BOOK AND MEDIA REVIEWS

PALAR: The Action Research Model in Higher Education and Communities

Review of "Professional Learning in Higher Education and Communities: Towards a New Vision for Action Research"
By Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt, Margaret Fletcher and Judith Kearney
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In the past few years, ideologies such as data-driven decision-making, performance-driven management and evidence-based cultures have become highly popular. In this context, educational policies, procedures and teaching modalities all have been interpreted in terms of measurements, figures, indicators and outputs. Simple but powerful ideals pertaining to "deep learning, democratic values, critical reflection and collaborative dialogue" (Zuber-Skerritt *et al.*, 2015, p. x) have been ignored and forgotten. Education and learning, however, is more than figures and grades; it also involves sharing knowledge, critical discussion, revising mental models and advancing knowledge to improve the external world and its existing practices. Emotions are not always negative and harmful. Decisions need not always be based on the foundation of hard facts and numerical figures but can also be based on values, emotions and critical reflection. The affective realm needs to be acknowledged along with the social and cognitive realms. Critical perspective grounded in critical theory strives to develop the notion of knowledge as "tentative and uncertain, of curriculum as negotiable, of pedagogy as exchange and of learners as active in the process of making meaning in the classroom" (Zuber-Skerritt *et al.*, 2015, p. vi). Critical theory in the discipline of education believes that the outcome of education is not the grades received nor the exercise of mental faculties but the ability to link educational knowledge to the outside society or rather to whatever is happening outside the classroom. To question the capitalist order of production, exploitation of workers in organizations, patriarchal family relations and racism in the society. Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) allows making sense of these contemporary challenges and their complexity within a collaborative environment to generate practical solutions from theoretical, conceptual and heuristic perspectives. PALAR is a new alternative which includes those excluded so far by the formal learning institutions due to the divisive order of society and its distorted notions of gender, race and religion. Knowledge in this new global community would encompass everything which is scientific, experiential, cultural and intuitive, and learning would mean individual, professional, collaborative, organizational and critical. The emphasis would shift from outcome and performance towards "unlocking human potential offering equal opportunity for all and closing the gap between rich and poor" (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015, p. 2).

This book "*Professional Learning in Higher Education and Communities: Towards a New Vision for Action Research*" is a valuable read consisting of philosophies from neuroscience, affective-socio-cognitive processes, critical reflection and participatory action research backed up with case studies from Australia and South Africa. It is just not another book on action research; instead, it integrates concepts of critical theory within action research and change management to argue that PALAR is the answer to a turbulent, undemocratic educational system seeped with inequalities and variations. It provides a different epistemological and political outlook on education in higher societies along with practical tools and techniques to grapple with current issues of poverty, environmentalism prevailing within the surrounding communities around the school systems. The first half of the book is informative, it introduces the reader to different theories of PALAR, professional learning with focus on neuroscience, critical reflection and action research. The second half of the book discusses case studies to demonstrate practical application of PALAR. With the final section describing an action research thesis and the authors' concluding thoughts and reflections of PALAR. The book in total consists of eight chapters and is a comprehensive volume on the concept of participatory action research with a focus on critical theory.

Chapter 1 is an introduction to the methodology of PALAR which has been influenced by the theories of phenomenology, critical theory, grounded theory, complexity theory, experiential learning theory, living theory, hope theory and negative dialectics and critical reflection. The net outcome is a transformative methodology of PALAR which is "transformational in purpose, process and outcome" (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015, p. 2), with the capacity to reflect and subsequently create new "ways of thinking and understanding the world" inquire and address the "wicked" problems collaboratively, thereby going beyond the limits of human perception modified by formal learning instruction. To accept that learning is never perfect and knowledge is not the mastery of objectified truth, instead, it is a constant struggle and an acknowledgement that learning is an exercise of dialogue and reflection. The authors introduce and explain to the reader various terminologies of action research, phenomenology, grounded theory, complexity theory and critical theory amongst a few. The structure of the book is outlined along with its aims, limitations and contributions.

Chapter 2 on Professional Learning focuses on adult learners and the theory of andragogy and the neurological processes which account for our decisions and the reasons behind it. Action research incorporates adult learning and critical reflection, adults learn by reflecting on their experience and workplace. The authors in this chapter map the physiological processes involved in learning experiences by technically imaging the nervous system specifically the brain. Neuroscience supports a learning process which is the outcome of "physical experience encountered through the senses and mental experience as processes through the nervous system" (Fletcher, 2015, p. 53). Panksepp *et al.* (2012) describes how babies learn by responding to the sensory input at the emotional level. Similarly, all learning is dependent on emotional habits and conditioned responses based on positive or negative experiences. These experiences influence the cognitive, reflective and decision-making processes of all individuals. Learning thus initially is emotional and nonconscious – "the entire brain is an organ of emotion and […] emotion, reason and memory are all linked together" (Zull, 2002, p. 65). Action research is able to relate to the emotional aspect of learning, all individuals first observe and then plan their actions. Along with emotion, another aspect of learning is social. All individuals are emotional-social beings who need to interact and collaborate with others. We learn from our peers and family as well. The final component of learning is cognition, where the conscious part of the brain shuffles through the accumulated memories consisting of both emotional and social

moments to imagine and explain existing world. Whenever an individual feels his/her previous experiences do not warrant a complete and proper explanation, he/she ponders, wonders, questions, evaluates, reflects and criticizes to remove any biases and errors to reach a more complex higher order reasoning. In other words, neurologically we learn through emotions, social interaction and cognitive processing and critical reflection. Learning emerges as a more complexed process. Learning and education is therefore more than just an outcome based paradigm. Instead, it is a "[…]emotional, shared, thoughtful journey that centers on our capacity to reflect critically on our experiences as we engage and interact with our self and each other" (Fletcher, 2015, p. 71). Critical reflection emerges as an important aspect of the entire learning process in this chapter.

Students need to possess the ability to think critically, creatively and innovatively at the end of their education. This ability hones their capacity to solve complex human and social problems and also effectively utilize communication, collaboration, vision building and relationship building and lifelong action learning skills (Zuber-Skerritt and Teare, 2013). This signifies the connection between learning, reflection and action research in higher education. Action research allows a student to solve practical problems, explore current practices, reflect on them to improve and transform them better. Chapter 3 discusses critical reflection, the relevant literature pertaining to reflection, critical reflection, critical theory and critical judgement and its significance. Different approaches to learning are covered, various stages of reflection and evaluation are explained. All these concepts of learning and reflection are then related to teaching and the role of a teacher. The responsibility of a teacher is to "establish a learning environment that builds a community that is committed to knowledge building" (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015, p. 91). A learning environment and community where the student is motivated to use senses and emotions, interact with peers, reflect on this knowledge and use it to improve existing practices. Pedagogical techniques such as community development projects, reflection diaries are amongst a few methodologies which can develop "creative, innovative, collaborative, confident and self-educated, holistic human beings who take responsibility for their own learning and for their own and others' lives" (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015, p. 92).

Action Research as continued in Chapter 4 is more than just a methodology – "it is a way of engaging with groups of people to integrate theory and practice, research and development, to improve practice and to create understanding and new knowledge[…]" (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015, p. 102). And advancing a few steps further as compared to other books on action research, this volume highlights the role of '*emancipation*' in action research, which is the passion to seek solutions to the complexed human, social and environmental problems currently existing. The chapter outlines the various approaches to action research, differentiating the authors' vision of action research, i.e. PALAR both as a philosophy and methodology, and also as a theory of learning and facilitation process. Next the concept of PALAR is discussed from a critical perspective and its role in higher education, which is informed by theory to analyze community problems and designing appropriate solutions.

The next three chapters consist of case studies on action research for professional learning in higher education. Chapter 5 focuses on a case study on professional learning of academics affiliated with three universities in South Africa. While Chapter 6 is on another case study on leadership development of academics in six African countries. Chapter 7 is about a case study which demonstrates professional learning through a university-community partnership involving a migrant community in Australia.

Chapter 8 identifies the characteristics of an action research thesis. The authors provide definitions and checklists which could be useful for students, supervisors and examiners of action research thesis. The similarities and differences between action research thesis and

traditional research thesis are also provided. The readers will also come across guidance and advice for supervisors of action research thesis.

The last chapter, Chapter 9, draws conclusions from all the chapters in the book to explicate the vision of the authors on action research in general and PALAR in particular. The authors argue that their design of action research, PALAR is able to collaboratively transform societies, achieve sustainable development and social justice based on human values and democratic values to create a better world. And how this book is able to articulate their arguments and practically demonstrate it through case studies.

This book is a must read for those who are passionate about critical theory, emancipation and transformation of societies. It is interesting with wealth of knowledge about professional learning, neuroscience, critical reflection and action research. The final chapters on action research thesis writing and supervision are useful for one considering an action research project in the future. This book would prove to be informative for professionals in higher education, supervisors and examiners of action research thesis and those interested in gaining more information on action research and critical theory. Overall the book makes the reader think about new issues, new questions and new agendas in education, learning and action research critically.

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