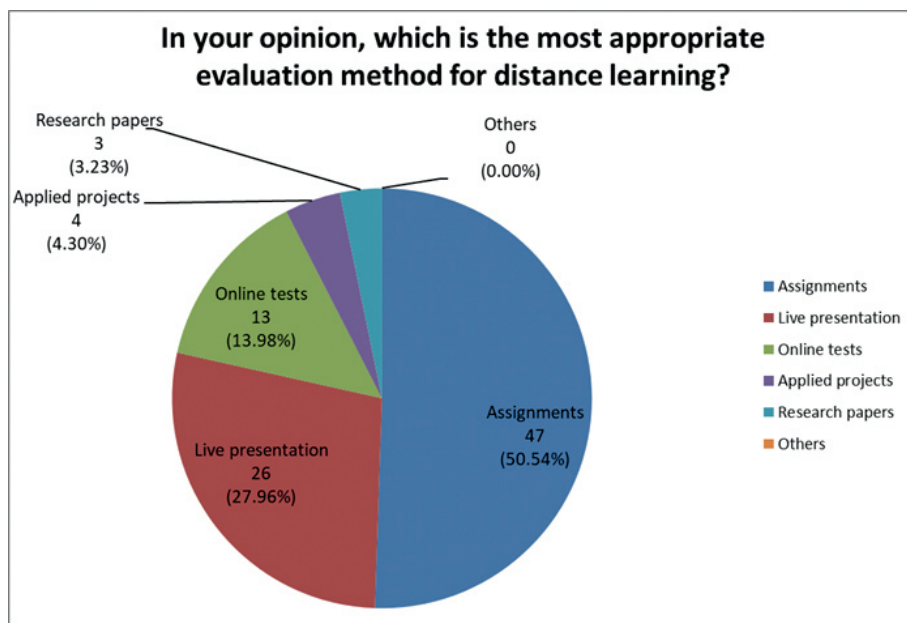
The instructor was aware that evaluating e-learning strategies constantly is essential to improve the process. Thus, the researcher/instructor used both open and closed questions to evaluate this process and improve the e-learning environment in cycle 1. Most of the students (50.54%) stated that interactive assignments are the most appropriate method for distance learning, while (27.96%) students prefer live presentation, and (13.98%) prefer online tests (Figure 6). The students explained that:

- "Interactive activities motivate us to participate, and be involved in the virtual class".
- "Interactive activities are challenging, and make us understand the lesson better".
- "Since we cannot see the instructor face-to-face, we need interactive activities to be more involved in online sessions".
- "Interactive activities and live presentation make the lecture fun and interesting".
- "These exercises make us relate theory to practice in a better way".
- "These activities motivate participation and critical thinking".

The students stated that the most appropriate evaluation method that enhanced their understanding and participation in online class is interactive assignments (43.02%) and live presentation (39.53%) (Figure 7). Some students explained,

- "I prefer problem-solving assignments, because I think tests and traditional assessment methods are not appropriate for distance learning".
- "Assignments and live presentations are the best way to encourage the students to participate in live sessions".

Figure 6: The perspectives of the students of the most appropriate evaluation method for distance learning.



- “In distance learning, live presentations give the students equal opportunity to express their opinions and to communicate actively in the class”.
 - “I think interactive assignments and presentation are effective tools in distance learning to assess the students’ understanding and participation in the virtual class”.
 - “At the beginning, I was afraid of discussion my ideas in virtual lectures, but after my first presentation I really enjoy it and find it useful to get instant feedback from the instructor”.
- Most of the students (78.85%) stated that they prefer combining live with recoded lectures to enhance their online learning; (13.46%) students prefer live lectures, and only (7.69%) students prefer recorded lectures (Figure 8).

Most of the students (82.69%) stated that they think public relations online lectures should focus on both theoretical and practical content through problem-solving exercises, while (17.31%) explained that online public relations lectures should be more practical. None of the students think that public relations lecture should be more theoretical (Figure 9). This emphasises the need for more practical interactive exercises in online public relations lectures. Several students stressed, “In distance learning, teachers have to remember that PR is a practical field; they cannot focus only on theory”; “Virtual PR classes should address both theoretical and practical skills”; “I think the best way to relate theories to practice when studying online PR modules is through problem-solving activities”.

As shown in Figure 10, most the students (40.38%) recommended allocating extra live time to communicate directly with the students online, some students (32.69%) recommended providing supportive recoded lectures, other students (19.23%) recommended the use of direct communication with the lecturer, few students (7.69%) provided other recommendations as follow,

Figure 7: The perspectives of the students of the most appropriate evaluation method that would enhance their understanding and participation in online courses.

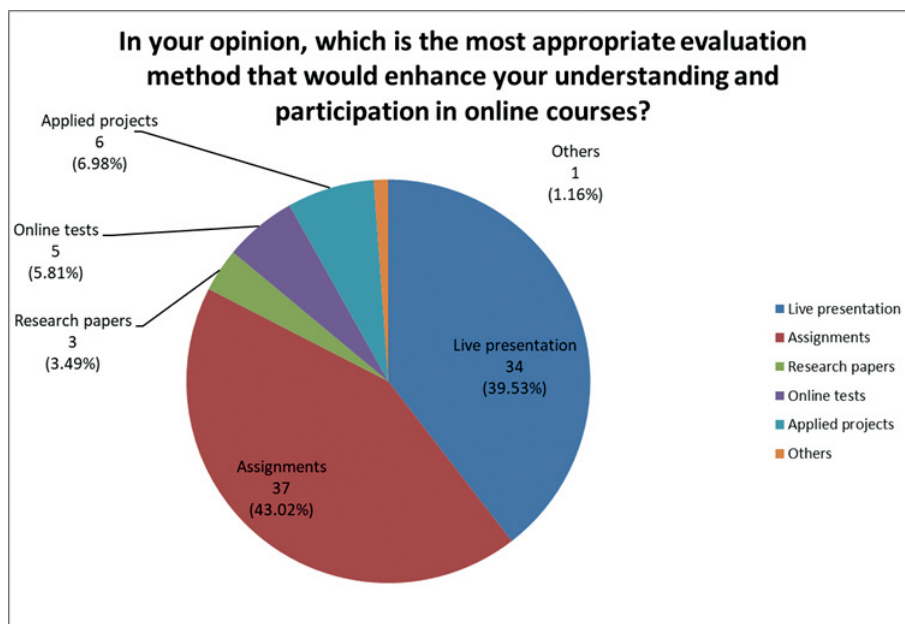


Figure 8: The perspectives of the students about live and recorded lectures during online learning.

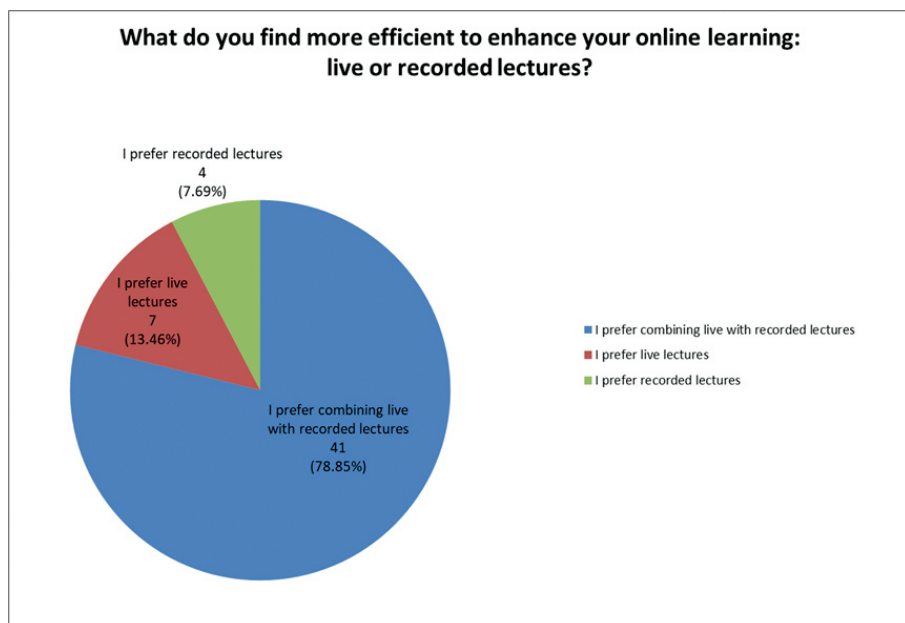


Figure 9: The perspective of PR students of the content of public relations lectures.

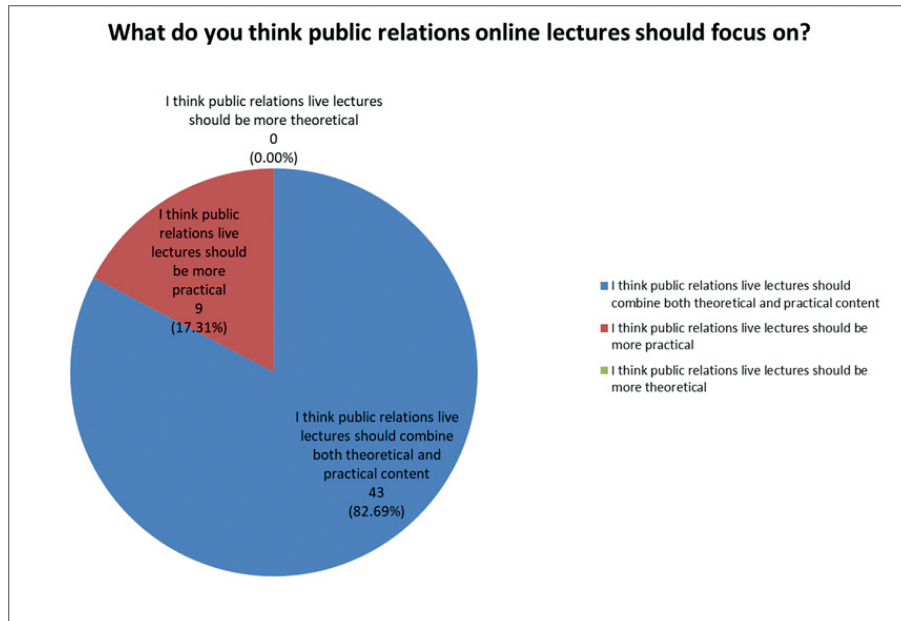
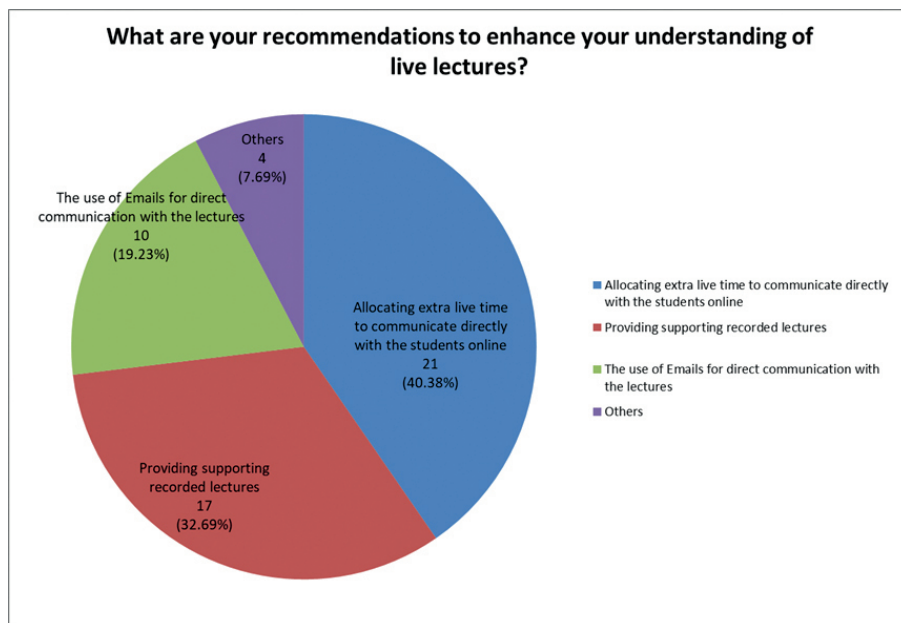


Figure 10: The students' recommendations to enhance their understanding of live lectures



- “I think increasing problem-solving activities and live presentation will be useful”.
- “It will be useful to accompany live virtual lectures with recorded lectures to ensure that all the students have access to the learning materials”.
- “In distance learning, it is useful to assign extra time after each lecture to discuss with the students and answer their questions”.
- “I think teaching online should encourage participation and thinking out of the box through encouraging students to think and debate rather than only to memorise”.
- “It is not enough that the students attend the live lectures; they should develop PR practical skills through interactive problem-solving activities and involvement in debatable presentations that would challenge their thinking and encourage them to participate actively”.

The results of the first cycle highlight the students’ perspectives and challenges and help the instructor to reflect on the instructional, pedagogical, and learning practices and improve them in the following cycle.

4.5 Cycle 2: Stage 1: Developing planning goals

The instructor/researcher considers action research as a catalyst for developing the learning process in the new virtual environment. In the first cycle, action research has helped to empower the students to participate in the e-learning process and share their opinions to improve e-learning strategies. Besides, this process enables the instructor/researcher to develop a participatory relationship with the students and reflect on the e-learning strategies. The instructor has learnt from the evaluation of the first cycle and reflected on her teaching strategies. Action research has helped the instructor to develop critical awareness of her teaching practices in e-learning environment and improve new e-learning goals and strategies. The instructor takes into consideration the students’ challenges and problems and aims to develop new goals to improve effective e-learning practices. Based on the results of the first cycle, the researcher/instructor develops the teachings goals as follow,

- To increase the students’ participation in live lectures through focusing on interactive problem-solving activities and live presentation.
- To motivate students to attend live broadcasting through making class presentation a key assessment tool.
- To enhance the students’ practical skills through making solve-problem activities a key assessment tool.
- To enhance the students’ theoretical understanding of learning materials through providing supportive recorded lectures and ensuring the availability of multiple learning technological channels.

By developing these goals, the instructor aims to overcome the e-learning challenges and improve new creative teaching tactics.

4.6 Stage 2: Implementation of new teaching tactics

Action research has been useful in such a changing environment to improve new educational and pedagogical tactics. The instructor uses the following tactics to achieve the goals based on the results of the first cycle:

- Breaking the students' psychological barrier, through constant communication through live broadcasting and emails.
- Allocating more time for students' presentation and discussion in live broadcasting, to encourage their participation.
- Allocating extra grades for live presentation and interactive activities, to motivate students to participate.
- Providing both live and recorded lectures to help students who have technical problems.
- Enhancing participating in live broadcasting, through focusing on learning-by-doing and problem-solving activities as one of the main course assessment methods.
- Encouraging students' discussion and debate in live lectures, through allocating few minutes for every student in the class to express his/her opinion and debate the others' ideas.
- Providing recorded instructions for all assignments and lectures.
- Arranging extra virtual meetings with the students who encounter problems.
- Changing and adopting some assignments and evaluation methods to be appropriate for virtual courses and to ensure the students safety during the pandemic.

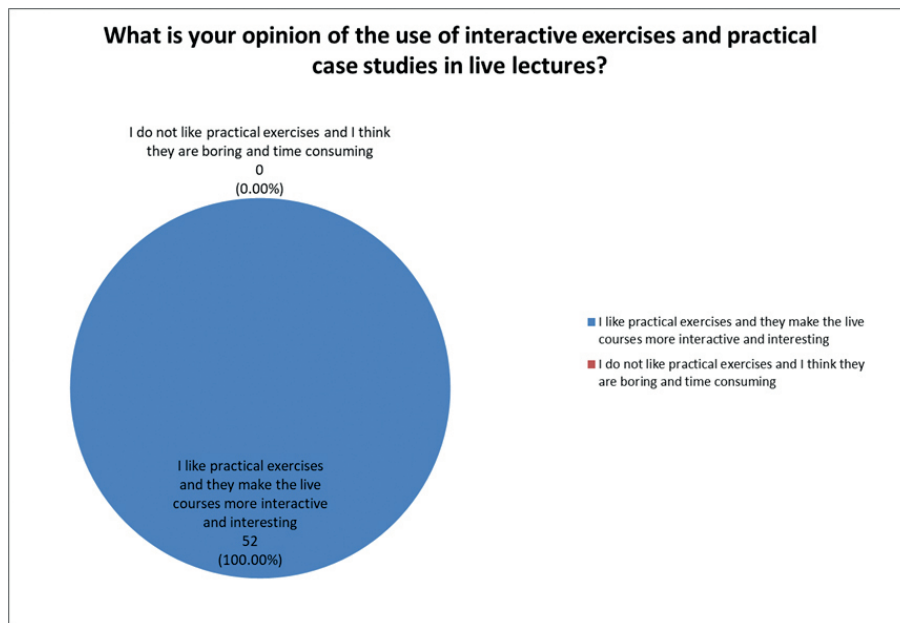
The process of improving e-learning tactics was based on a participatory process, where the instructor was flexible to adjust some of these tactics to the students' needs. Some students explained, "I feel more comfortable now in the e-learning environment as I can get direct feedback from the instructor"; "E-learning offers us with more flexible context as even when we missed a virtual class due to technological problems, we can go back to recorded lectures"; "I find some assignments difficult to implement virtually, so it is good that we can reflect on these assignments and discuss them with the instructor". Thus, constant observation has been useful to improve these tactics. Action research has been beneficial in this process as it allows continuous reflection and adjusting of e-learning tactics in a more flexible environment.

4.7 Stage 3: Observation and evaluation

The instructor observed a considerable development in students' interaction and participation in live lectures as live presentation became a basic assessment tool. The students took part in all the lectures, as the instructor has allocated a few minutes for every student in live broadcasting, to reflect on the theoretical lecture and participate in interactive activities. The instructor related all the activities to real-live situations and case studies, to involve the students in live activities. The students had to apply the theories they have studied to solve real-life problems. The instructor was aware that listening to the students' perspectives is significant to improve e-learning practices in this cycle. Some of the students explained this experience as follow, "Some of the problem-solving activities are difficult and challenging but they motivate us to learn the theories in a creative way"; "At the beginning, I was really afraid to participate in virtual classes, but now I must overcome my fears because grades are assigned for virtual presentations. Now, I get used to these activities and I find them useful to

improve our understanding and help us to listen to each other”; “Competitions and interactive exercises make the virtual classes more fun”. The students were motivated to compete to prove the best solutions in an interactive virtual environment. In the evaluation stage, all the students stated that they have enjoyed this process as the interactive exercises make the lectures more interactive and interesting (Figure 11).

Figure 11: The perspectives of students of the use of interactive exercises and practical case studies in live lectures



Most of the students (73.08%) agreed that practical exercises have enhanced their understanding of theoretical online courses, while (25%) students agreed to some extent (Figure 12). Some students explained, “The virtual session is really fun as we can discuss our ideas and understand the lesson better”; “The interactive exercises make us think and use our practical skills such as planning, writing, critical thinking rather than only memorise theoretical information”; “At first I was stressed that I have to speak up in virtual live lectures, but then I find it really a useful experience to relate theory to real case studies and situations”.

Most of the students (73.08%) agreed that practical exercises have enhanced their participation and motivation when attending theoretical online live lectures, (23.08%) students agreed to some extent, while only (3.85%) of the students disagreed (Figure 13). Some of the students stated, “The lecture now is more interesting and interactive”; “I like that I can communicate every session and discuss my ideas with my colleagues”; “I like the competitive exercises as they encourage us to think in a creative way outside the box”.

Most of the students (73.08%) agreed with increasing interactive learning-by-doing exercises to enhance participation in live online PR theoretical lectures, while (26.92%) disagreed (Figure 14).

Figure 12: The students' evaluation of the impact of practical exercises in enhancing their understanding of theoretical online courses

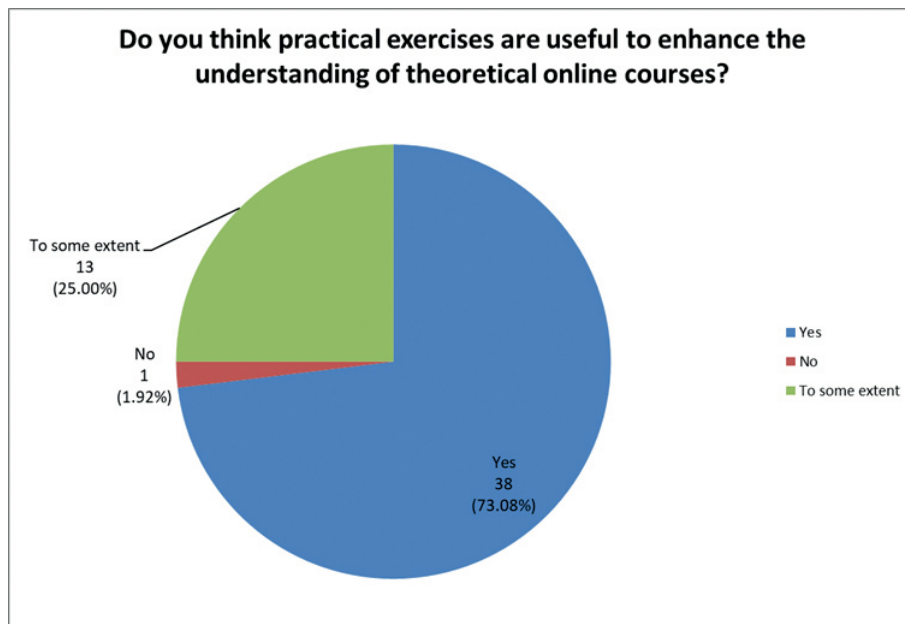


Figure 13: The students' evaluation of the impact of practical exercises in enhancing their participation and motivation when attending theoretical online live lectures

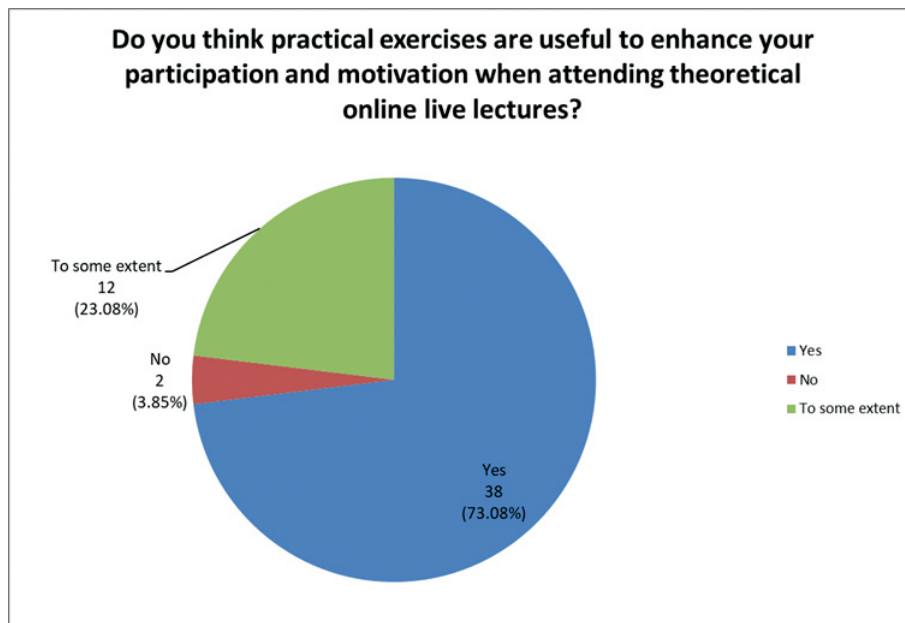


Figure 14: The opinions of the students about increasing interactive learning-by-doing exercises to enhance their participation in live online PR theoretical lectures

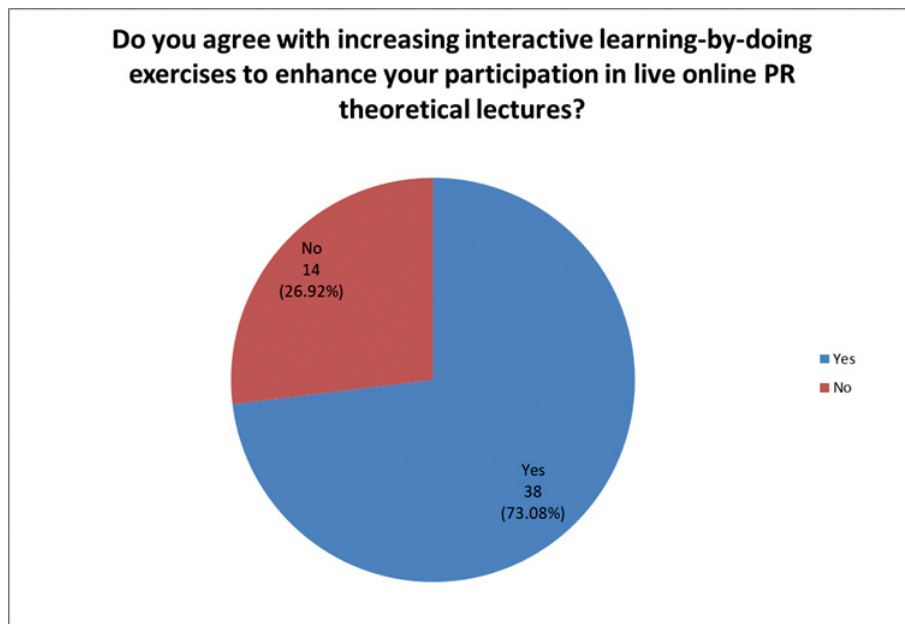
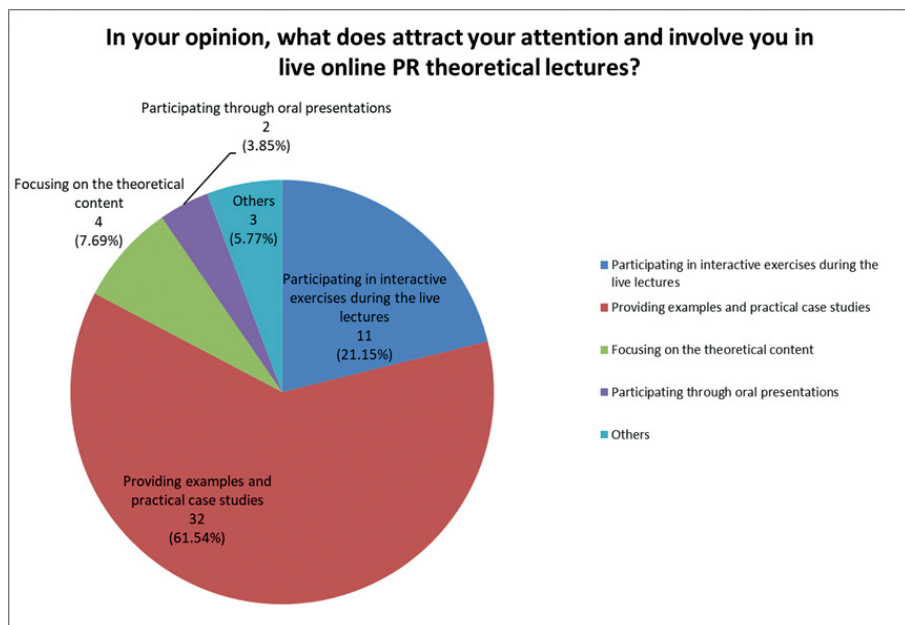


Figure 15: The perspectives of the students of the activities that involve them in live online PR lectures



In the second cycle, the students stated the most attractive activities that have involved them in live online PR lectures. Most of the students (61.54%) explained that providing examples and practical case studies attract their attention most, (21.15%) of the students preferred participating in interactive exercises during the live lectures, (7.69%) of the students preferred focusing on the theoretical content, while (3.85%) preferred participation through live presentation (Figure 15). This evaluation helps the instructor to develop a critical awareness of the new e-learning process. The instructor considers action research as a learning process, where she has learnt to listen to her students' perspectives to develop effective e-learning practices.

4.8 Opportunities and challenges of e-learning during the Covid-19 pandemic

The paper finds that e-learning facilitates the opportunity for developing innovative strategies that would develop the students' skills in public relations. It encourages the instructor to think out of the box, and to develop creative approaches to involve students as active participants in the learning process. Virtual interactive activities can increase the students' motivation and want to learn and participate. Moreover, the flexibility of the e-learning environment allows the students to access the recorded lectures any time. To enhance these opportunities, the students recommended the following teaching strategies in the following cycle,

- Implementing more competitive activities and games in live sessions to motivate students to participate.
- Inviting professional guest lectures in the live sessions to relate the skill-oriented activities to real-life practice and opportunities for getting a job.
- Assigning some activities that the students must do outside the class, then present them in live sessions to share their experiences in the class.
- Encouraging peer assessment in the live sessions where the students could reflect on the work of each other.
- Collaborating with PR guest specialists to participate in class activities, and giving awards to the students who deliver the best solutions in real problem-solving situations.
- Awarding best presentations extra grades to motivate the students.
- Providing the students with PowerPoint recorded sessions in an attractive way.

On the other hand, the students highlighted that one of the key challenges of e-learning during the pandemic is the lack of face-to-face interaction with the instructor, which makes it difficult for some students to understand the lessons. Besides, the students explained that they varied in their achievements through e-learning as the students' adaption to new virtual approaches needs time. These challenges go along with Chiu-Lan Chang & Ming Fang's argument (2020) that "although most instructors try to prepare the contents of instructions well, however, it is still not an easy way to monitor and change the students' learning behaviors in such a short term". Furthermore, some students highlighted that the technical problems resulted from using e-learning can affect the communication between the instructor and the students. Therefore, providing constant technical support and accompanying live lectures with recorded lessons are essential requirements to improve on-line teaching of public relations modules. Besides, the students require psychological support through developing extra online office hours by

using different channels to develop communication with the students. Thus, to overcome the pedagogical and technological challenges of e-learning, the students recommended,

- Combining participation in live sessions with open-book assignments so the students who have technological problems could have flexibility to do the assignments at home.
- Recording all the live sessions and making them available to students.
- Providing supportive recorded PowerPoint lessons for students who missed the live classes because of technological problems.
- Providing flexible environment through making the class materials available through different channels.
- Communicating openly with the students through multimedia tools, phones, and video conferencing chat.

5. Discussion

The paper uses an action research methodology to bring new practical and theoretical insights of the use of e-learning in teaching public relations at the university-level during the Covid-19 pandemic. The instructor/researcher developed two cycles where she planned new teaching strategies based on the students' needs, implemented these strategies, observed, evaluated, and reflected on the process. The findings of the first cycle were useful to improve the second cycle of e-learning during Covid-19.

Based on Dabbagh's model (2005), e-learning consists of three significant combined elements: instructional strategies, pedagogical models and learning technologies. The researcher used action research to reflect on learning strategies taking into consideration facilitating flexible learning environment and learning technologies. The researcher/instructor finds that addressing instructional strategies of e-learning of public relations during the Covid-19 pandemic should be based on a participatory approach, through focusing on involving students in the online lessons by using problem-solving activities, live presentation, case studies and real-life examples. The research finds that interactive students-centred activities are significant to achieve the e-learning objectives.

Furthermore, the students stressed the importance of addressing pedagogical constructs through distributing the knowledge using flexible channels, and providing both recorded and live lessons to ensure that the knowledge is accessible to the students easily at any time. As for the third component of learning technologies, the students highlighted the significance of providing technological support for students who encounter technical problems. The teacher's role is to offer multiple technological communication channels with the students, using multimedia tools, phones, and face-to-face virtual chat.

The research finds that action research has been beneficial to improve e-learning of public relations modules during the Covid-19 pandemic. The first cycle of action research has started with a strategic situation analysis, that takes into consideration the environmental factors that would affect the reflective process of e-learning. The two cycles of action research have provided both the instructor and the student with various benefits. First, action research's cycles have helped the instructor to plan and improve her teaching strategies based on the students' needs. Second, they have created an interactive process between the instructor and

the student, where the instructor can reflect constantly on the e-learning strategies. Third, action research has empowered the students to express their fears and recommendations and improve the new experience of e-learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. Fourth, action research has helped to create a motivating participatory environment of e-learning, where the students can take part in developing creative e-learning activities.

After implementing the two cycles, the researcher/instructor has achieved a considerable development in students' attendance and participation in virtual classes. The findings of this study have been useful not only to develop teaching of public relations modules, but also to bring significant insights of on-line teaching of skill-oriented modules during Covid-19 pandemic. The paper argues that the instructor cannot develop creative e-learning strategies without taking into consideration the pedagogical and technological aspects of e-learning. The researcher finds that implementing strategic situation analysis planning was useful to address key challenges and opportunities of e-learning during Covid-19 pandemic.

6. Implications on the use of action research in a wider context in Bahrain

The results of this study highlight the role of action research in transforming and improving educational context in the process of transfer from traditional learning towards e-learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. The results of the research can be taken a step further, through recommending the use of action research to improve new creative e-learning strategies of high education institutions in Bahrain after the Covid-19 pandemic. After the change of educational context resulted from the Covid-19 pandemic, action research can be considered as an effective change tool to improve educational methods in various disciplines. It helped the instructor and the students to adapt and reflect on modern teaching methods and to find solutions for challenges and dilemmas during the pandemic. Action research can help to transform academic disciplines that are still based on traditional teaching in Bahrain to adopt more modern student-centered methods.

This study encourages high education institutions in Bahrain to adopt action research as a catalyst for improving innovative teaching methods. Action research can help high-education instructors in different disciplines in Bahrain to reflect on their e-learning experiences, and overcome the challenges. The potentiality of action research to provide solutions and involve the participants in change makes it useful in providing reflective solutions during pandemics and crisis situations. The transfer from traditional learning towards e-learning in Bahrain requires participatory cooperation between the instructor and the students. One of the significant lessons learnt from this case is that one-way communication is ineffective in e-learning, and there is an instant need for more creative methods, based on the students as the centre of the educational process. Another important lesson learnt by this paper is the significance of empowering the students to learn during the time of pandemics and crisis, through providing them with new educational and pedagogical tools that would fulfil their needs and help them overcome the challenges. Therefore, action research can play a significant role in transforming the educational strategies of not only public relations modules, but it can also transfer the educational practices of various academic disciplines in Bahrain.

The researcher argues that constant reflection, observation, and evaluation of educational processes and cycles is crucial to empower the students to adjust to the new educational context. Therefore, action research can play a significant role in developing high education in Bahrain, through improving creative strategies that would enable both the instructor and the student to develop a critical awareness of the challenges and participate in improving the educational context. It facilitates openness for modern educational approaches and pedagogical practices as it empowers the instructor and the students to explore their own practices and reflect on teaching strategies to overcome challenges. Therefore, the researcher recommends extending the use of action research in high education in Bahrain in different disciplines, as it enables the instructors to improve effective educational practices through moving from traditional teaching methods to creative strategies. Thus, action research can be looked at as a facilitator of change and transformation, from traditional educational methods to creative modern teaching methods.

Furthermore, the main contribution of this paper to action research literature is that it has addressed the role of action research in promoting change in an educational context. It is the first study that has addressed the role of action research in transforming teaching public relations modules in Bahrain during the Covid-19 pandemic. The research highlights the role of action research in changing and improving educational context in a challenging environment. The result of this research highlights the role of action research in transforming traditional teaching methods to creative e-learning methods. The researcher urges further scholars to use action research to explore new creative methods in different disciplines in Bahrain and the Arab Gulf countries. The research argues that action research can help to transform traditional learning methods, and develop creative teaching strategies in high education institutions in Bahrain. Moreover, another contribution of this paper to action research literature is that it emphasises the role of action research as a transformation and improvement instrument during pandemics and crisis. This study encourages further research to explore the use of action research to find solutions in crisis and pandemic situations. The researcher argues that the reflective nature of action research can enable the participants to create their solutions in their own contexts through developing effective practices that adapt to their needs. Thus, future research should take the results of this research further, and use action research to improve creative educational methods that would improve high education in Bahrain after the Covid-19 pandemic.

7. Conclusion

The paper finds that action research has been useful in creating a collaborative relationship between the instructor and the student, and has helped to reflect on the e-learning process of public relations modules during the Covid-19 pandemic. The research recommends that the instructor should develop a strategic framework to develop e-learning during the Covid-19 pandemic, taking into consideration the opportunities and challenges provided by virtual teaching. The researcher suggests the use of creative problem-solving activities to motivate students to take part of the new e-learning environment and increase their participation. Besides, the paper emphasises the significance of addressing the students' psychological,

pedagogical, and technical needs to adapt to this virtual environment, through encouraging constant communication and providing both recorded and live lectures. This paper emphasises the need to develop creative strategies based on the students' needs to adhere to e-learning challenges. New cycles should be implemented in the future to develop the findings of this study. Moreover, action research can be used to improve new creative strategies of teaching other media and mass communication modules at the university-level during the Covid-19 pandemic. The nature of these skill-oriented modules requires a reflective approach, where the students take part of the process of e-learning to improve their communication and practical skills. Furthermore, action research can be considered as a revolutionary instrument that can empower both the instructor and the student in different disciplines to overcome the challenges and dilemmas. Thus, this study encourages high education institutions in Bahrain to adopt action research as a catalyst for transformation and improving innovative teaching methods. Future research should take the results of this research further and use action research to improve creative educational methods that would improve high education in Bahrain after the Covid-19 pandemic.

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The implementation of a bakery sales project during the COVID-19 pandemic to improve the employability of Semai indigenous students

Zainoriza Zainun and Mohd Syafiq Aiman Mat Noor

Abstract During the COVID-19 pandemic, the practitioner and author of this practice in action took the initiative to carry out a piece of action research, by running a bakery sales project with Semai indigenous students. She found that running this project online and remotely was less successful than anticipated, due to the lack of physical proximity and issues with internet connectivity. Thus, in this practice in action, the resulting action research is discussed qualitatively and narratively, asking the following question: how can the practitioner enhance her practice as a special education teacher of Specific Vocational Skills (Bread Making), to improve the employability of Semai indigenous students through a bakery sales project? The bakery sales project not only exposed students to the work environment, but also enabled the practitioner to improve her content knowledge and pedagogy, especially with regard to developing meaningful lessons during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Employability; vocational skills; special education; indigenous students

La implementación de un proyecto de venta de panadería durante la pandemia COVID-19 para mejorar la empleabilidad de los estudiantes indígenas Semai

Resumen Durante la pandemia de COVID-19, la profesional y autora de esta práctica en acción tomó la iniciativa de realizar una investigación-acción, mediante la ejecución de un proyecto de venta de panadería con estudiantes indígenas Semai. Descubrió que ejecutar este proyecto en línea y de forma remota fue menos exitoso de lo previsto, debido a la falta de proximidad física y problemas con la conectividad de internet. Así, en esta práctica en acción, la investigación-acción resultante se discute cualitativa y narrativamente, haciendo la siguiente pregunta: ¿Cómo la profesional puede mejorar su práctica como maestra de educación especial de Habilidades Vocacionales Específicas (Fabricación de Pan), para mejorar la empleabilidad de los estudiantes indígenas Semai a través de un proyecto de venta de panadería? El proyecto de venta de panadería no solo expuso a los estudiantes al entorno laboral, sino que también permitió a la profesional mejorar su conocimiento del contenido y la pedagogía, especialmente en lo que respecta al desarrollo de lecciones significativas durante la pandemia de COVID-19.

Palabras clave: Empleabilidad; habilidades vocacionales; educación especial; estudiantes indígenas.

1. Introduction

This practice in action discusses the practitioner's experiences of being a teacher of Specific Vocational Skills (Bread Making) and conducting action research, through qualitative and narrative analysis. The practitioner, who is the first author of this study, carried out a bakery sales project with three Semai indigenous students. The second author of the practice in action is a critical friend of the practitioner, and their role is discussed in the methodology section. A narrative writing style is used because it plays an essential role in describing the action research process in detail. McNiff (2007) and Whitehead (1989) explain that narrative writing and action research are closely interrelated, as they enable the practitioner to recount their experiences of performing actions to improve self-practice. Thus, the use of the term practitioner in this practice in action is adapted to the narrative approach, as suggested by Coghlan and Brydon-Miller (2014), Reason and Torbert (2001), and Stenhouse (1975).

Action research is a process that begins with a survey and evaluation of the past professional practices of the practitioner (McNiff, 2017). Kemmis et al. (2014) explain that the degree of survey and assessment in the initial stage of action research is a vital process for the practitioner to explore concerns, dissatisfactions, or issues in specific situations. Thus, this study begins with the survey and evaluation phase, to reflect on the professional practices of the practitioner, and to identify issues and challenges in the context of self-teaching. A discussion and analysis of the survey and initial evaluation phase discusses three aspects of the practitioner's professional practices, namely: (i) special education and vocational skills, (ii) the context of Semai indigenous students and their employability, and (iii) the teaching of current vocational skills in the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Issues and problems

2.1 Special education and vocational skills

"Where there is a will, there is a way" is a proverb that means success will not be achieved without desire and determination. This proverb is synonymous with the journey of the practitioner as a special education teacher who strives wholeheartedly to improve her teaching practices, due to not having a specific background in the field of special education. This field involves various categories of students, and it thus presents challenges in providing them with meaningful and contextual teaching (O'Hanlon, 2009). Furthermore, the practitioner is responsible for handling the Specific Vocational Skills subject, a new curriculum introduced in 2017 as part of the Special Education Integration Programme (SEIP) in Malaysia. Vocational skills are part of the special education curriculum, as drafted in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025, which seeks to provide alternative access to special education students to develop and diversify their interests and talents (MOE, 2013).

Schools are institutions that initiate the preparation of practical vocational training for special education students, to enable them to adapt to a situation in the workplace in the future (Mohamed Yusof et al., 2020; Zainun et al., 2020). Cannella and Schaefer (2015) also explain that when vocational skills are planned and implemented in school, students are better prepared to enter the world of work. In this regard, MOE, through its Blueprint, has planned to

equip students with skills in line with industry needs. This planning can also be achieved by increasing the employability of vocational graduates to meet the needs of a better workforce (MOE, 2013). An emphasis on planning has enabled the inclusion of groups with special needs, which include indigenous students and other minority groups.

2.2 The context of Semai indigenous students and their employability

This study involved three Semai indigenous students, named Akel, Ara and Titak (pseudonyms). They are special education students in the category of intellectual disabilities defined by the mainstream. Akel and Ara (female) are 15 years old, while Titak (male) is 17 years old. All three of them are from and live in Kampung Orang Asli Chinggung (Chinggung Indigenous Village), Perak, which is located over 15 kilometres from the school. The geography of the village, which is hilly and close to the Titiwangsa Range, means that the indigenous community has limited transportation links. This is one of the factors that influences the presence and absence of Akel, Ara and Titak at school. Furthermore, through the observations of the practitioner, mainstream education is not viewed as important within the community although it does not devalue their own traditions. Wahab et al. (2020) explain that most indigenous communities in Malaysia are not interested in the curriculum taught in mainstream schools, because they believe that the lessons studied provide less job guarantees for the future.

One of the Semai indigenous students, Titak, once talked about something that had been said by the indigenous village community regarding his attendance at school. Titak explained that a small number of Semai indigenous communities are of the view that his attendance at school is not beneficial for his future. This does not surprise the practitioner, because the basic income of a large number of Semai indigenous villagers depends on forest resources and orchards, notably the harvesting of bitter beans (*Parkia speciosa*) and durian fruit (*Durio*). Thus, not much emphasis is put on mainstream education in the community. The villagers' words made Titak feel sad, and less motivated to continue his studies. Talib and Muslim (2007) explain that the low socioeconomic status of indigenous village communities can lead their children to feel inferior and to suffer from self-esteem issues. As such, the Titak story presents a great challenge to the practitioner as a teacher. She thus sought to plan and implement lessons, in an effort to increase the enthusiasm and motivation of Semai indigenous students, not only to continue their schooling, but also to enhance their future prospects.

The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 emphasises equality and equity of education for groups with special needs, which includes indigenous students and other minority groups (MOE, 2013). This coincides with the agenda in bridging the education gap for all groups of students to gain access, equity, and high quality education (Marzuki et al., 2014). The equity of education for indigenous students takes into account aspects such as values, and socio-cultural context, which can improve their knowledge, skills and employment opportunities (Abdul Rahman, 2014; Ramli & Dawood, 2021; Schultz, 1961). By introducing indigenous students to the vocational skills curriculum, they are afforded the potential to overcome employability problems. The curriculum needs to be integrated with the values and practices of indigenous peoples (Abdul Rahman et al., 2020). Thus, the provision of an appropriate vocational skills curriculum can further empower and enable the potential of the indigenous community (Wahab et al., 2020).

The Malaysian Special Education School Standard Curriculum (MSESSC), introduced in 2017, emphasises the vocational skills curriculum for all students with special needs, as they transition to a career (Zainun et al., 2020). The vocational skills curriculum aims to increase the employability of students (Ali et al., 2018; Fatima, 2016), especially rural students and other minority groups, including indigenous peoples. Based on the observations of the practitioner, Semai indigenous students lack core abilities, which makes it difficult for them to get a job after school. Among these core abilities include interpersonal skills, which provide added value and can enhance the employability of a person, as well as his/her quality of life (Levin, 2015; Mohamad Sattar et al., 2009; Mohamad Sattar & Puvanasvaran, 2009; Yusof et al., 2012). The core competencies, as contained in the National Competency Standards, consist of: (i) communication applications, (ii) personal behaviours, (iii) workplace culture, and (iv) behavioural adaptation to the environment, health and safety procedures (DSD, 2015, p. v).

2.3 Teaching vocational skills during the COVID-19 pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the practitioner was less successful than usual in online teaching, due to the lack of face-to-face contact and issues with internet connectivity, as was also experienced by other vocational skills teachers (Ab Rahman et al., 2020; Ishak & Mir Ahmad Talaat, 2020; Syauqi et al., 2020). The teaching of vocational skills usually needs to be conducted face to face as it involves practical training (Nasir et al., 2014). At the initial stage, the practitioner made attempts to implement online teaching with students using the WhatsApp application as a communication tool (Balasundran & Awang, 2020; Hairia'an & Dzainudin, 2020). Ara and Titak have personal mobile phones, while Akel uses her mother's mobile phone. Through WhatsApp, the practitioner distributed Google Forms links to students to create exercises and quizzes. In addition, she uploaded a video to the YouTube site to provide tutorials for students on how to make doughnuts.

Through online teaching methods, the practitioner expected the students to do the assigned tasks. However, the expectation of the practitioner failed when the students did not respond in regards to the assignments distributed via WhatsApp, with the exception of Ara, who stated that she did not know how to open the video links and quizzes through the Google Forms application. Although the students had been given tutorials on how to use the application, the practitioner found that they were unable to access the exercises and quizzes, because Internet access in their home areas was very poor. The same thing happened with the video tutorial on the YouTube site. Thus, the practitioner expected the students to not be able to access the video, let alone practice their vocational skills at home. It is also worth noting that poor Internet access not only occurs in the context of Semai indigenous students, but also students in higher education institutions in Malaysia (Mohamad Nasri et al., 2020), and thus alternative solutions must be found.

Although there are challenges in implementing online teaching (Efriana, 2021), the practitioner was still working hard to implement vocational skills teaching with Semai indigenous students using other mediums. She made an extra effort by visiting the students in their homes to try and solve the problems they faced related to Internet access. Although the practitioner had provided Internet access to students using different Internet providers, the Internet access in their village area was still found to be weak (Mohd Shafie, 2020). The

practitioner thus concludes that online teaching cannot be conducted with Semai indigenous students. A situation like this makes the practitioner frustrated as a teacher, because, at first, her efforts to provide vocational skills lessons for Semai indigenous students during the COVID-19 pandemic were unsuccessful.

These issues also made the practitioner aware that the teaching of vocational skills needs to be implemented practically and face to face, in order to guide students to carry out vocational skills tasks such as making bread, particularly when involving special education students who lack technological literacy. The teaching of vocational skills not only involves skills related to physical activity but also includes communication application skills, communication behaviours, work culture and behavioural adaptation to the environment, as well as knowledge of health and safety procedures. These challenges made the practitioner ask the following question: what is the best strategy that can be adopted to enable the teaching of vocational skills to continue during the COVID-19 pandemic?

3. Focus of the study

This action research study begins by reflecting on the issues, challenges and concerns of the practitioner as a special education teacher, thus extending the discussion in the previous section. First, as a teacher who does not have a specific background in the field of special education, let alone vocational skills, the practitioner realised the importance of improving her professional practice in both areas, especially in terms of content knowledge and pedagogy. She made a particular effort to enable vocational training to be implemented practically for special education students in their preparation for the world of work.

Second, in the context of the practitioner's professional practices, Semai indigenous students are also part of the Special Education Integration Programme (SEIP). The practitioner is concerned with Semai indigenous students, as they lack self-confidence which can affect their chances of getting a job after school (Abdullah et al., 2018; Bala & Tan, 2021; Shah et al., 2018). In addition, the indigenous community, which emphasises culturally inclusive education, presents challenges to the practitioner in educating their children. The study recognised the importance of equity education for indigenous students, and hypothesised that the intervention would increase the employability of Semai indigenous students. Therefore, the practitioner realised that the application of vocational skills should be in line with the students' values and socio-cultural aspects.

Third, during the COVID-19 pandemic, various challenges were presented in implementing online and remote teaching and learning. Apart from the problem of poor Internet networks in the Semai indigenous village area, the practitioner also realised that the implementation of vocational skills teaching is less suitable for online and remote learning contexts. Furthermore, Semai indigenous students do not have the tools and equipment required to carry out tasks such as making bread in their own homes. Basically, vocational skills need to be implemented practically with full guidance from the teacher, particularly when this involves special education students.

The practitioner carried out this action research to further reflect on improving her professional practice as a teacher. Her involvement in a critical friend group was part of the

support system that led to the success of this action research. In the initial stage, the practitioner shared issues, challenges and concerns in terms of professionalism and teaching approaches with critical peer groups. As a result of brainstorming with the group, the practitioner came up with ideas and interventions to overcome the issues and challenges faced. She also read previous studies based on work-based learning (see Ahmad et al., 2020; Mohamad et al., 2021; Mukhtar & Ali, 2018; Musset, 2019) to develop interventions for this study.

The action research intervention used was a bakery sales project carried out with Semai indigenous students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, this practice in action asks the following research question: how can the practitioner enhance her practice as a special education teacher of Specific Vocational Skills (Bread Making), to improve the employability of Semai indigenous students through a bakery sales project? This question will be explored through a qualitative and narrative analysis, as will be described in further detail in the below methodology section.

4. Methodology

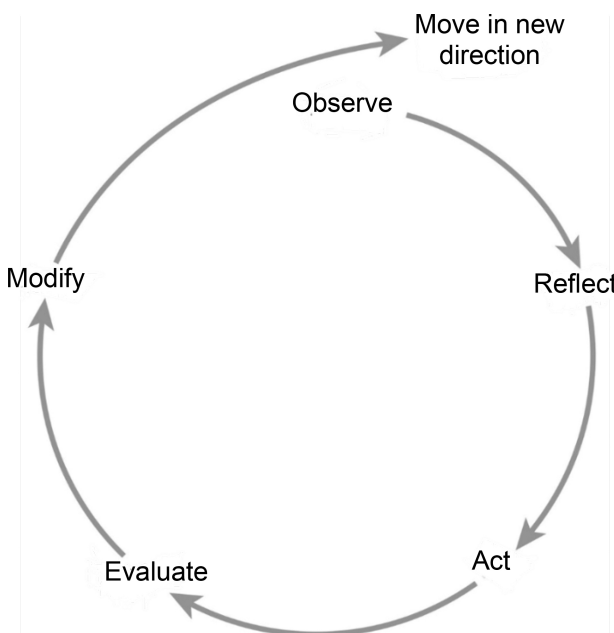
4.1 Study design

This study employed an action research model developed by McNiff (2017), known as the action-reflection cycle. This involved the process of observing, reflecting, action, evaluating, modifying and subsequently planning new actions (see Figure 1). The use of action-reflection cycles in this study helped the practitioner act as a researcher in an effort to develop new practices, knowledge, ideas and theories (McNiff, 2017). Based on this model, at the beginning of the study, the practitioner made observations on past teaching practices, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, and then reflected on how to improve her practice as a Special Education Teacher for Specific Vocational Skills (Bread Making) by planning a bakery sales project with Semai indigenous students. Later, the practitioner acted by conducting and evaluating the project. As a result of the evaluation, the practitioner modified the method of conducting the bakery sales project by planning new actions. In this study, a total of two action-reflection cycles were implemented, which referred to the double implementation of the bakery sales project.

4.2 Methods of data collection and analysis

In general, data collection is an important process that involves collecting, gathering and defining information obtained from the field to enable a practitioner to answer research questions and to deal with issues. In action research, data are collected systematically to help a practitioner to make an assessment through personal experience (Feldman et al., 2018). The data collected in this study included doughnut preparation, marketing and sales lesson plans, a student's ledger, video and photo recordings. Doughnut preparation, marketing and sales lesson plans are data to show how the practitioner planned interventions through a bakery sales project. Video and photo recordings are observational data, which offer an important source of evidence in support of action research writing (McNiff & Whitehead, 2012). During

Figure 1: A typical action-reflection cycle (McNiff, 2017, p. 12)



the intervention, the practitioner recorded the implementation of the bakery sales project through video recordings and photos, and also by collecting student business record books to enable the purpose of reflecting on and evaluating the projects implemented.

The data collected from this study, especially while planning, implementing and evaluating the bakery sales project, were analysed narratively. Narrative analysis was chosen because such an analytical approach allows the practitioner to narrate their own lives and experiences (Esin et al., 2014). In addition, narrative analysis allows the practitioner to understand complex social relationships in a diverse way, through their storytelling. In this study, the practitioner engaged in a narrative analysis process that began by structuring the storytelling descriptively based on the research questions and issues raised during the study. The results of the narrative analysis are presented in chronological order. As suggested by Mills et al. (2012), narrative narration articulates the whole structure of a study and how it has been planned, implemented and evaluated. One of the important purposes of narrative analysis in this study was to provide a chronological explanation of how to improve the practice of the practitioner as a teacher of Special Education Vocational Specific Skills (Bread Making), in order to improve the employability of Semai indigenous students through a bakery sales project.

4.3 Critical friend group

In the action research literature, a critical friend is widely defined as a trusted person who ask provocative questions, provide data to be examined through another lens, and to offer a critique of a person's work as a friend (Campbell et al., 2004; Costa & Kallick, 1993). Critical

friends are important in action research, as they help to identify the focus of the study, plan actions, collect and analyse data, as well as reflect on the process during discussions (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). Thus, this study was conducted through the support and assistance of critical friends, which in turn built its credibility. This approach coincides with McNiff's (2017) work, which highlights that action research requires at least one or two individuals acting as critical friends. During the study, the practitioner was guided by a group of teacher educators to identify issues, plan interventions and evaluate their implementation. The practitioner was also involved in a group of critical friends, i.e., fellow teachers who jointly conducted action research. Other critical friends of the practitioner consisted of fellow teachers of special education and business subjects, who also provided critical views from the beginning of the study. Herr and Anderson (2014) explain that critical friends are also part of the dialogue validity of action research, which provides alternative interpretations of the data and processes involved in the study.

Following Mat Noor and Shafee's (2021) critical friends protocol, the practitioner engaged with a critical friend group by attending a virtual meeting once a week for the duration of the study. In the beginning, the members of the group guided the practitioner in reflecting on her previous teaching experiences, for the purpose of clarifying issues and problems. They posed questions about the practitioner's teaching practice by encouraging her to engage in self-inquiry. In the process, she asked herself questions such as: What does the practitioner do? What tools does the practitioner use? Do students understand the material after performing assignments? How does the practitioner implement teaching? These questions led the practitioner to reflect on issues and problems in her past teaching and learning experiences. Based on the reflections, the practitioner was able to focus on some crucial aspects of the study, particularly the issue of the employability of Semai indigenous students.

This study encouraged the practitioner to be more critical in systematically planning, reflecting on action, and evaluating professional practice. The critical friend group played an essential role in validating every action taken as part of the study. To be clear, the practitioner's critical friends validated the core abilities demonstrated by the students, such as communication and personal behaviours while conducting a bakery sales project. In addition, the evaluation process allowed critical friends to evaluate and challenge the practitioner in making self-assessments and provided a justification for each intervention activity undertaken. This assessment helped the practitioner to make adjustments in the following intervention, for example, the use of ledgers used in the next cycle as a medium for teaching about cost calculation. The role of critical friends did not end there; their guidance was also sought for the documentation of this action research in the form of narrative writing and a review to ensure every detail was relevant (Katsarou & Tsafou, 2016).

4.4 Students as co-researchers

The participating students involved in this study were not treated as data sources, but as active participants or co-researchers (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2016) who helped the practitioners conduct the bakery sale project (Salazar, 2021). The students adopted these roles by providing suggestions and ideas for the duration of the project. Although in the beginning the practitioner found that it was quite challenging to get students to participate in providing opinions and views, she kept providing encouragement and the opportunity for the students to

talk and express their ideas (Yonezawa & Jones, 2009). The practitioner realised that students' voices and suggestions were influential in improving her teaching practices (Bland & Atweh, 2007), as well as shaping the project's activities (Hall, 2017).

In the study, the practitioner allowed students to provide ideas, which were used when carrying out the activities for the bakery sales project. In Step 1, Titak suggested that the project should use durian fruit as a doughnut filling. In response, he voluntarily obtained durian from his grandfather's orchard for the doughnut preparation. In Step 3, Akel and Ara bought all the ingredients and tools needed from a local bakery shop for the doughnut preparation. They also provided suggestions during the selection of the doughnut packaging box. In Step 4, students suggested a shooting location in their village to produce a poster for marketing purposes. In Step 5, Titak offered ideas for improving the recipe by reducing the amount of sugar in the preparation of the durian filling. In Step 11, the students evaluated the quality and quantity of doughnuts provided by offering critical feedback among themselves. Students also gathered and considered customers' feedback, which significantly improved the subsequent bakery sale project in Cycle 2. In Step 12, students themselves generated a marketing and sales report using a ledger.

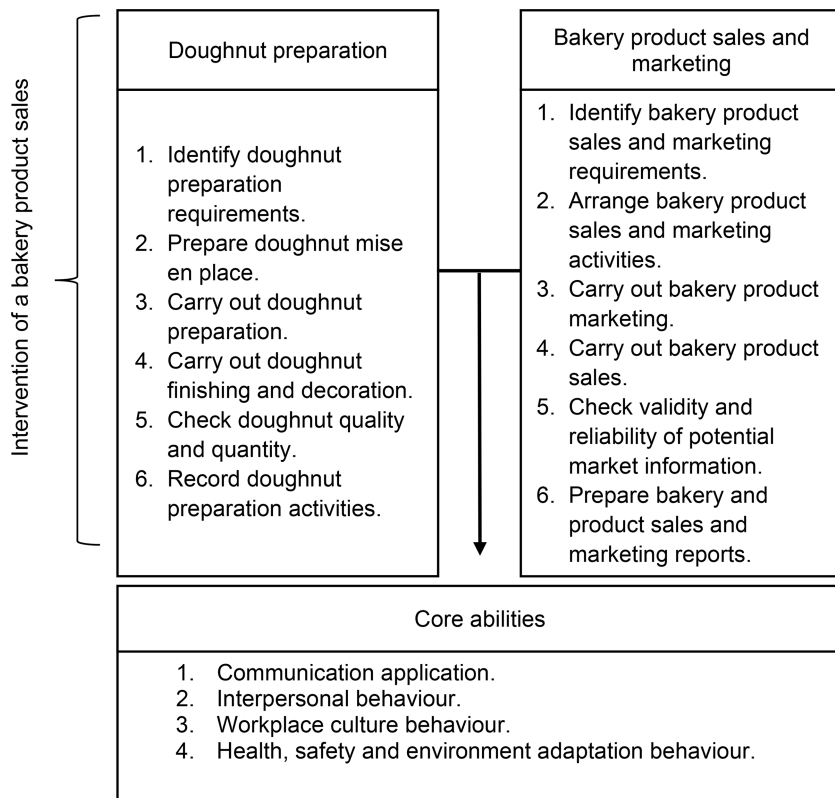
4.5 Study intervention through a bakery sales project

As explained at the beginning of this practice in action, among the main challenges faced by the practitioner as a special education teacher for vocational skills included preparing Semai indigenous students to develop core abilities, as contained in the National Competency Standards (DSD, 2015). Core abilities consist of: (i) communication applications, (ii) personal behaviours, (iii) workplace culture, and (iv) behavioural adaptation to the environment. Health and safety are also important job skills that are essential to improving the employability of students (Anthony et al., 2015).

Thus, these core capabilities were the backbone of the main objective for implementing the bakery sales project in this study. The objective was to enable Semai indigenous students to gain the basic job skills needed for the improvement of their quality of life. This is significant because the poverty rate of Semai indigenous people is still at a critically high level (Dentan, 2001; Mohd Harun et al., 2006). The emphasis on basic job skills is very important for Semai indigenous students, to enable them to "*duduk sama rendah, berdiri sama tinggi*" – a Malay proverb which literally means "sit equally low stand equally high" – with the community outside of their indigenous village.

The bakery sales project intervention, which combined two vocational skills subject syllabi, was developed to enable the practitioner to apply the basic job skills required by Semai indigenous students. The "doughnut preparation" and "marketing and sales" metrics used are based on the National Occupational Skills Standard (DSD, 2011). These two metrics are combined to achieve employability objectives through the core competencies outlined in the National Competency Standards (DSD, 2015), as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: The framework of intervention through the combination of two measures to enable core competencies to be achieved by students (as adapted from DSD, 2011; DSD, 2015).



5. Findings and discussions

The findings of this study are discussed in a narrative to answer the research question, namely: how can the practitioner enhance her practice as a special education teacher of Specific Vocational Skills (Bread Making), to improve the employability of Semai indigenous students through a bakery sales project? Through an intervention framework that combines two vocational skills subject syllabus, namely doughnut preparation, and marketing and product sales, the practitioner planned a bakery sales project through the implementation of twelve key steps, as shown in Figure 3. The study was conducted in two cycles, referring to two separate implementations of the bakery sales project. The project was implemented twice to enable the practitioner to reflect on and improve her practice as a teacher of Specific Vocational Skills (Bread Making). This resonates with the main purpose of action research, namely, to improve the practice of a practitioner (Carver & Klein, 2013). Therefore, the findings and discussion of

this practice in action emphasise the comparison between the bakery sales projects carried out in the first and second cycles.

Figure 3: Steps in the implementation of a bakery sales project

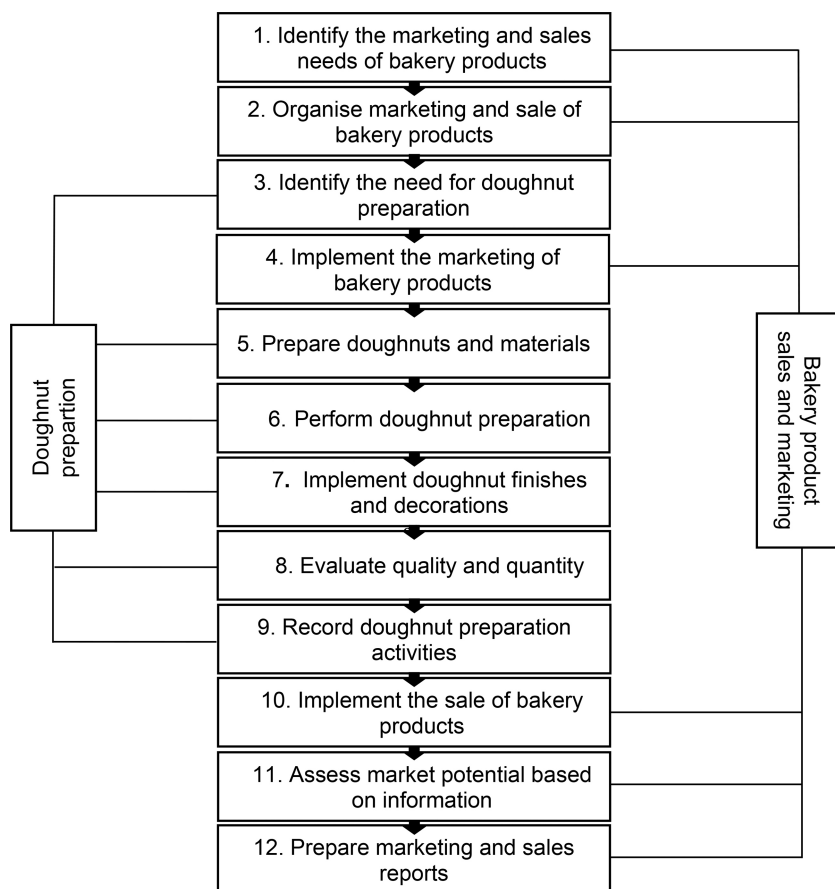


Figure 3 shows the steps involved in implementing a bakery sales project. Steps 1, 2, 4, 10, 11 and 12 relate to product marketing and sales metrics, while steps 3, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 relate to doughnut preparation metrics. The combination of these two vocational skills subject syllabi aims to achieve core employability, which is the objective of the implementation of the study intervention. Through this integration, that is, through the bakery sales project implemented within a day, the practitioner could include the learning of students who were delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the bakery sales project is an alternative initiative that can be successfully carried out during this period. The planning carried out is in line with the curriculum alignment recommended by the MOE (2020), to ensure the continuity of student learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Curriculum alignment is the reorganisation of pedagogical content and assessment based on the desired learning outcomes, to meet the specific needs of the subject in any situation (MOE, 2020).

Step 1: Identify the marketing and sales needs of bakery products

The practitioner emphasised the importance of identifying the marketing and sales needs of bakery products to the students. This project was carried out during the durian fruit season in Malaysia. Durian fruit is one of the sources of income of Semai natives, due to the geographical form of the area, which is rich in forest products and orchards (Howell et al., 2010). The sale of durian fruit is also a major source of income for parents of Semai indigenous students. Because the marketing and sales needs of a product must take into account the demographics of the place (Adnan et al., 2020), the practitioner suggested to students that they could produce and sell durian-based doughnuts in the first and second cycles. One of the students, Titak, supplied durian fruit obtained from his grandfather's orchard, and the cost of the durian fruit was paid to him based on the current market price. The practitioner also stated that durian-based doughnuts are a market necessity, a perspective that gained acceptance among the students during this project. At the same time, the practitioner wanted to show students that durian fruit can be diversified in terms of sales to get a higher profit than through natural resources alone.

Step 2: Organise marketing and sale of bakery products

In the first cycle, the project was not systematically planned, leading the practitioner to be less prepared to carry out the planned activities with the students. Thus, in the second cycle, the practitioner improved the implementation of the project by organising doughnut preparation and marketing activities as well as the sale of bakery products. Due to the fact that the project carried out had to be completed within a day due to the time constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, a careful planning schedule was required. The planning schedule included taking students from their villages to the practitioner's home, purchasing doughnut preparation materials, making photographic recordings for promotional purposes, producing digital posters, promoting bakery products on social media networks, calculating material costs, making doughnut kernels, preparing doughnuts, preparing to package, executing sales, and calculating the sales profit and loss incurred. Organised project planning helped the practitioner to be more prepared in carrying out planned activities with the students. She was aware of the importance of structured planning in a lesson that included aspects related to management, implementation and evaluation (Hashim & Ahmad, 2007). In addition, through structured planning, the practitioner not only hoped to achieve the teaching objectives that had been set out, but also to introduce students to working hours that started at nine in the morning, continuing until five in the afternoon.

Step 3: Identify the need for doughnut preparation

In contrast to the first cycle, the practitioner took the students to the bakery in the second cycle to buy doughnut preparation materials such as flour, sugar, yeast and packaging containers. During the process of dealing with the seller, the practitioner found that the students were reluctant to ask about how to get ingredients such as sugar, flour and yeast. This feeling of shyness was due to social gap of culture and language (Salleh & Ahmad, 2009). Salleh and Ahmad (2009) also explain that the gap between the indigenous community and the outside

community is due to the indigenous community's lack of exposure to mainstream education. Thus, the practitioner guided the students with methods they could use to communicate with sellers. They then asked the sellers how to get the necessary ingredients. In the context of the application of these communication skills, the practitioner found that the teacher plays an important role in increasing students' confidence, and in enabling them to become accustomed to interacting with communities outside of their own.

Step 4: Implement the marketing of bakery products

During the first cycle, the practitioner did not emphasise or teach about marketing practices. However, he subsequently realised that this action was not very helpful to the students, as they needed to know how to market a business. Thus, in the second cycle, the practitioner involved students in implementing the marketing of bakery products. Students were guided to produce digital posters as doughnut advertisements, which they then marketed through social media networks, namely Facebook and WhatsApp (Nordin & Lada, 2019). Digital posters (see Figure 4) produced by students emphasised the use of appropriate graphics to attract customers and to provide enough information to enable them to make reservations. The digital posters were uploaded to Facebook pages and WhatsApp applications. Thus, this was an important step to expose students to strategic marketing methods, which could be used to market the results of their bakery products.

Figure 4: Digital poster used to promote doughnuts through social media networks



Step 5: Prepare doughnuts and materials

Based on the proceeds from the sale of doughnuts in the first cycle, students received feedback from customers that the doughnuts were sweeter and less filling than those sold in other stores. The practitioner explained to the students that the feedback received from customers was very important to consider in order to improve the quality of doughnut preparation in future sales. Prior to the second cycle, the practitioner also attended online doughnut-making classes to improve her knowledge and skills in doughnut making. Following that, in the second cycle, the practitioner encouraged students to experiment with doughnut-making recipes to facilitate their further learning. Students were guided to prepare doughnut preparation tools and materials covering the process of weighing, measuring and categorising materials. This process offered an initial preparation of tools and materials, better known as “*Mise en Place*” (French term). *Mise en Place* aims to ensure that the task of preparing tools and materials is carried out in an orderly, professional and organised manner to facilitate and ensure quality during the cooking process (Fisher & Louw, 2020).

Step 6: Perform doughnut preparation

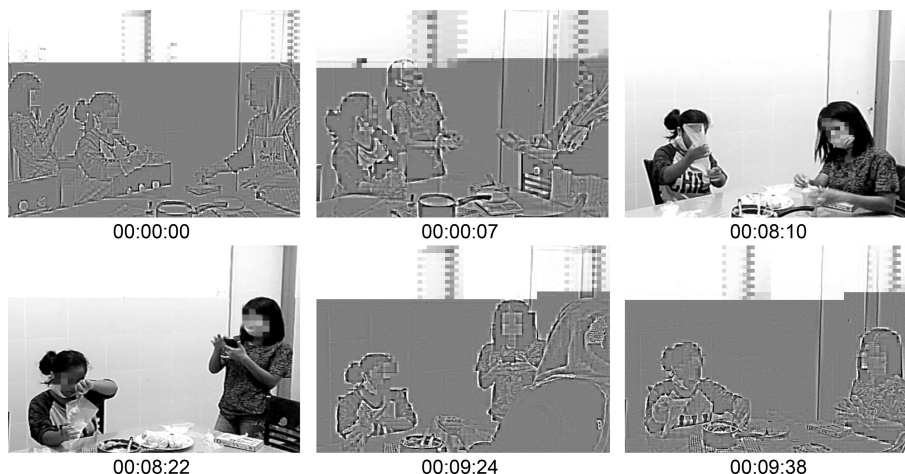
Students were guided to perform doughnut preparation. The implementation of doughnut preparation involves the process of mixing, kneading, expanding, forming dough and frying. This process takes a long time and needs to be done in stages. While running the project in the first and second cycles, the practitioner found that teamwork culture was necessary in order to perfect the process. In the second cycle, in particular, the practitioner emphasised the culture of teamwork to students, as it is part of the cultural element of behaviour at work, and the backbone of an organisation in the workplace (Shukor et al., 2020). Students were always reminded to complete the assignments given in groups while carrying out each doughnut preparation process. The practitioner also reminded students to help each other and to perform tasks diligently in the workplace.

Step 7: Implement doughnut finishes and decorations

During the first cycle, the practitioner guided the students on how to insert the durian filling into the doughnuts, and to make an outer finish. The process of implementing the finishing and decoration of doughnuts was not only focused on the activity of filling the doughnuts alone. Rather, it also enabled the practitioner to monitor the quality of the finish and decoration carried out by the students. Figure 5 shows the video recording suction during the process of inserting the doughnut core into the piping bag. At 00:00:00, the practitioner found that Akel was using a mobile phone, while Ara was focused on doing the task. The practitioner expected Akel's behaviour to be temporary. Therefore, she did not criticise Akel's actions at that time. At 00:00:07, the practitioner explained the importance of hygiene to the students, by wearing gloves before starting the assignment. During the second cycle, the students were found to be more adept at inserting the doughnut filling into the piping bags, as shown at 00:08:10. The practitioner found that the students' existing experience during the first project gave a slight advantage when implementing the project in the second cycle. At 00:08:22, Akel once again used her cell phone in the absence of the practitioner. Akel's less focused be-

haviour in carrying out this task led the practitioner to reprimand him, as shown at 00:09:24. As a result of the reprimand, Akel apologised and resumed the assignment at 00:09:38. The video recording analysis was presented as part of the efforts of the practitioner to apply core abilities through an emphasis on using personal behaviours to enable students to adapt to real work situations.

Figure 5: Video recording during the process of performing doughnut finishes and decorations, as well as observations on Akel's behaviour



Step 8: Evaluate quality and quantity

Students were guided to evaluate the quality of doughnuts in terms of shape, texture, aroma, colour, and flavour. They were encouraged to market doughnuts that looked interesting and appetising. In the second cycle, the practitioner placed more emphasis on the core abilities of behavioural adaptation to the environment, and health and safety procedures. As a result of the reflection from the first cycle, the practitioner realised that aspects of the core competencies needed to be emphasised to the students in each project implementation process. Following that, in the second cycle, the practitioner encouraged students to always clean the kitchen space, and wash their hands before, during and after performing an activity. The practitioner also emphasised that this would be the situation in the workplace later; they thus needed to maintain a clean work environment at all times.

Step 9: Record doughnut preparation activities

During the first cycle, the practitioner did not emphasise the aspect of recording doughnut preparation activities. This process aimed to monitor the development of operations and the efficiency of students performing tasks. The practitioner was aware that students needed to be exposed to methods for recording doughnut preparation activities. During the second cycle, the practitioner explained orally the doughnut preparation tasks that needed to be performed according to the six rules of doughnut preparation work activities. She did this without the aid

of a written record. Thus, she planned to improve the process of recording activities for future projects using written records. The process offered a guide for students in implementing bakery sales projects using checklists, and detailed procedures related to job descriptions, personal hygiene and attitudes, safety, cooking techniques and product results. These aspects can also be used as data for the practitioner to reflect on how to guide students to be able to perform tasks efficiently and to be prepared to apply these skills in the workplace.

Step 10: Implement the sale of bakery products

The practitioner guided the students in carrying out the sale of bakery products. In the initial stage, the students stated that they felt embarrassed to send the resulting doughnut order to the customer's residence. In the same situation as in the third step, feelings of shyness and lack of self-confidence are common among Semai indigenous people when they are faced with a community outside their village (Mustapha, 2020). In the first cycle, the practitioner did not offer enough guidance to the students on how to deal with customers. Realising this, in the second cycle, she highlighted to the students that customers are an important part of the business. The practitioner also guided students on the ethics of selling products, including how to communicate with customers, by greeting them, introducing themselves, stating the product name and total price, as well as the number of durian doughnuts required, returning the balance, and thanking the customer. In addition, the students were also reminded that on the first bakery sales project, they had earned a profit from the sales carried out, and that profit was part of their salary. Therefore, students were encouraged to develop tools for increasing their self-confidence, to enable the sale of bakery products to be implemented outside their community.

Step 11: Assess market potential based on information

After the durian doughnut sales implementation activity, the practitioner guided the students on how to assess the market potential based on the feedback given by their customers. This step had not been emphasised during the first cycle. Thus, in the second cycle, the practitioner guided students to make an assessment of their products' market potential based on the feedback given by customers through the WhatsApp application. Students asked customers about the doughnuts that had been sold in terms of the quality of the core flavour and their texture. The practitioner found that the students were able to communicate well with the customers virtually. In addition, the practitioner emphasised that the purpose of assessing market potential is to improve sales in the future, in terms of product quality, potential sales locations, and attracting new customers. Thus, based on the first and second cycles, the practitioner found that the teacher can diversify the methods used in guiding students, to make an assessment of the sales they implement.

Step 12: Prepare marketing and sales reports

The practitioner guided students to prepare marketing and sales reports. In the first cycle, the doughnut sales carried out by students gained a satisfactory profit. However, an emphasis was

not placed on developing a report based on the calculation of profit and loss because the practitioner lacked knowledge related to the basics of business. Thus, before conducting the second cycle, the practitioner asked a critical friend who is a business subject teacher regarding the method of calculating capital, material costs and sales profit and loss. The teacher suggested that the next project implementation should use a ledger. Thus, in the second cycle, the practitioner guided the students to write the sales report into the ledger, as shown in Table 1. However, the students still did not understand the calculation of material costs and gross sales, or the calculation of profit and loss, even though the practitioner showed them these aspects, one step at a time using a ledger. The practitioner is of the view that this is because they did not have the basic knowledge and skills of accounting to make sales reports. Furthermore, he had never guided students to use ledgers in previous lessons. If students were to become accustomed to business reporting activities through future bakery sales projects, the practitioner is confident that they would have more understanding and be more proficient in using ledgers.

Table 1: Excerpts of doughnut ledger books during the first cycle, produced by Ara

Date	Details	Debit	Date	Details	Credit
20 June	Gross profit (60 doughnuts x MYR 1.50)	MYR90.00	20 June	Durian filling ingredients	MYR15.00
				Donughnut dough ingredients	MYR27.00
	Debit-credit (net profit)	MYR48.00			
	Total	MYR42.00		Total	MYR42.00

Overall, through the implementation of the project in the second cycle, the practitioner found that Akel, Ara and Titak were becoming more skilled in preparing doughnuts and making donations and sales. Through structured planning, they became more familiar with the activities of preparation, marketing and sales of bakery products. The practitioner realised that systematic planning can enable the teacher to achieve a single planned teaching objective. Students can then also better understand the process and purpose of learning that is expected and apply the skills learned. One of the students, Akel, expressed a desire after the project implementation to learn cake making skills. She aspired to be like her aunt, who is a successful cake trader. In conclusion, the implementation of interventions through the integration of two syllabi in vocational skills subjects has helped the practitioner to assess the potential for fostering the employability of students through exposure to the real work environment.

6. Conclusion

This action research project did not intend to prove whether the bakery sales project was capable or not of improving the employability of Semai indigenous students. Instead, it was a starting point for the practitioner to plan, implement and evaluate daily teaching and learning strategies that emphasise work-based learning. In the initial stage, the practitioner outlined

three main focus issues of the study. First, she identified the lack of content knowledge and pedagogy as a teacher of special education and vocational skills. Second, based on preliminary observations, she found that the Semai indigenous community did not emphasise their children's engagement with mainstream education, which caused them to lack confidence and motivation to continue schooling. Finally, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the practitioner realised that the teaching of vocational skills in online and remote learning contexts was not appropriate, especially when involving special education students.

This study is the beginning of the practitioner's journey as a special education teacher in the subject of Specific Vocational Skills (Bread Making), to further reflect upon and improve her practice. Through this study, the practitioner has demonstrated the process involved in improving content knowledge and pedagogy through the action-reflection cycle in the context of teaching practices (McNiff, 2017). For example, in the fifth step of the implementation of the intervention, she attended online bakery classes to learn about doughnut making methods, and in the 12th step, she gained marketing and sales knowledge from a critical friend, namely a foundation of business subject teacher. As a qualified teacher, the practitioner is aware of the importance of constantly improving content knowledge and pedagogy in order to guide students as best she can. Systematic instructional planning is not only important to ensure that its implementation is planned but also to enable an outlined objective to be achieved.

Through this study, the practitioner also found that the bakery sales project carried out with the Semai indigenous students has provided them with exposure to the work environment. In addition, Semai indigenous students have also been enabled to interact with people outside of their own community. Indigenous students have been guided through a bakery sales project, which has developed their basic job skills, namely communication and marketing skills, and self-confidence. The practitioner plans to conduct skills learning through practice more frequently and consistently through planned guidance, as this could help to develop the potential of students (Mohamed, 2018). She also hopes that by learning skills through practice more frequently and consistently, students will become more independent in carrying out activities, with minimal monitoring from the teacher.

The current situation of the COVID-19 pandemic has taught the practitioner about the importance of acting wisely in planning, implementing, reflecting on, evaluating and making modifications to pedagogical practices. As a teacher, the practitioner is responsible for modifying the teaching and learning process according to the situation and level of students, especially when involving students with special needs. Through the bakery sales project implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, the teaching of vocational skills was carried out in the residence of the practitioner, with an emphasis put on personal hygiene procedures. Thus, the practitioner has assessed the extent to which students are able to master core abilities such as behavioural adaptation to the environment, as well as health and safety procedures. However, in the absence of the face-to-face teaching of vocational skills, it was difficult for the practitioner to assess the level of employability gained by the students.

In addition, conducting this action research has taught the practitioner about the importance of aspects of collaboration and involvement with critical friends in assisting the action-reflection process. Involvement in critical friend groups has assisted the practitioner in validating research processes and data. This group of critical friends has also guided him in each research process, starting with identifying issues and challenges, observing each action process, making self-reflections on each action, and providing many ideas for new actions. The practitioner also realised that as both a practitioner and researcher, it is difficult to give a

clear justification for the action that has been taken. However, the results of collaboration with critical friends have helped to cultivate critical thinking skills in reflecting upon the actions and practices of her professional life.

In conclusion, the most important learning that the practitioner has gained through this action research is practical knowledge in the context of personal professionalism. This knowledge will influence her professional daily practices as a teacher. By nature, action research is not temporary and has no finish line; instead, such studies provide important learning for the practitioner, who in turn influences their own professional practices (McNiff, 2017). Through this study, the practitioner learned that it is the responsibility of a teacher to provide meaningful and contextual skills teaching to students, based on their context. This study was part of the effort to enable Semai indigenous students to get a good job and quality of life after graduation. Thus, this study will be expanded through further employment-based projects that use a work-based learning approach in the future, in an effort for the practitioner to improve her practice as a teacher of Specific Vocational Skills (Bread Making), as well as to improve the employability of Semai indigenous, and other special education students.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Mohd Syafiq Aiman Mat Noor is a Research Fellow in Science Education. He completed his PhD in Science Education at the renowned education institution, UCL Institute of Education (IOE), University College London, United Kingdom. His PhD research focused on improving the pedagogical practices of teaching inquiry in school science, using a classroom action research study. He is also passionate about integrating research and classroom practices, and promoting teachers' engagement with research. He seeks to inculcate a research culture in schools to advocate change, and to close the gap between research and practice. He established the Malaysian Action Research Network (MARNet) to inculcate action research as a legitimate philosophy and methodology.

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“Life as Action Research”

Interview with Richard Ennals by Miren Larrea and Danilo Streck

About Richard Ennals

Richard Ennals was educated at King's College School Wimbledon, Phillips Academy Massachusetts, King's College Cambridge, London University Institute of Education, and Imperial College of Science and Technology.

Richard taught History in the UK and Nigeria, before becoming a researcher and then research manager in Advanced Information Technology, at Imperial College and in the UK Government Department of Trade and Industry. He resigned his posts in December 1985, when the UK Government signed a secret Memorandum of Understanding to participate in the American Strategic Defense Initiative, thus endangering the research he was managing. He joined a successful campaign to prevent UK involvement.

Richard moved to Kingston College, then to Kingston University, where he was Professor at Kingston Business School from 1990. His research was based on collaboration in Sweden (National Institute for Working Life and Royal Institute of Technology) and Norway (Work Research Institute and Centre for Senior Policy), and on working with the European Commission. In the UK in 1997 he was co-founder of the UK Work Organisation Network.

Richard has been Emeritus Professor at Kingston University since 2013. He currently has part-time Professorial posts at the University of Agder (Norway) and the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. He has Visiting Professorial posts at Mykolas Romeris University and Kazimieras Simonavicius University (Lithuania), where he has an Honorary Doctorate, as well as engaging in research with Kathmandu University (Nepal), Sabanci University (Turkey) and the University of Cape Town (South Africa). The common themes are participation and empowerment.

He is an Editor of the *International Journal of Action Research* and Editor in Chief of the *European Journal of Workplace Innovation*. He is author or editor of numerous books, on Education, Information Technology, Working Life and Innovation. For example:

Beginning micro-PROLOG. Ellis Horwood, Chichester 1983.

Star Wars: A Question of Initiative. Wiley, Chichester 1986.

Artificial Intelligence State of the Art Report (Editor). Pergamon Infotech, London 1987.

Work Organisation and Europe as a Development Coalition. (with Bjorn Gustavsen). Benjamin, Amsterdam 1999.

Work Life 2000: Yearbooks 1, 2, 3. Springer, London, 1999, 2000, 2001.

Dialogue, Skill and Tacit Knowledge. (Edited with Bo Goranzon and Maria Hammaren). Wiley, Chichester 2006.

From Slavery to Citizenship. Wiley, Chichester 2007.

Learning together for local innovation: promoting learning regions. (Edited with Bjorn Gustavsen and Barry Nyhan). Cedefop, Luxembourg 2007.

Creating Collaborative Advantage: Innovation and Knowledge Creation in Regional Economies. (Edited with Hans Christian Garmann Johnsen). Gower, Farnham 2012.

Coping with the Future: Rethinking Assumptions for Society, Business and Work. (Edited with Hans Christian Garmann Johnsen and Halvor Holtskog). Routledge, London 2018.

Miren and Danilo: Thank you, Richard, for granting this interview to the *International Journal of Action Research*. We know that you have been, and continue to be, active in many fronts, and any interview will come short in terms of your rich life story. Let us focus on Action Research and related themes. In some circumstances you mentioned that your life is Action Research. Could you elaborate on this idea, eventually bringing in some examples? What does it mean to consider life as Action Research?

Richard: It is a privilege to be asked to reflect. I have not had a conventional career path. There have been apparent changes of direction, with successes and failures. In the UK, for example, with a background in English literature, I studied philosophy and history at King’s College, Cambridge University, before teaching in the UK and Nigeria. I was then a researcher and research manager in logic programming and artificial intelligence at Imperial College London. I have tried to take on a series of challenges, in different fields, which means that my “career” (or “skid”) can seem to be a series of “projects”, with varying levels of success.

In December 1985 I resigned my government funded posts in opposition to UK participation in President Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), which threatened the research which I was managing. I suddenly spent some months in 1986 as a peace campaigner. My collaborations in Scandinavia began in December 1986: with Bo Göranson, who was interested in my resignation, and the issue of what he called “civil courage”, and with Björn Gustavsen from 1988, who introduced me to “Action Research case studies” as a way of evaluating managed research programmes. Both had been influenced by the philosophy of Wittgenstein, whose work I had encountered at Cambridge. My subsequent work in Scandinavia has been in Working Life Research. I worked at Kingston College from 1986, and as a Professor at Kingston University from 1990. My referee for the professorship was the director of the national programme from which I had resigned in 1985.

Miren and Danilo: Richard, could you come back to the idea of life as action research?

Richard: This is a very useful challenge, which has prompted me to further reflection. I have always tried to respond to opportunities. I have had no specific clear goal, other than to work on projects in which I believe. I do not have a personal website. I could describe my life as Action Research.

On reflection, I can see how foundations were laid:

- At school in the UK in 1964, I experienced an Action Research approach to physics teaching, in particular “wave-particle duality”.
- From my time as a student in the USA in 1969, encountering the human relations movement and working in a quality control tester in a woolen mill, I have been familiar with the challenge of fitting in with different discourses: finding the appropriate vocabulary and concepts, and engaging in dialogue. It was always a matter of combining action and research.
- Leading weekly Study Groups on social issues at Cambridge University, with students from many disciplines.
- The influence of Frege, Wittgenstein and Chomsky: action and research; speech acts.
- Role play and simulations: this took me from school history teaching to artificial intelligence research.

- Writing and directing plays and musicals: working with political, social and workplace actors.
- Working on an Experimental Social Work project with John Bellers Ltd in London: I was waste recycling manager.
- With a series of different jobs, it has been necessary to fit the part, and play the role. This has been all the more important as I have typically lacked conventional qualifications. I have been judged on the basis of my performance.

Miren and Danilo: You have been with the *International Journal of Action Research* almost since its beginning (1997), when it started as *Concepts and Transformation* (CAT). How do you see the development of the journal since its creation, and the role the journal plays or should play today?

Richard: In May 1997 I failed in my attempt to be elected to Parliament in the UK. Björn Gustavsen invited me to attend a seminar at Skebo (Sweden), with leading members of the Action Research community. Hans van Beinum and Öyvind Pålshaugen were editors of *Concepts and Transformation* (published by John Benjamin). I joined them in 1998. Werner Fricke also joined the editorial team, and later succeeded Hans as editor-in-chief. My focus was on “language cleaning”, helping authors to publish their ideas in English. Danilo Streck then joined the team, and succeeded Werner Fricke as editor-in-chief. The journal, renamed as the *International Journal of Action Research* (published by Rainer Hampp and then Barbara Budrich). IJAR has built an international research community, encompassing many paradigms of Action Research.

Miren and Danilo: Can you tell us about changes in the process? New themes? About the international perspective?

Richard: The journal has remained human and pluralistic in focus, supporting a network of researchers, rather than relying on automation and a single rigid methodology. Starting with a Scandinavian focus, the journal has become increasingly international and diverse, across Europe and then Latin America. In my “language cleaning” I have had to try to understand a new range of approaches. For example, “systematisation” is a key concept in Latin America. It has taken time for me to see how it fits with Action Research in other contexts, such as at Linnaeus University in Sweden. This led to an appreciation of the key bridging role played by Björn Gustavsen, who had been the real founder of CAT / DOWI and then IJAR.

IJAR should have a great future, based on international participation, and links to ongoing debate through symposia and special issues.

Miren and Danilo: The *International Journal of Action Research* has promoted biannual symposia for discussing theoretical and practical developments in Action Research (Porto Alegre, Copenhagen, Bogotá, Kristiansand, San Sebastian: the next is scheduled for Istanbul in 2022). In the last one we had a PhD seminar. We understand that the journal has also a role in enabling researchers not only to do good research, but to publish good papers. Considering your long experience as an editor, what suggestions or recommendations do you have, especially for beginners?

Richard: I see writing as a way in which we explain ourselves to ourselves. When we publish, we try to explain ourselves to others. It is important to write, and then to receive feedback. We need to have something to say, to an intended audience, and to contribute to a discourse, for example in a particular chosen journal. Our words can also be seen as actions. We have learned that collaborative research, and collaborative writing, are not straightforward, particularly in the recent context of the international Covid pandemic.

Miren and Danilo: Does one have to publish everything one writes? How to choose a journal or other vehicle?

Richard: We do not normally publish our draft notes. However, they can be an important starting point for regular writing. With the idea of "speech acts", I see writing papers as engaging in action. I regard journals as networks, and communities of practice. Language is not simply used for description. There are many different "tools in the tool box". This can affect the choice of a journal. It is important to read as well as to write, in order to contribute to debate.

Miren and Danilo: You have worked with students from many places around the world, and recently worked as visiting professor at a seminar on Action Research Methodologies at the Action Research PhD Programme at Sabanci University in Istanbul. How do you see Action Research within the academic community? Could you provide some examples of the promises, accomplishments and obstacles in doing Action Research, for instance, in doctoral dissertations?

Richard: I was Professor and Head of Department at Kingston University from 1990. However, the dominant positivist paradigm, and the disciplinary rigidity of the UK government's Research Excellence Framework, were not suited to my approach to research. I led the Centre for Working Life Research at Kingston, which engaged in collaborative research with UK and international partners. I used income from overseas contracts to fund research at Kingston, where I have been Emeritus Professor since 2013. I published as I saw fit. My work was classified in several different disciplines. I preferred not to use conventional highly rated journals. I was co-founder of three international journals.

From December 1986 my research was influenced by Scandinavia. In Sweden, I worked with the National Institute for Working Life, the Royal Institute of Technology and the Royal Dramatic Theatre, with a focus on Dialogue and Practical Knowledge, and then with Linnaeus University. I was then rapporteur for the Swedish "Work Life 2000" programme of 64 specialist workshops and an EU Presidency conference. My role was to capture the dialogue, and to publish a series of Yearbooks. In Norway, I worked with the PhD programme EDWOR (Enterprise Development and Working Life), which was based on Action Research, as well as with the Centre for Senior Policy and the University of Agder. In Finland I worked with the Institute of Occupational Health.

It may be helpful to give some examples of doctoral students and dissertations where I have been an adviser.

Trond Haga (Norway) orchestrated networks of companies for regional development. He had a background in school teaching, and in Quality Education. This underpinned his AR

work on regional development. He now works in the Norwegian offshore industry, and co-ordinated an EJWI special issue on socio-technical systems thinking in manufacturing.

Anne-Inga Hilsen (Norway) took an AR approach to issues of Older Workers. Her research involved challenging assumptions of quantitative research, as she illustrated the transforming impact of changing work organisation.

Zelin Li (China) took a socio-technical systems approach to mobile health information systems in community healthcare centres. While he was my PhD student at Kingston, he also led the Chinese Students and Scholars Association in the UK, with over 100,000 members. He is now CEO of a property development company with offices in London, Hong Kong and Beijing.

Jude Rachele (USA) took a critical view of diversity management, based on Action Research in a Further Education College, with a Quality Cycle process. She is CEO of a successful consultancy in the USA and the UK.

Johan Berglund (Sweden) considered formalisation and skill in the nuclear power industry. This built on research by Bo Göranson on Skill and Technology. Johan now works in the field of nuclear safety.

James Karlsen (Norway), researched the regional role of universities. He is now Professor and Head of Department at the University of Agder, and is engaged in close collaboration with the University of Deusto (Spain).

Roger Normann (Norway) applied his background in economics and political science to his PhD research on Democracy in Development. He is now Dean of Agder Business School.

Tauriq Jenkins (South Africa) seeks to decolonise accounts of the history of the Western Cape. He is a Khoi chief, and a researcher in the San and Khoi Research Unit in the Centre for African Studies at the University of Cape Town. He has a live Action Research case study concerning Amazon's proposed building of a new headquarters in Cape Town, with major concerns regarding heritage and environmental issues.

Tina Saud (Nepal) is exploring participative management, and the role of Quality Circles. She has faced obstacles at Kathmandu University in her approach to Action Research, which she has addressed through writing. My role has been to serve as a dialogue partner. She worked with Students' Quality Circles, and she will be applying her thesis research in an EU funded project as a Quality Champion in the coffee industry in Nepal. She teaches at Kathmandu University.

In the Action Research industrial PhD programme at Sabanci University (Turkey), we have explored a range of Action Research Methodologies and Approaches, learning from differences. It has been a rich learning experience for both faculty and students. It became clear that from within a particular tradition, such as "Action Research Ala Turca", it can be hard to develop explanatory documentation. At Sabanci the programme involved full time senior business executives, with heavy workloads.

Behind the different traditions of AR, there is a shared view that change and transformation are possible. They require active engagement, rather than traditional detachment. I am primarily concerned with Socio-Technical Systems Thinking, Trust and Environmental Sustainability, linked by AR.

My starting point in recent work has been the newly fashionable field of "Blockchain" technology, which tends to have been focused on financial applications, such as crypto currencies. It had been assumed that ledger transactions are "trusted". This is not now a reliable assumption, following major financial crises. I start by considering Trust, and shared

objectives such as Environmental Sustainability, where we can identify key data to support decision making. STS provides a suitable framework, with a key role for AR.

In Norway at NTNU there is well established cross-departmental collaborative research on Blockchain technology. Based on my past experience of research management in advanced IT in the UK in the 1980 s, based on Declarative Systems, and of Socio-Technical Systems Thinking and design in Norway, as well as Environmental Sustainability, I suggest a new approach, including a fresh account of computation. The project could bridge the gap between normally separate research perspectives and traditions. We can put the idea to the test with a PDCA approach, based on AR case studies.

Miren and Danilo: You once mentioned, paraphrasing you, that “being optimistic is more fun, and may produce positive results”. At the same time, your realistic comments sometimes don’t sound that optimistic about the future. How do you “read” current international developments? Does the idea of coloniality help to understand the past and present power relations?

Richard: We face many daunting global challenges, such as Climate Change and Inequality. In my experience, success has sometimes been possible in what had seemed to be impossible causes. Our campaign in 1985–6 to resist the American Strategic Defense Initiative was successful, after a complex process of dialogue, which was consistent with the Appreciative Inquiry tradition in Action Research. We found common ground in unexpected places. This does not mean that all campaigns will succeed. It does show that, on occasion, individuals can make a difference. This is a view which I have inherited from my late father David and uncles John and Martin, who were activists with a focus on internationalism, self-determination and human rights.

Struggles continue, such as in South Africa, where I work with the San and Khoi Research Unit. There is also a need to build new digital archives following the disastrous fire in the UCT University Library in April 2021. We currently await the outcome of a High Court case in Cape Town.

I know about failure, which can be seen as attributable to my own poor judgement. I had experience of leading an international arts festival in 1996, which lost money. It was my personal responsibility to deal with the consequences.

We can now see compelling international evidence for the emergence of a “New Colonialism”, and a continuing widespread refusal to address uncomfortable historical truths regarding slavery, the slave trade and empire. Decoloniality concerns the present and future, as well as the past. It challenges established orthodoxies, including in politics and academia. It is important to write and publish, through “academic activism”.

Miren and Danilo: In retrospect, what are the key learnings in your journey with/as Action Research? Where did you learn? Whom did you learn with?

Richard: From an early age I have sought to link action and research. Action Research has provided a number of contexts, including in Educational Action Research, which I encountered as a school student of physics with Nuffield Foundation, and as a secondary school teacher of social studies, teaching about race relations, with the University of East Anglia. This linked to my work with classroom simulations, and on education for world citizenship.

I learned a great deal from my experience of leading research on “Logic as a Computer Language for Children” from 1980, based at Imperial College London. We launched a network of new projects in the UK and internationally.

I have learned not to work alone, but to co-operate with trusted colleagues who can apply a veto to my overly optimistic plans. Björn Gustavsen was a formative influence from 1988, when I encountered his “action research case studies”, which he used to evaluate research and development programmes. I was honoured when he asked me to write his profile, which IJAR then published as his intellectual obituary. He was an “AR particle”, who “made waves”. He built bridges which we are still learning to cross.

Events can move fast, so I ensure that I write up my work each day. This was learned from my experience of the successful campaign against SDI in 1985–6, in a context of high politics and official secrecy.

There is no one best way: we need to understand the diverse contexts in which people work and write. I have worked in the UK, European Union, Sweden, Norway, Lithuania, South Africa and Nepal, as well as with UN agencies and NGOs. In each case there are institutional borders to be crossed.

Miren and Danilo: This is very interesting. Can you tell us a little more?

Richard: Now I work from home in physical terms, but with a variety of external partners and contexts. When I publish, my writings can be regarded as actions, sometimes in ways which I might not have anticipated. I can be taken by surprise, such as when, in 2020, I was awarded a PhD Honoris Causa by Kazimiero Simonavicius University in Lithuania, in recognition of my support over thirty years for the successful campaign for Lithuanian self-determination and independence.

Miren and Danilo: You have shared with us, sometimes confidentially, about your illness, and we are very much impressed about the way you deal with life. What keeps you moving with such confidence and willingness to participate and help? We would appreciate your comments as a way to deal with difficult situations.

Richard: I have experienced difficult illness for 50 years, which has meant that I have often had to challenge my own judgement, balancing my preferred optimism with enforced realism. For a period, I stepped back from my role with IJAR. After a while, I felt able to resume activity. I was very fortunate to be able to maintain my work.

I now have a recent diagnosis of chronic lymphocytic leukaemia (CLL), which could continue for many years. This makes succession planning, and keeping writing up to date, all the more important. I do not take on new projects which depend on my leadership or continued presence. I can work with partners around the world, but without leaving my home. You might think that this is now “Inaction Research” on my part. The test will be seen in the outcomes of work by my network of students and partners. Many of them have published articles and books. The work continues. At heart, I am a teacher and editor, but without a consistent clear conventional discipline. My life continues to be Action Research “work in progress”.

Miren and Danilo: Thanks, Richard! An impressive testimony.

About the interviewers

Miren Larrea is senior researcher in Orkestra- Basque Institute of Competitiveness and lecturer at the University of Deusto in the Basque Country, Spain. She is also associate researcher at Praxis Research Institute in Rafaela, Santa Fé, Argentina. Her research focuses on regional innovation systems, Industry 4.0, smart specialisation strategies, multilevel and collaborative governance, local development, and shared leadership. She is one of the proponents of action research for territorial development, practiced by a multilocal community of researchers in the Basque Country (Spain), Agder (Norway), Santa Fé and Tierra del Fuego (Argentina).

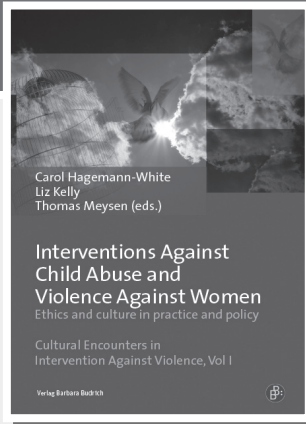
Danilo Streck is Doctor of Education from Rutgers University. He has been a Visiting Scholar at the Latin American Center, UCLA, and at Max Plank Institute for Human Development in Berlin. Danilo is Professor at the Graduate School of Education of the University of Caxias do Sul (Brazil). His research projects focus on popular education, Latin American pedagogy, participatory social processes and research methodologies. He is author of “A New Social Contract in a Latin American Educational Context” (Palgrave/McMillan), co-editor of “Paulo Freire Encyclopedia” (Rowman & Littlefield).

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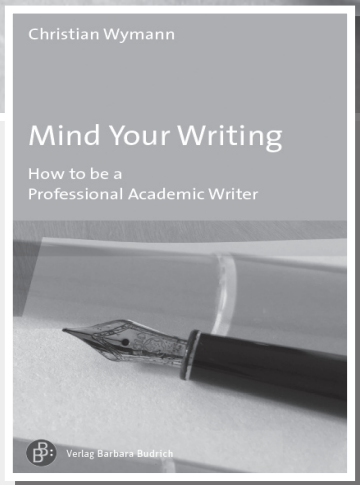
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Christian Wymann

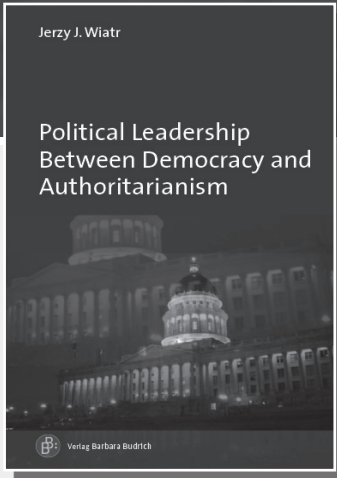
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