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From Action Research to Action Learning: How can film communicate

De la Investigación en Acción al Aprendizaje en Acción: Cómo puede el Cine Comunicar

Abstract:

This article forms part of the emerging issue of Learning Alliances (LA), in the field of education of vulnerable and disempowered children. On a theoretical level, a rigorous application of participatory action research methodology is presented to tease out the potential for knowledge exchange through a Learning Alliance approach in conjunction with best practices of film in this field. LA on a theoretical level is readily conceivable based on communicative action in a Habermasian sense.

Keywords:

Learning Alliance; Participative Action Research (PAR); Habermas; communicative action; film

Resumen:

Este artículo forma parte del tema emergente de Alianzas de Aprendizaje (LA), en el campo de la educación de niños vulnerables y desamparados. A nivel teórico, se presenta una aplicación rigurosa de la metodología de investigación-acción participativa para descubrir el potencial del intercambio de conocimientos a través de un enfoque de Alianza de Aprendizaje junto con las mejores prácticas cinematográficas en este campo. LA, en un nivel teórico es fácilmente concebible basada en la acción comunicativa en un sentido Habermasiano.

Palabras claves:

Alianza de aprendizaje; Investigación Acción Participativa (PAR); Habermas; acción comunicativa; película

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1. Introduction

"You cannot understand a system until you try to change it" (Lewin recited in MacDonald, 2012)

Participative Action Research (PAR) had no disciplinary or political orientation at the beginning, but it is known mainly as a breakthrough among empiricist approaches and positivism in social science. Looking at it from a practice-oriented point of view, Rahman (1999) sees the origin of PAR mostly in rural areas in the less privileged countries:

PAR has been initiated by so-called "voluntary" bodies, variously called "social action groups," "non-governmental organizations" or, to use a more recent nomenclature that is functionally more communicative as well as challenging, "self-reliance-promoting organizations" or SPOs (p. 18).

"As with all great things, it had no single inventor. Nobody discovered it, it was the result of an atmosphere by the clash between clear-cut scientific explanations and rough reality", stated Alfredo Molano in his opening speech at the World Congress on Participatory Convergence Knowledge (1997). He believed PAR emerged to add an ethical dimension to science and has done a good job in that respect. Two main reasons are behind this; first, PAR had lived a life of two decades by 1990s and researchers had experienced to walk beside the researched and not a step ahead; secondly, researchers had decided not to stay away and assist the state than fighting it (Molano, 1997).

Back in 1977 in Cartagena World Symposium on Action Research and Scientific Analysis, one of the milestones of PAR's concept of participation was laid down. Going beyond development issues and partnership with government in a representative democratic context, as defined by Huntington (1976), participation was conceptualized to break through the subject-object relationship of the researcher and researched and their union despite recognition of their otherness.

PAR was born from left traditions of thought with roots in a new interpretation of historical materialism; however, Marxism's anti-culture approaches and rigid principles were no longer helping to reconstruct the actual life of ordinary people. At the beginning, PAR can be seen as the offspring of nationalistic spirit to build new nations' voices criticizing colonial scholarship and struggling against oppressive governments in many parts of the world. However, it did not flourish on the same ground in the so-called global South. Unlike Latin America in which it was understood in a post-colonial political context, initially criticizing modernization and its implications, in Africa it was associated with a practical need to address the gap between academia and actual reality concerning national development (Swantz, 2016).

Among other social sciences, Action Anthropology was pioneer in challenging the concept of disinterested science in 1948. In 1960s universities in Africa started AR on the ground that social science did not produce "a high-quality ethnographic portrait" and the social science tradition of thanking the "informants" was inadequate. They called for equal share of knowledge by the researcher and the researched. Introduction of PAR to politics resulted in a tendency to give voice to the voiceless (Swantz, 2016, pp. 31-32)

2. Philosophical Background of PAR: from Self-reflective Praxis to Communicative Action

From a philosophical point of view, PAR can be traced back to the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, especially to Jürgen Habermas' views (Kemmis et al., 2014). From the advent of the social sciences, all studies/research have attempted to understand the 'other', be it social life, an object, or a person (Outhwait recited in Kemmis, 2014). This attempt to understand the other has given birth to hermeneutics, the methodology of interpretations. The pioneer philosopher of this school, Hans-Georg Gadamer in Truth and Method (1975) refuses to conceive this interpretation as a scientific method. Gadamer articulates what he calls 'effective-historical consciousness', which implies that people including historians are embedded in the culture and history that have shaped them. In his own words "the historian's (self) consciousness of how history is effective in her or his own historicality, actively influencing her or his interpretations (via 'prejudices' or taken-for-granted assumptions)" (Gadamer recited in Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 125). He is convinced that people are shaped more by the history and culture of their community as by their own reasoning. Therefore, by exploring the links between language and thought, in a Foucauldian sense, and how they shape the way we see or not see certain things, which is bound to ideology, he challenges the application of scientific methods to interpretation.

In another take on this, one of the main founders of the Frankfurt School, Max Horkheimer (1972) explains critical theory as a theory to overcome social injustice (Kemmis, 2014). He challenges positivistic science, which always distinguishes between 'value' and 'facts' and emphasizes the concept of critique in exploring unjust or inhumane structures and practices. In discovering unjust conditions, PAR has laid its foundation on a Habermasian notion of self and an 'extra-individual' characteristic of 'practice/praxis' (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 126).

According to Schön (1993) a critical participatory action researcher is a 'self-reflective practitioner' whose self is shaped by a 'plurality'. This self is "constructed through developmental-historical, cultural-discursive, social and material-economic interactions between people" (Habermas recited in Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 126). As a result, there is no subjectivity and how the self understands these unjust or inhumane practices is subject to the contextual conditions enumerated by Habermas. What he suggests is to study the practices and structures with a type of communication which he calls 'communicative action'. To do so there are four main conditions: first, everybody who can contribute to a 'controversial validity claim' should be included. Second, no one should be deprived of an equal opportunity to express themselves and everybody should enjoy the right to be engaged in communications. Third, there is no place for illusion or deception on the side of the participants. They should genuinely mean what they do or say. Forth, communication should be free, with all types of coercion excluded. He suggests these four measures to be checked at all stages to evaluate the validity of the claims.

Habermas objects to Gadamer's concept of 'understanding' in linguistic context of practice by stating its occurrence in trans-individual context of language. He believes that understanding and language happen in discourses in which the relation of power has already been shaped and thus warns against solitary self-reflection:

The self-reflection of a lone subject... requires a quite paradoxical achievement: one part of the self must be split off from the other part in such a manner that the subject can be in a position to render aid to itself. ... [Furthermore], in the act of self-reflection the subject can deceive itself. (Habermas recited in Kemmis, 2014, p. 127).

Habermas introduces the concept of 'intersubjectivity' in The Truth and Justification to face the challenge exposed by self-reflective communicative action (Kemmis, 2014). There he argues that truth is not understood in individuals' consciousness but in an intersubjective space where different life-worlds are interwoven. Afterwards, he emphasizes that communicative action is different from strategic action in that the former does not look for pre-planned outcomes (Kemmis, 2014).

Based on this theoretical backbone, Kemmis and McTaggart (2014) defined participative action research as:

A form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out. (Kemmis et al. recited in Kemmis, 2014, p. 122).

Therefore, there are two main focal points in Kemmis definition of critical participative action research: understanding of the situation and self-reflective practices. By practice, he means a neo-Aristotelian definition of the word, which is better known as praxis. He defines praxis as a "morally informed, committed action, oriented by tradition, that responds wisely to the needs, circumstances and particulars of a practical situation" (Kemmis, 2014, p. 135). Fals-Borda (1999) believes one of the first concepts on which PAR has been founded is praxis. Tracing it back in Marx's Theses on Feuerbach and Hegel's dialectics, she shows how praxis moved away from 'social engineering of humans' to be 'the science of Proletariat' (p. 156).

In conclusion, in Kemmis' pioneering undertaking in formulating the philosophical aspect of PAR, he emphasized that it often emerges in the context of social movements as an 'engaged research' to find ways to change the situation. People feel they are alive in a 'universalistic' way to make changes in their own history, and therefore, it is 'emancipatory' (Kemmis, 2014, p.135). Having roots in the thoughts of Antonio Gramsci in turning common sense to "good sense", an emancipatory phase initiated through which knowledge becomes a tool to request social justice by asking "knowledge for whom or what?" (Fals-Borda, 1999).

3. Action Research and Action Learning; Two Sides of the Same Coin?

Mike Pedler and John Burgoyne (2016) distinguish Action Learning (AL) from other types of action research by the priority it allots to action and to the learning of the people who are concerned with the problem in question. It is highly skeptical of the approaches and solutions offered by experts and is more generally understood as 'ethos' or broad approach rather than a set of techniques for learning (Pedler & Burgoyne, 2016). With political and personal drive to criticize the current situation and change it for better, action learning is a process of self-development for the researcher herself/himself.

"Action Learning originates with Reginald Revans (1907–2003), who was variously an Olympic athlete, a student of nuclear physics, an educational administrator, and a professor of management." (Pedler & Burgoyne, 2016, p. 319). He believed that systems, which are designed for humans, should be developed in a way that benefit people depending on them the most. In order to do so, he emphasized one should not only look for solution in libraries and academia but also in social laboratories and fieldworks. In 1920s and 1930s, Marry Parker Follett stated that knowledge should be sought wherever it might be found despite any hierarchical tendency for classification of it (Pedler & Burgoyne, 2016).

Action Learning is different from Action Research emerging more as a resistance to the domination of the "expert over learner" or the so-called 'book culture' rather than as general reaction against positivism (Pedler & Burgoyne, 2016, p. 320). It addressed a biased cultural misconception making people believe by talking/writing about a problem, they are actually doing something about it. AL's main undertaking is to assist people to "learn how to solve a problem" (Pedler recited in Pedler & Burgoyne, 2016, p. 320).

However, like AR, AL resists accepting one single definition. Revans (1966) maintains there are three main components for Al; first, people who are concerned about the problem and are ready to take on the responsibility for that. Second, (the) problem(s) to be addressed and acted upon. Thirdly, a group of colleagues (he mentions six or more), who meet regularly to tackle the problem. However, Pedler (2016) challenges this definition as he believes it is not comprehensive enough and meant more for an organizational context.

4. Alliance for Learning through New Modes of Action for Knowledge Production

Gibbons (2012) discussed the emergence of new mode of production of knowledge, which he called mode 2, side by side the traditional mode 1. This heuristic mode rebels against the Western culture of scientific versus non-scientific, where science was synonymous with knowledge (Gibbons, 2012). Mode 1 generally refers to "a complex of ideas, methods [and] norms ... [in which] the problems are set and solved in a context governed by the largely interests of a specific community" (Gibbons, 2012, pp. 2-3). It tends to be disciplinary, homogenous, and hierarchical. By contrast, in mode 2, "Knowledge is always produced under an aspect of continuous negotiation, and it will not be produced unless and until the interests of various actors are included" (Gibbons, 2012, p.4).

The difference between mode 1 and 2 does not only lie in its sources for and approach towards knowledge production, but in communication of the results. Unlike reporting in academic journals, in mode 2 everything is communicated with those who had participated in production and diffusion of the knowledge (Gibbons, 2012). On the other hand, the particular result achieved might or not become a "cognitive site" for further/future problems, and however, remain particularly open to for "closer interaction of knowledge production with a succession of problem contexts" (Gibbons, 2012, p.5).

Mode 2 is not a planned central body; therefore, it is organizationally diverse and heterogeneous. It is decentralized in the sense that, knowledge production is encouraged from miscellaneous sources including non-academia, non-governmental, governmental, think-tanks, laboratories, etc. Moreover, ways of communications are also as diverse as the modes of knowledge production, for example electronic, informal, and social interactions, etc. (Gibbons, 2012). And finally, because of transdisciplinary approach of this mode, more subfields are being born out of disciplines and in long term it will result in the glorification of more expertise with 'finer specialty' (Gibbons, 2012, p.6).

When it comes to quality control, Gibbons suggests peer reviews through which control and quality reinforce each other mutually. These reviews are done by people who have been working on the problems, and quality is no longer a set of pre-determined criteria. Representing a wider social composition, quality is not restricted to the views and judgements of disciplinary peers with the same intellectual interests, who consider themselves as the gatekeeper of that specific discipline (Gibbons, 2012).

Concluding his argument by methods of producing knowledge in mode 2, Gibbons (2012) emphasizes that "communications are crucial. At present this maintained partly through formal collaborative agreements and strategic alliances and partly through informal networks backed up by rapid transportations and electronic communications... it is one of the imperatives of Mode 2, that exploitation of knowledge requires participation in its generation." (p. 15, emphasis added).

5. Breaking the Monopoly of Knowledge through Participation of the Oppressed

As we discussed earlier, one of the main preoccupations of PAR is to establish social justice. In that sense, PAR has been inspired by 'class struggle' rooted in historical materialism. However, it stands against the elite interpretation that put much of the responsibility of social change on the shoulders of the "vanguard" with a more "advanced consciousness" than that of the masses' (Rahman, 1999, p.3). PAR maintains the only way to liberate people is through their own consciousness. Otherwise stating, PAR is not only seen as a break-up with the right but as a reaction to the crisis of the left as well. The oppressed groups identify themselves with the PAR process and take lead by participating authentically through *vivencia*, Spanish word for "inner life-experience" or living actually through something very close to Habermasian "life-world" concept, and transform their situation (Fals-Borda, 1999, p.11).

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Consequently, Fals-Borda (1999) argues for a PAR to succeed, there should be shared codes of communication between internal and external components of change. These codes which are acting as animators should marry the external or Cartesian academic elements with experiential practices or combine elite and popular knowledge. Rahman (1999) states while combining knowledge and practice, PAR should beware of creating a new jargon as its ultimate goal is to return the legitimacy of knowledge production to the people.

The first step to make the scene ready for the participation of the oppressed is to raise the people's awareness through "conscientization" in the words of Paulo Freire (Rahman, 1999). He believes "conscientization is a process of "self-awareness-raising through collective self-inquiry and reflection" which is reminiscent of Habermas' intersubjectivity and communicative action (Rahman, 1999, p.17). To Freire, however, the researcher should be fully aware not to reduce the whole process to merely transfer of the knowledge but to build the capacity and confidence to produce it. Moreover, to establish a real subject-to-subject relation between the researcher and the researched will not be an easy task as the people have always been subjugated to traditional up-down structures and they might lack the self-image and confidence to be put in decision-making positions. On the other hand, to put the self-image aside might not be an easy task on the side of the researcher, that is why a PAR should develop research initiated and monitored by people in different stages of its implementation. Therefore, as Foucault (1980) has put it, we must be content to "develop a more modest conceptual systematization of heretofore 'subjugated knowledges' as a more stimulating and creative task" (Fals-Borda, 1999, p.162).

6. Principle of PAR and Learning Alliance

Despite the vast inclusive range of characteristics and philosophical backgrounds mentioned for PAR, Swantz (2014) believes that there are some principles for it. First, in PAR the starting point is always a practical situation, and the researcher should have a systematic participation by which he/she can put himself/herself in the place of the researched and appear as a partner but be aware of the fact he/she represents a different class or social group. Among other types of PAR, three types of empirical-analytical, hermeneutic (interpretational), and critical participative action research are more well-known according to Stephan Kemmis. However, irrespective of its type, there seems to be a consensus on these criteria for PAR: it should always be transparent, carried out with a researcher with good research skills, and with compatible objectives and means of research (Swantz, 2014).

According to Fals-Borda (1999) at least thirty-two schools have been found related to the concept of participation in social, economic, and political research.

7. Action Learning – A Self-reflective Praxis

As an educator, researcher, and NGO coordinator for over eight years, I continuously undertook research into the significance of quality education by NGOs working with refugees and underprivileged children. My work entailed carrying out field research and since April 2016 when I joined

LearningAlliance: Sharing Knowledge across Borders NGO in Geneva as a voluntary researcher, most of my research has focused on qualitative education and the establishment of knowledge sharing networks. As an NGO person I was aware of the importance nongovernmental organizations afford to those marginalized groups. As I am a firm believer that sustainable access to education can only materialize through participation on all levels, I felt compelled to apply Participative Action Research rigorously this study, as an underlying paradigm, to hear those whose voices are not readily heard.

Ever since engaging in discourse about PAR and LA, I found out using short films and videos as a case study both in academic set-ups and in workshops with humanitarian practitioners can have significant pedagogical impact. Given the researcher background, speaking "A Learning Alliance (LA) in Education for Vulnerable Children; NGOs Across Borders". In different fora, the feedback stemmed predominantly from academics considered the project from a methodological point of view. In one instance, a university professor showed a strong skepticism about any added value in the learning alliance. On the other hand, for the practitioners, the necessity of participation on a communicative-action-based approach was more clearly definable. However, only when both groups were able to visualize the learning alliance via two films, a short animation and a film documenting a whole process of a project implemented applying PAR.

These films document and illustrate a project focused on building a school for children of underprivileged background via application of PAR. They depict how an alliance of learnings is happening among different programmes from painting, theater, music, and handcrafting. While children as the main beneficiaries are actively participating and communicating their needs, visions, and dreams about their future school, teachers, facilitators and mangers are becoming part of this learning alliance by observing and taking actions in another circle. In one instance, when the theatre teacher noticed the level of physical tension among boys in a more closed space intensifies, he utilizes the experience of the music group to mitigate the level of violence. In another example when girls expressed interest in having gender separated classrooms, their experience of a drawing course, where they could paint the classroom walls, they felt they were able to make space their own. This self-determination assisted their visualization process in producing a more gendered learning environment.

The participants of PAR and LA when being shown films and depicted in pictures this process rather than purely being told about a theoretical concept stated a better understanding and showed more interest in learning more about it. The cycle of learning from students to teachers and mangers and ongoing reflective review highlight the importance of participative approaches in education supported by either film or video screening or indeed making a film as part of PAR and documenting change process in learning and over time.

8. PAR and Praxis of Learning Alliance through Films: Preliminary Findings

One can argue that film meets Habermas' four main conditions for as a "communicative action" especially when it is employed as a tool for documenting action learning. The inclusion of all those,

who can contribute to a 'controversial validity claim' can be better verified and reviewed through documentation via film. Although, granting equal opportunity to express oneself in front of a camera is arguably not a given, however, the self-reflective practice of filming a learning action can provide those with less access to representation to engage in future or repeated communications. While the participants' genuine intention in a communicative action via film can be paradoxical, illusion or deception can be part of any narrative similar to real life. However, the paradoxical split of self-reflection starts when the subject can be in a position to render aid to itself and at the same time represent itself, be in a film or real learning action. Finally, the exclusion of coercion for communicative action occurring via filming, needs the validity check of this claim in different stages. This seems to be imperative especially when it includes children or marginalized groups, whose participation via informed choice should be the base of the communication.

On the other hand, the three main components of AL (Fals-Borda, 1999) appears to be present in documenting an action learning via film. First, there is a problem to be addressed and acted upon. Second, there are actors ready to take action and accept the responsibility. Third, there is a collective way about solving the problem.

9. Conclusion

Given the preliminary findings of this study, using film as a communicative action tool can combine the three types of empirical-analytical, hermeneutic (interpretational), and critical participative action research described by Stephan Kemmis. The starting point is always a practical situation with problem statement and the researcher/ actor interchangeably shifting roles and being researched or acted upon via a self- reflective praxis.

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