Book review

Participatory action learning and action research: Theory, practice and process by Lesley Wood

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The knowledge shared in this publication pertains to questions often asked by researchers, supervisors, and students. The questions relate to what it means to employ participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) when conducting research, and how research questions should be constructed to ensure the participation of all group members. These questions also have a bearing on how to guarantee adherence to ethical considerations while simultaneously striving to develop a trusting relationship with participants.

In aiming to answer the said questions, Lesley Wood offers a concise yet analytical interpretation of the transformative, collaborative, and democratic PALAR research approach. In her foreword, Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt, a pioneer in the field of action research, applauds the significant contribution of this first comprehensive volume to a decidedly non-conventional research approach (pp. x–xi). She encourages readers to explore beyond their preferred research genres in order to learn and discover lessons, understandings, and insights on PALAR with the author. This book, however, offers more than the mere understanding of PALAR as a methodology. It comprises an authentic and critical reflection from the perspective of a researcher in Africa, showing readers how PALAR is also a philosophy, a theory of learning, and a facilitation tool for a much-needed transformative research approach. Readers are taken on a professional PALAR journey in which Wood's deep knowledge, understanding, and passion in serving communities are portrayed.

There is a growing interest among academics, stakeholders, and community members in the different forms of participatory research. This book draws on the idea of building bridges between the academic and the real-life worlds by arguing for the need of using PALAR, not only in our lifetime, but also in the future. It explains why participatory research is useful and relevant in contexts where a group of people have a desire to improve on present practices by means of a shared responsibility. The purpose of the book is twofold: to develop the capacity for community engagement, and to allow readers to deliberate and reflect on their own research and on their involvement in the research process. After the introductory chapter, the book is divided into three clusters, namely, the theoretical foundations of PALAR, the practice and process of PALAR, and reflecting on PALAR. The two chapters in the first cluster specify the theoretical foundations of participatory research by focusing on the philosophies and

theoretical frameworks suited to the implementation of PALAR. The author outlines how these philosophies and theories provide standards of judgment in terms of which the practice of PALAR may be assessed. While she convinces the reader of the need for this collaborative and democratic research approach, the author also draws our attention to the fact that action research is not always conducted from an emancipatory and transformative paradigm. An important warning for researchers who intend to use PALAR is clearly articulated in this chapter: the author reminds researchers that their personal philosophical positions should be thoroughly scrutinised to guarantee alignment with the PALAR methodology.

In the cluster regarding the practice and process of PALAR, the author uses five chapters to review the following five features: forming the core action-learning group, ethical considerations, the research design, rigour and integrity, and writing for publication. The first of these chapters provides examples of how to form the heart of the PALAR process when involving participants in collaboratively addressing challenging and complex real-life issues. Fostering core action-learning groups often gives rise to numerous challenges, which include facilitation glitches, power issues, diversity, and language and personality differences or domination. Action researchers are well aware of these challenges in group facilitation and, in this chapter, the author shares valuable thoughts and practical advice on communication and relationship skills (the 7Cs and 3Rs) that readers can employ as means to monitor and evaluate discussions during group facilitation (see p. 77). In the next chapter, the author demonstrates the need for working in partnership with participants by guiding readers on the ethical requirements of participatory research. Critical elements such as respect for other individuals, justice, and beneficence are evident from the example of an ethics agreement from a past community project (see p. 97). In the third chapter of this cluster, a blueprint for taking action by utilising PALAR is expounded. Here, the author provides suggestions and practical guidelines for using suitable, creative, and innovative methods such as visual or arts-based methods when researchers generate or analyse data. The rigorous nature of PALAR is discussed in the penultimate chapter of this cluster. PALAR researchers are shown working closely with people over a period of time and practical, real-life examples from various studies are provided. The cluster ends with Chapter 8, in which the course of action when writing for publications is outlined. Examples from previously completed projects are sure to help the reader to learn about reporting on findings. Different approaches regarding the writing and publishing of findings from PALAR projects, such as theses, articles, book chapters, or research reports, are included in the discussion.

The final cluster of two chapters comprises a critical reflection on the PALAR process. In the first chapter, the author discusses the challenges of using PALAR in projects and, moreover, aims to stimulate interest and motivate readers despite the identified challenges. The reader is reminded of obstacles when conducting participatory, democratic, and transformative research and ideas are offered on how to overcome the challenges by drawing on the actual experiences of researchers involved in PALAR projects. True to the critically reflective nature of participatory research, the last chapter concludes with the author's reflections on her own learning and research journey during the process of writing the book. Evidence of the educative value of PALAR for people who are not likely to access higher education can be seen on the last page of the book in which a participant applauds participatory research for having provided them with an opportunity for personal growth and empowerment (see p. 198).

A decided strength of this book is that it suggests feasible ways of engaging in research with communities for social and educational improvement. Of particular value, is the inclusion of practical, real-life examples of projects and of studies drawing on experiences of the author, other researchers, and postgraduate students. The scholarly contributions in the three clusters demonstrate that research can serve the learning and developmental needs not only of researchers but also of

community members. An important message that runs through the book is that researchers should recognise all participants in their projects as coresearchers, and cocreators of knowledge.

Participatory Action Learning and Action Research: Theory, Practice and Process contributes to creating knowledge about community-based research and will be of interest to both emerging and experienced researchers. The book succeeds in showing readers feasible ways of bringing about change at the individual, professional, organisational, or communal level. It is clear that the author endorses the idea of community engagement for social change by promoting the notion of doing "research *with*, rather than *on* people" (Wood & Zuber-Skerrit, 2013, p. 2).

List of references

Wood, L., & Zuber-Skerritt, O. (2013). PALAR as a methodology for community engagement by faculties of education. *South African Journal of Education, 33*(4), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.15700/201412171322