

Interview Davydd Greenwood

The Mid-career Making of an Action Researcher

Davydd J. Greenwood

Danilo and Miren:

Thank you, Davydd, for this interview for the readers of *International Journal of Action Research*. We are pleased to have your insights in this special issue that you have edited together with colleagues from Norway and the Basque Country in Spain. We think that this can provide the reader with a perspective on your experience and trajectory that will help better understand the contents presented through the different articles.

Let's start giving the reader a perspective on your trajectory. Why and how did you come to AR?

Davydd:

Narrating history backwards tends to rationalize that history, making it more coherent than it was. With that caveat, I will dive in.

I did not set out to become an action researcher. Born in Colorado in the middle of World War II, the grandchild of immigrants from four countries and the child of a psychiatrist and a psychiatric nurse, I grew up in Topeka, Kansas, a city almost divided into thirds: a White third, an African American third, and a Latino (in this case, Mexican) third. The latter two were clearly on the lower end of the socio-economic ladder. The reason for this was that, in first half of the 20th century, United States railroads were still important. Topeka, Kansas, the terminus of the "Santa Fe Trail" had the central offices and shops of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, one of the largest in the country. Most African Americans came to Topeka during World War I to work on the railroad and replace the "Whites" who had gone to war. In World War II, African Americans also went to war and so Mexicans immigrated to Topeka to take the railroad jobs. The city was segregated racially until 1954. I was in grade school when the Supreme Court decision "Brown vs the School Board of Topeka, Kansas" made segregated schools illegal. I remember the first African American children coming into my grade school for the first time.

One peculiarity of Topeka was that, in a town of 100,000 people, it had only one huge urban high school, built during the Depression. As a result, all the high school students in Topeka were there. Though the race-ethnic groups kept to themselves to a degree and there was tracking of students into vocational and higher education, we all met in the marching band, the band, the orchestra, the pep band, and on sports teams and events. One of the local Mexican immigrants became my Spanish language teacher in high school. He was charismatic, humble, and fascinating to me and I became a dedicated learner of Spanish because of my curiosity about him. Growing out of this, my family arranged an exchange with a middle-class family in Mexico City and my international life began.

I mention these experiences because there never was a time that I could be unaware of cultural differences, racism, and class, something I discovered later that many "White" Americans were and are oblivious to. And because I had good experiences with my musical

and sports friends from other groups and my parents supported these relationships, I developed an enduring curiosity about people and cultures different from mine.

When I went to college, I wanted to continue in Spanish and became a Spanish language and literature major, later double majoring in Anthropology and adding Latin American Studies. This took place in a 1200 student liberal arts college in the middle of the Iowa corn and wheatfields, Grinnell College. Grinnell was in its fanatical liberal arts phase, teaching us to respect knowledge from all fields and encouraging us to understand that there was an infinite amount to know and learn. I learned that you can never know enough. They even gave us a third-year liberal arts examination on universal knowledge, together with bibliographies running to thousands of pages. I think the aim was to show us how much more there was to learn than we already knew. Grinnell was also where I met my wife of 57 years, a Spaniard, in a Spanish literature class we took together. Our history together initially was only possible because of those Spanish classes back in Topeka and learning to seek out and learn from cultural differences.

Among the many things the Grinnell experience did for me, it affected my understanding of the importance of learning how to learn and how necessary it is to disregard disciplinary boundaries and rules in search of understanding. By comparison, graduate school in Anthropology, despite some wonderful mentors who took an interest in me, was a disappointingly narrow business and served as my first introduction to the Tayloristic world of academic life.

As an anthropologist and fortunately with the support of my mentors, I decided to do my dissertation research in Spain. In the 1960's, this was generally off limits to anthropology because anthropology had become understood as the social study of people of color outside of the United States, Canada, and Europe. Indeed, Europe was not designated an acceptable research area in professional anthropology in the US until the 1990's. Since I was a good student, my mentors left me alone, but I then had to figure out how to work in Spain. My dissertation advisor was an expert on Japan. At that time there was very little anthropology written about Spain. With a tip from one of my professors, I finally found the books on the Basque Country of the brilliant Spanish anthropologist, linguist, and historian, Julio Caro Baroja. Based on reading them, I wrote a proposal to the National Institute of Mental Health and was funded for 3 years of dissertation research and writing. The inconvenience was that I knew next to nothing about Spanish history, ethnography, or even geography. On arrival in the Basque Country, I went to meet Julio Caro Baroja. Generously, he took me on as an informal student and became a colleague and lifelong friend. His immense knowledge and the incredible library at his home in Navarre showed me again how much there was to learn, how little I knew, and the incalculable value of good mentoring.

I completed a dissertation on the political economic evolution of Basque family farming under the impact of industrialization and tourism and the massive rural exodus that was visible in the late 1960 s. While we were there, the ETA movement broke out and I became a witness to and student of ethnic violence and identity politics in the heart of a fascist regime, a theme that has also played a major role in my own intellectual career.

To foreshorten this history, I then got a professorship in Anthropology at Cornell University where I taught from 1970 to 2014. In that context, I found myself quickly unhappy with the restrictive view of anthropology as the study of the "other". I tried hard to develop an integrated biological-archeological-linguistic-cultural introductory course for anthropology only to meet with resistance from my anthropology colleagues. I had more in common with