

Articulating inherent values of action research for newcomers coming from the field of territorial development

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Abstract This paper discusses the inherent values of action research for newcomers coming from the field of territorial development. The discussion is framed around three dimensions: 1) inquiring about problematic situations in real-time; 2) contextual-temporal qualities of the process; and 3) reflecting-acting on what we have reasons to value being and doing as researchers, participants, facilitative actors, and citizens. The conceptualisation builds on theoretical influences, most notably the writings of John Dewey and action research for territorial development, and my own practice. Two cases are discussed. One is about a Knowledge Transfer Partnership in Scotland, and the other is with regards to on-going work in the wine-producing territory of British Columbia, Canada.

Keywords: action research, territorial development, inherent values, Dewey

Una articulación de los valores inherentes de la investigación acción para quienes se aproximan a ella por primera vez desde el desarrollo territorial

Resumen Este artículo debate los valores inherentes de la investigación acción para aquellas personas que se aproximan a esta forma de investigación por primera vez y desde el campo del desarrollo territorial. La discusión se plantea en torno a tres dimensiones: 1) la investigación realizada sobre situaciones problemáticas en tiempo real; 2) las cualidades contextuales-temporales del proceso y 3) la reflexión-acción sobre las razones para valorar ciertos modos de ser y de hacer de las personas investigadoras, participantes, actores facilitadores y la ciudadanía. La conceptualización está basada, además de en mi propia experiencia, en una serie de influencias teóricas, entre las que destacan John Dewey y la investigación acción para el desarrollo territorial. Se discuten, además, dos casos. Uno vinculado a la entidad denominada Knowledge Transfer Partnership en Escocia, y el otro conectado al trabajo en curso en el territorio productor de vino en la Columbia Británica, Canadá.

Palabras claves: Investigación acción, desarrollo territorial, valores inherentes, Dewey

1. Introduction

Amidst complex cultural, economic, environmental, social, and political dynamics, organisations and territories face increasing challenges, not least related to concerns like climate change, and inequalities. Universities as territorial actors with local and global knowledge capabilities are called upon to help address those challenges (Benneworth, 2013; Geschwind, Kekäle, Pinheiro, & Sorensen, 2019). This expectation of universities to meet societal needs is

not new. What has become clearer is that more collaborative and proactive approaches to research are needed.

The importance of knowledge co-creation and change through “action, co-ordination and collaboration across knowledge domains, sectors and types of organisations” is highlighted in policy and managerial circles (Geschwind et al., 2019, p.13). In responding to policy and societal demand, universities are directing more attention to the so-called third mission of societal engagement (Laredo, 2007; Uyarra, 2010; Karlsen & Larrea 2019). An implication is that university researchers are having to reimagine and reframe how they think about and approach research. To avoid a divisive approach to research, teaching and societal engagement, a balancing act of pursuing research that matters to society, in a way that is conducive to both good (and better) research, and practical outcomes, is desirable.

For many researchers, especially those who have been trained in traditional approaches, it may not be straightforward to change how they conduct research. Action research characterised by an integrative approach to action, research and participation in real-time offers meaningful perspectives in that regard. With that in mind, the paper explores the question: what are inherent values of action research that may appeal to those researchers who need to break away from hegemonic practices, and do research differently? By ‘inherent values’, I refer to what is valuable in and of the inquiry process itself. Inherent values are not external to the inquiry; they are at its core and define it.

Practical insights about the inherent values of action research are offered through two case presentations. One case is about a project between a university and an arts centre in Scotland, and the other concerns on-going work of a university in a wine-producing territory in Canada. Recognising that it is not possible to cover all the valuable aspects of action research in this paper, the discussion is framed around three dimensions: 1) inquiring about problematic situations in real-time; 2) contextual-temporal qualities of the process; and 3) reflecting, and acting on what people have reasons to value being and doing as researchers, participants, facilitative actors, and citizens. The framework is a result of connecting theoretical influences with my practice in the cases in the field of territorial development.

The paper is pertinent to newcomers to action research coming from the field of territorial development, where there are pressures to engage in third mission activities and deliver productive outcomes on various fronts (Aranguren, M. J., Guibert, J. M., Valdaliso, J. M., & Wilson, 2016). For example, by producing knowledge that is relevant to society and advances academic debates, *and* demonstrates the impact generated through those processes through academic reflection, writing and publications (Aranguren, Canto-Farachala & Wilson, 2021). The discussion may also resonate with researchers from other fields experiencing similar trends.

The paper is organised as follows. First, the rationale for the paper, its main focus and objective, and the interplay between first-person and second-person inquiry are articulated. Thereafter, concepts used in the case discussions, and which inform the framing of inherent values, are introduced. The two cases are subsequently introduced. Drawing on theoretical concepts and my learning from the cases, I develop the arguments about the three valuable dimensions to action research. The cases are discussed before concluding with final reflections.