

## “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.