

Pragmatic Action Research

Greenwood, Davydd J.

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

Rainer Hampp Verlag

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Greenwood, D. J. (2007). Pragmatic Action Research. *International Journal of Action Research*, 3(1+2), 131-148.
<https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-412899>

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Pragmatic Action Research^{*}

Davydd J. Greenwood

AR is not just one more social science “method”; it is a fundamentally different way of conducting research and social change work together. Participation in AR is not just a moral value but essential to successful AR because the complexities of the problems addressed require the knowledge and experience of a broad and diverse array of stakeholders. I argue that there is no one ideal form of AR and that what is useful is situationally dependent which is also why AR cannot respect or operate within the disciplinary boundaries or departmental structures of academic. For these reasons, Morten Levin and I prefer to call our work “pragmatic AR”. To complete the paper, I present two cases, one from industry and one from community development, to show how I practice pragmatic AR in context.

Key words: Pragmatic AR, method, participation

AR is neither a method nor a technique; it is an approach to living in the world that includes the creation of arenas for collaborative learning and the design, enactment, and evaluation of liberating actions. I practice AR pragmatically as a strategy for research that self-consciously and strategically combines multiple methods and techniques according to the concrete needs of particular groups and situations.

^{*} I would particularly like to thank Werner Fricke, not only for the invitation to participate in this issue of the International Journal of Action Research, but for his thoughtful, critical, and kind editorial hand. As much a mentor as an editor, Werner deserves no blame for the weaknesses of this essay and much credit for whatever strengths it has.

I have to admit that my own training in philosophy is extremely spotty and so I make no claims for having made a thoughtful intellectual choice of positions. My personality is such that I cannot/will not discipline myself to do things when I cannot see their usefulness. Nevertheless, I needed to get philosophy credit to complete my graduation requirements and so I enrolled in a summer course at a very modest university in my Midwestern hometown. Manning the barricades there was a good natured, extremely awkward, and sincere philosophy teacher used to teaching students who did not care at all about the subject. Very early in the course, we read selections from William James and John Dewey and they were the first pieces of philosophical writing that made the slightest sense to me. When I reacted positively, I discovered that this professor was a devotee of American pragmatism. So I ended the course having concluded that I liked pragmatism but nothing else in philosophy.

My graduate school encounters in the 1960's with structuralism and my later encounters with critical theory and post-modernism did nothing to increase my love for abstract and apparently pointless arguments. Only the work of Clifford Geertz and his commitment to hermeneutics resonated with me personally. However, while my wife was pursuing her Ph.D. in comparative literature at Cornell University, she was reading Hans Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1982) and was so interested in it that I ended up reading it with pleasure and gained a strong sense of the value of these kinds of arguments.

Subsequently, as part of teaching a course on methodology, I read Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Rorty 1980) and was reminded how much I liked the pragmatist position. At the time, I was also fully engaged in action research and had recently met Ira Harkavy, the Director of the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Community Partnerships and an avid proponent of Dewey's philosophy (see Benson, Harkavy, and Puckett, 2007). This led, together with working with Morten Levin (another neo-pragmatist) to a re-reading of Dewey, books about Dewey (Westbrook, 1991) and the other pragmatists (Menand, 2001), and a growing sense that my whole approach to action research fit within the pragmatist framework modulated by the cultural productivity and historicity of Gadamerian hermeneutics. For

these reasons, my Norwegian colleague Morten Levin and I call our approach “pragmatic action research”, signaling a debt to pragmatic philosophy and to the project of democratization.

Those who speak of AR as a method are reducing AR to a set of methods or techniques and obscuring AR’s central aim which is the creation of more democratic, just, fair, and/or sustainable human situations. AR may involve the use of theories and methods from the natural and physical sciences, quantitative and qualitative methods from all of the social sciences, and interpretive frameworks drawn from linguistics, hermeneutics, cultural studies, literary and art criticism, and philosophy. No theory, method, or technique is ruled out if a particular situation requires its use and using it does not violate the rights of any participants to be treated as collaborators in the AR process.

I resist the tendency to treat AR as just one more social science “method” to be made equivalent with positivism, grounded theory, constructivism, neo-Marxist political economy, etc. because doing this ignores AR’s larger aims and permits AR to become co-opted into battles over little bits of academic and intellectual turf.

This is not a trivial matter. The reduction of other reformist approaches to particular theories, methods, and techniques is central to the process of domesticating them and converting reformist political economy into a non-cooperating set of academic professions with little social impact (see, for example, Messer-Davidow’s analysis of the history of feminism, 2002). The pressures to locate AR definitively somewhere and to treat it as a discipline or as a form of “qualitative” research grow more intense. Giving in to them will result in AR becoming just another “lapdog” profession, one more form of academic petty commodity production or another tool in the arsenal of fee-for-service consultants.

For me, AR is a strategy for conducting research that engages professional social researchers and other professional experts with the local stakeholders from an organization, a community, or a coalition in a co-generative process of knowledge creation, action design, and evaluation of outcomes. These AR processes aim to increase local capacity for participative, self-managing, and sustainable change processes. AR combines action and research, reflection and action in an ongoing cycle of cogenerative knowledge creation.

In AR, participation is more than an ethical and political commitment. Participation is key to successful AR because the complexities of the problems addressed require the knowledge and experience of a broad and diverse array of stakeholders including academic experts and local stakeholders who have their own forms of intellectual/experiential expertise to contribute. Without participation, the research cannot be done well enough to have the desired results. In addition, participation has and should have democratizing political effects.

There are some “Luddites” in AR but I am not among them. I don’t reject professional expertise; indeed, I admire and respect expert knowledge and believe that AR must respect expertise as much or more than other forms of social research because expertise is essential to solving complex problems. However, in AR practice, expertise is very broadly defined, including a wide array of academic/professional systems of knowledge, methods, and techniques and the kinds of local expertise that summed up in the term “local knowledge”. Local expertise is an essential ingredient in AR because we start from the premise that human beings are intelligent, experts in their own lives and life situations, and that the mobilization of their expertise is a fundamental ingredient in any successful and lasting social change process.

A consequence of this pragmatic AR stance is that there is no one ideal form of AR. It really is a broad array of practices, epistemological beliefs, ontological commitments, and processes. AR practice, thus, is highly personal, built around the abilities, mindsets, experiences, and ethical/political commitments of the action researchers who practice it. In my case, I bring years of anthropological ethnographic research experience, a commitment to democratic social change and justice, and years of work in both industrial and service organizations both as a researcher, consultant, and as manager. I also bring a broad background in evolutionary biology, neo-classical economics, general systems theory, and the history of ideas to bear on my work. This background gives me unique abilities and also unique limitations.

Added to this I had had the lifelong benefit of a remarkably intense and thorough liberal arts education as an undergraduate at a wonderful small college, Grinnell College. There I learned not to let my fear of my own ignorance force me to define problems so narrowly that I could solve them with-

out having struggle to learn new things. In my college days, we actively lamented the moment when we had to “sell out” and pick a major, thereby narrowing our intellectual scope.

I came to believe that the ideal situation would be to know everything there is to know about all fields of human activity. Since that was impossible, I gradually discovered that the next best thing is to work in multi-disciplinary and multi-stakeholder teams that make up collectively for some of each individual’s limitations. I was already engaged in such multi-disciplinary and multi-stakeholder work as a tenured faculty member at Cornell University when William Foote Whyte introduced me to AR. I soon realized that this approach to the world was what I had always been looking for.

The other interest that has always engaged me is my endless fascination with the complex skills ordinary people demonstrate in their daily work lives. The complexity of their actions, the amount of knowledge they have, the online decisions they make seem on a par with the most complex activities of academic intellectuals I know. This is why I became an anthropologist and later became fascinated by the work of Donald Schön. He and I shared a profound admiration for John Dewey whose belief in the skills and capacities of ordinary people brought us both, along different paths, to an anchoring of AR in pragmatic philosophy.

My emphasis on multi-disciplinarity and multiple forms of expertise is consequential. Most conventional academic social science practices are built around a Taylorist-inspired division of labor into disciplinary departments of disciplinary “experts” whose allegiances are principally to the members of their academic professional associations and then to their academic departments. These departments are linked into a hierarchical structure of academic management in which the department leader reports to a dean who reports to either a provost or a president or a rector who reports to a board of trustees, board of governors, or a state authority.

This organizational structure is based on imagining that each discipline is a hermetic compartment of expert knowledge that does not overlap with other compartments of expert knowledge. The higher authorities then are in charge of deploying these forms of expertise according to their superior knowledge and authority and they alone set the institution’s goals and strategies.

This model of organization is posited on an indefensible belief in the existence of essentialist disciplinary identities (e.g. that sociology is separate from anthropology which is separate from psychology which is separate from neurobiology, etc.). Issues of cooperation among the disciplines and boundary defenses between them are endemic to academia. Students are expected to get an education by traveling from department to department, thereby becoming generally “educated” and then to bore into the center of one of the disciplinary essences and thereby become an expert. Students are like the cars being dragged down Henry Ford’s first assembly line.

This organization of academic life is inimical to AR and yet its reality is taken for granted and built into every aspect of academic structures. Yet, as an action researcher, I have no choice but to reject the ideologies that underpin academic Taylorism. I see the world as a complex, dynamic place in which phenomena have messy boundaries and I do not believe that this messiness can be ignored for the sake of simplifying the task of understanding social problems.

I assume that all significant problems create challenges that reach well beyond the boundaries of any conventional discipline and that cannot be mastered by academic deans, provosts, or presidents. Effectively addressing such issues requires the mobilization of many kinds of expertise including many forms of academic expertise and non-academic local knowledge garnered through years of stakeholder experience with particular problems. Because of this, I do not view engagement beyond the university as a choice; it is a requirement for the existence of AR.

In what follows, I will analyze two examples of my AR work that I think illustrate some of the practices I associate with pragmatic AR.

Case 1: The Mondragón Industrial Cooperatives in the Spanish Basque Country

This case involved a long-term collaboration begun by William Foote Whyte in the late 1970’s with the human resources department of the Mondragón industrial cooperatives in the Spanish Basque Country. I joined this project in

1982 and eventually led teams variously composed of about 40 cooperative members through a 3-year action research project.

Whyte did not go to the cooperatives proposing to do an AR project. He was doing research for a book on the movement because he felt it was important and little known in the U.S. The AR project began when Whyte gave public feedback to the cooperative on his observations about the system. The Director of Human Resources for the system, José Luis González Santos, asked him how he intended to help them solve the problems he identified. Whyte involved me at that point, because I had been working in the Basque Country as a researcher since 1968. With a grant we and José Luis authored, we began an AR process. José Luis entitled the Project “the Industrial Anthropology of the Mondragón Cooperatives.” It became clear later that none of us had a clear idea just what he meant by that.

At the outset the HR group’s sense was that the cooperatives were headed for serious trouble because they had been rapidly recruiting people with no commitment to cooperative ideals. They feared that the new recruits were apathetic about just what made the system successful. I was asked to give them a month-long seminar on industrial anthropology, a topic about which I knew little and they knew less. When we became fully aware of our mutual ignorance, we were forced to re-imagine what we were doing. I suggested that we go back into the history of the cooperatives and develop a series of case studies that demonstrated their claims about the loss of ideological commitment.

After doing this research for some time, it became apparent that the moral of the historical story was not as clear as they had imagined. At that point, I suggested that we had exhausted the knowledge and views of the 20 or so people working together intensively on this. I proposed that they learn how to do interviews, by developing an interview protocol and identifying as diverse a group of stakeholders as possible to interview in order to check their understandings.

We did this over a period of 6 or so months and the results were devastating to the team. Many of the people they interviewed were radically dissatisfied and even angry at the cooperatives. Far from being apathetic, the mem-

bers were both committed to cooperative ideals and quite critical of the way the cooperative administration failed to live up to them.

Yet, the team members, after assimilating this blow, felt that it did not give an adequate picture of what was going on because, despite the feelings expressed, work discipline, low absenteeism, and other signs of a reasonably good working climate existed. Thus they felt the interviews had opened up a space for people to “dump” their emotions but that these emotions did not fully dictate their conduct.

Faced with this, I had to decide in my own mind if they were fooling themselves and trying to avoid confronting the hostility of the members or if they might be right about the bias in the interviews. Doing as I think action researchers must, I decided to trust their view and submit it to further analysis.

At the same time, we had been working by then for about 18 months and José Luis was feeling intense pressure to provide the cooperative members and leaders with feedback about a project that had taken lots of time and resources. To meet this need pragmatically and yet continue the research, I suggested that we could convene a series of focus groups to further explore the issues that had been discussed in the one-on-one interviews but that would also introduce more cooperative members to the kinds of subjects and analyses the team was engaged in.

The focus group results confirmed the cooperative members’ sense that the interviews were somewhat misleading. It was clear that there was dissatisfaction but when people dumped their emotions in the group setting, other members answered them, and they in turn modified their statements to ones that more nearly matched their behavior.

By the end of the focus groups, it was clear that the initial problem they had built the AR project around was not properly defined. The new recruits turned out to be deeply committed to cooperative ideas but the administrative/bureaucratic operation of the cooperatives and most particularly of the human resources group, routinely violated these cooperative principles and ethics. Thus, the AR team members found out that they themselves bore an important part of the blame for the problems they were trying to address. This meant that HR had to revise its own mode of operation fundamentally. They

subsequently spent months working through the changes that needed to be made. In addition, they began to work, independently of my assistance, on internal AR projects, applying what they had learned to problems in the system.

Finally, I urged them to write a book on the experience and to represent the cooperatives more realistically than they had been in the existing literature. This was a difficult choice for them to make but eventually we did co-author a book in Spanish and another in English (Greenwood *et al.* 1990, 1992). While the writing was very demanding for them, in the final meetings we had before the end of the project, they felt that the writing experience had done more than anything to help them learn from their experience.

From the beginning to the end the project changed focus and direction a number of times with a changing group of local actors and a changing agenda. The outcomes could never have been predicted in advance and yet the outcomes made significant substantive contributions to the operation of the HR group in the system. Also, unintentionally, this AR project served as a kind of “school” for cooperative managers with 4 of the team members becoming general managers of a cooperative and another became the general manager of the whole cooperative system.

Over the course of the project a combination of happenstance, ongoing reformulation of the central problems, and the creation of a large and strong AR team was key to the success of the work.

Case 2: Youth development in Lyons, New York

Lyons, New York is one of the many small towns on the shores of the Erie Canal. This canal was once the core transportation system and lifeline for towns from the West of New York State to the Hudson River and New York City. Small manufacturing industries could bring in materials and ship products on the barges and business flourished. When the canal was superseded by the railroads, these towns lost much of their momentum and when the interstate highway system and long-distance trucking took over from the railroads, the towns became true backwaters with high unemployment, low skill jobs, and a dying agricultural economy. Coupled with this is the fact that New York State is one of the most poorly administered states in the U.S. with

the highest tax rate, generally poor services, a deeply declining industrial economy, and no clear strategies to support small businesses and community development.

Cornell University is the “land grant university” of the State of New York, a designation given to one university in each of the 50 states that commits the university to teaching, research, and service for the benefit of the people of that state. Thus, in principle, the fate of communities like Lyons, New York is something Cornell should attend to through outreach in the form of education, research, and extension. Cornell actually has few structured programs for this purpose, relying mainly on an organization called Cornell Cooperative Extension, an extension service with offices in all the counties of the state. These offices are co-funded by Cornell and the county taxpayers and thus they are supposed to serve the county citizens.

This project and my involvement in it did not involve Cornell Cooperative Extension at all. Rather, it began by happenstance. The Housing and Urban Development Authority of the U.S. government had invested some economic development funds in the entire Erie Canal Corridor area to try to revitalize the economies of these areas. They were interested in assessing the impact of the funding and the Ford Foundation was willing to offer a grant to conduct research on this. The original proposers of this project to Ford were a group of sociologists, economists, and planners who had intended to proceed with a fairly conventional positivist impact study. However, someone in the Ford Foundation insisted that, unless the project had an AR dimension, the money would not be granted. Who this was and why they had this view is something we have never been able to find out.

At that point, Frank Barry, a Senior Extension Associate in the College of Human Ecology and a specialist in youth development and I were called in by the already-formed research group and asked if we would participate. It was an awkward situation for the existing research group because they had been ordered to get people like us involved. Frank and I discussed it at length and thought about our various motives.

Frank had received formal training from Merrelyn Emery in search conferencing and had used the approach in a couple of communities. He had met me through a then active network, the Cornell Participatory Action Research

Network, and felt he wanted to learn more about AR from me. On my side, I had done both industrial and community-based AR but in Spain and as a peripheral member of a group in Norway but never in the U.S. The idea of working in the depressed communities surrounding my wealthy, elite university, the possibility of working with someone who had decades of experience in community development through youth programs, and the chance to teach some academic colleagues about AR were all appealing.

The grant had very little money in it and so, to do the project, Frank and I had to donate our time. Our budget would only cover travel, lodging, and meal expenses, some materials, and support for a graduate student who we could also apprentice in AR¹.

The terms we set for our involvement were that we wanted support to conduct two AR projects in two different Canal Corridor communities and to operate as full participants in the research group, attending all the meetings as equal partners. The other researchers agreed and, with everyone having a different agenda, we began.

One of the two projects took place in Lyons because Frank Barry had prior connections there from his 30 years of youth development work in the state. Using his prior connections there to open the door, we just went to Lyons to meet with a coalition of local citizen volunteers who were very concerned about the future of the youth of their town. They had been meeting for about 18 months and had focused their attention on building a youth center to keep the young people in the community safe and occupied. Some tragedies in the community resulting in one youth killing another, problems of drug use, child abuse, a sense that the schools had to improve to enable children to escape to other places where opportunities were greater all created an atmosphere of urgency.

Now I need to be clear that all of this was new to me. I had never really seen the Canal Corridor economic backwater before nor had I ever considered working on youth issues in any particular way. So, in this case, my own motives were to be helpful but mainly I wanted to learn about the realities of

¹ This student, Kai Schafft, went on to write an excellent article on the project and to become a skilled AR facilitator (Schafft/Greenwood 2003).

these communities and to learn from the vast experience of Frank Barry. This latter point deserves even more emphasis because, in all my AR experiences, I have learned from and enjoyed my relations with my colleagues every bit as much as I have learned from the local stakeholders. Learning in AR processes flows in all directions. For my part, I emphasized what I knew about AR strategies and approaches and put my shoulder to the wheel wherever it seemed to be needed.

The Lyons coalition had begun very well with large attendance at meetings and much enthusiasm but the numbers and enthusiasm had dwindled. We began by walking around the town, learning about the history of the Canal economy, and getting numbers on current conditions. We then met with the coalition members that included the mayor, the school superintendent, social services people, teachers, and people from the Chamber of Commerce. We discussed the problems with them for a couple of meetings and then asked them who else should be included in the discussion.

As a matter of both principle and of our daily observations, we wanted to press them to rethink the question of inclusion. In this poor and racially mixed community, we did not see any working class or African American people in the meetings. The local participants responded by broadening the group that met and added senior members of the African American community. There were still no working class people, none of the migrant farm workers present in the area, and no youth present.

At this point, it turned out that Frank Barry's expertise in youth development was crucial and it shows how long experience and professional expertise has a role in AR projects. The Lyons coalition wanted to build a youth center, a building to house safe youth programs. Frank used his experience to question this idea, something I could not have done. He pointed out that, in his experience, many places focused on creating buildings for youth, used their energy and resources for it, and but the center rarely served its purpose.

I was very curious how this would play out because many AR practitioners have the impression that, because we respect local knowledge, outside experts cannot contradict local understandings. The Lyons coalition members were taken aback by this and initially confused but it turned out to be a pivotal intervention in the project. By questioning this core premise, Frank

caused them to articulate more clearly what the problem really was and why they thought the building would be a solution. Discussing that problem more openly is what gave the project renewed momentum.

As it turned out, the larger problem was general economic and community development. Many parents had to commute long distances to work, leaving their children alone in the mornings and afternoons after school. There were few good work opportunities for young people starting out and there was a general sense of malaise clearly underlined by the number of closed storefronts along the streets.

To deal with such a broad set of problems, we then recommended a search conference on the future of Lyons. The group what was meeting to discuss the project (which had broadened out from the initial coalition members) eventually formulated the search question as follows: "How can you and I make Lyons a place we are proud to live in." This was a very different take on the issues from the problem they had posed to us. It was no longer about a youth center but about the life of the community itself. It was about relationships among the generations, social classes, and races.

I found this change of focus fascinating in so many ways because it involved a real "democratic dialogue" between an expert action researcher and youth development professional and a group of knowledgeable and committed local citizens who together changed their focus to something considerably more ambitious.

The surprises did not end there. The search conference was exciting because the shared history inspired nearly everyone to revalue their community and its many interesting features. The ideal future was one in which the youth did not have to flee to get good jobs and in which the adults could find work locally rather than commuting long distances in bad weather every day. Parents found out that their children were not as set on leaving the town as they had imagined in their worries about a lonely old age spent in a dying community.

But there was more going on. Over the course of development of the project, it had become clear to us that there was a group in the community that saw itself as the movers and shakers of Lyons and they were middle class, white adults. The African Americans and the youth were largely excluded

from this group. Through the processes of peer referencing and our stress on inclusion, we managed to have both youth and African Americans represented at the search.

During the search, the youth made significant contributions and demonstrated how important their inclusion was to any decisions to be made about them. But even more striking, a conflict broke out about the bad race relations in the community right in the middle of the search. A particularly courageous and eloquent African American woman pushed the issue forward against a “conspiracy of silence”. What then transpired was one of the most interesting events in my career.

The ensuing conversation revealed that the history of Lyons was intimately connected to African Americans since the U.S. Civil War (1861-1865). Many escaped slaves from the Confederacy passed through Lyons on the famous “underground railroad” and some houses in the community still have the hidden dugout rooms where they were kept safe. Some of these people settled in Lyons.

This meant that the African Americans were not newcomers to Lyons and associated with its economic decline, as some of the “movers and shakers” thought. Many of them had longer histories in the community than did the whites. One result of this new knowledge was an action team that hoped to create a chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in Lyons, an organization key to the whole civil rights movement in the United States. Thus, the participants’ sense of who the “we” in the community was changed quite significantly because of the search conference.

Once this frank discussion took place, the search proceeded along the usual path of creation of action teams and action planning. There were business development projects, school enrichment projects, new youth program, and even the creation of a storefront community liaison office. The projects continued for a couple of years and many actions were taken. We had a reunion a year later to hear about their work, successes, and failures.

Looking back on it, the project began in an accidental way, developed as a pilot and pedagogical activity for some Cornell faculty built on prior work by one of the participants, began with a youth focus but ended up being about community building and collective survival in a generationally and

racially divided community. The motives of all the participants, including my own motives, were quite diverse and even divergent. The AR processes of inclusive planning, shared history, and searching, however, brought the elements of the project together and enabled the community to set both new goals and achieve a few of the objectives that had motivated them to create the coalition to begin with. I learned about U.S. communities and youth development, I learned about challenging local knowledge in constructive ways. Frank learned more about AR strategies from me, a very good graduate student got an intensive course in AR and community development, the other members of the research team learned a good deal about AR and how it differs from conventional social science strategies. The Lyons' community residents embarked on a series of community development activities and gained a broader sense of community than they had before.

The former graduate student and now Ph.D., Kai Schafft, who worked with Frank Barry and me on this case continued to work in the area afterwards as a study of the impact of poverty, community change and housing insecurity on schools mainly through the constant mobility of people in search of housing and work. Partly as a result of this work, 3 school districts in the area got a large federal grant to analyze what to do about this set of problems and how to deal with student mobility which is apparently a strong predictor of poor academic outcomes.

Schafft sees the project as a continuation of the relationships we created in the initial search conference work and finds that the analysis of the history and probable future still holds up. However, the overall welfare of the community has not improved. Much more of the downtown is closed down and most economic indicators are worse. Schafft attributes this, not to the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the action research process, but to the devastation that post-industrial global capitalism is wreaking on such communities, effectively erasing the results of even sustained local initiatives. For a brief write-up of Schafft's work, see Schafft (2006).

Closing reflections – Action research is always a challenge

Pragmatic action research centers on the creation of co-generative arenas for learning and on gathering or creating the expertise needed to take on the issues identified by the local stakeholders. The projects described above developed quite differently and local circumstances and diverse motivations dictated a great deal of what happened in the projects. Yet there are some overall similarities. Both expert knowledge (industrial and labor relations, socio-cultural anthropology, human development, community and economic development, and the creation and facilitation of arenas for learning) and local knowledge (life experience, cost-benefit analysis, political involvements, business, social services, education, and community coalition building) were linked in a co-generative approach. While one of the projects used a search conference as a pivotal technique, the other did not. But in both cases, the aims were similar: help the local stakeholders clarify their goals and organize themselves in such a way that these goals could be accomplished for the benefit of a broad cross-section of the stakeholder group. This is why I insist that AR is not a method or a recipe but a complex strategy for orchestrating processes of democratizing social reform.

The trouble with programmatic descriptions of AR is that they sound very sanitary, rational, and unemotional, but that is not my experience. From the outset, my involvement in AR projects has resulted in some of the strongest and deepest friendships and most intense collaborations I have experienced in a 4 decade career. In retrospect too, one of the features of AR that is addictive is the excitement of working so intensely with large groups who are deeply committed to resolving the problems they are dealing with.

I know that my abilities and training as a social research are much more severely tested in this kind of work too. I have had to learn a great deal about social science that I did not know in order to support local processes and I have had to take on problems that were so large and intractable that I would never have dared take them on alone. Of course, this is precisely the kind of experience that makes conventional social scientists flee. A recent book

documents the “flight from reality” in the human sciences in no uncertain terms (Shapiro, 2005).

Talking about democratic dialogue in co-generative learning arenas sounds so smooth and rational but AR is anything but that. Pragmatic action research is always an adventure. In this way, I feel I have come to understand the sense of excitement that democratic deliberation and action awakened in John Dewey and Jürgen Habermas. Democracy is messy, noisy, demanding, and exciting. Pragmatic action research is anything but dull but we often write about it as if it were.

Øyvind Pålshaugen, in a very interesting article (Pålshaugen, in press) , has called attention to our overwhelming tendency either to render our accounts ethnographically and make few explicit contributions to organizational change theory or to theorize at such a distance from the context and actions that the necessary connection and interaction between theory and practice is broken down. We either seem to focus on ourselves and collaborators in an almost “auto-ethnographic” way or we theorize with abandon. Since the centerpiece of AR must be the ongoing dialogue between theory and practice, we need to attend to both sides of the picture and do so in tandem. Action researchers, unfortunately, are no better at this than are conventional researchers but the consequences for us are more debilitating. For this reason, I have made the case for pragmatic action research as a structured set of strategies and practices, given a narrative of two ethnographic cases, and briefly described the world of my own motives and sentiments as I engage in this work to explain why it is compelling to me personally. AR is not a flight from reality; it is a commitment to living in the world as it is in hopes of helping to make it somewhat better in the future.

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About the author

Davydd J. Greenwood is the Goldwin Smith Professor of Anthropology and Director of the Institute for European Studies at Cornell University where he has served as a faculty member since 1970. His current work focuses on the impact of corporatization on higher education with a particular emphasis on the social sciences.

Author's address

Davydd J. Greenwood
Director, Institute for European Studies
120 Uris Hall
Cornell University
Ithaca, NY 14853
E-mail: djg@cornell.edu