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The changing landscape of arts and action research

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Watching the evening come across Cadair Idris, a spectacular mountain in north-west Wales, you can see the landscape change moment by moment as the shadows of the clouds shift across the slope and the sky darkens. The view is at once constantly changing and eternal – the bones of the mountain, the essential truth of the landscape, remain (see Figure 1).

Action research has changed the landscape of social science research by dramatically shifting our perspective on the process of knowledge generation, highlighting aspects of experience that had been in shadow, helping us to appreciate the drama and beauty of lives in our communities, and bringing greater clarity to our understanding of important issues. And now arts-based action research is changing our perspective once again, as evidenced by the six articles included in this special issue.

We were delighted with the response to our call for papers for this project and are sorry not to be able to include more of the many examples of exciting and innovative work being done to integrate the arts in conducting and communicating action research projects around the world. That said, we feel that the work included here provides a wonderful introduction to the breadth of arts-based action research practices now being carried out.

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Figure 1. Cadair Idris, Gwynedd, Wales.

The six papers we have selected challenge us to re-examine our concepts, refine our research skills, and expand our theoretical frameworks. This special issue encompasses examples from the slums of Buenos Aires and the streets of Victoria, British Columbia, city centers in Switzerland and Austria, towns all around Denmark, and educative spaces across the United Kingdom. The research draws on theater, video-filming, quilting, mural-making, bio-graffiti, visual journaling, clowning, installations, and even art forms that we cannot specifically name. The authors work with and challenge theories as diverse as Spivak's (1988) work on subalternization, the Scandinavian action research tradition, known as the critical utopian action research (Nielsen, Nielsen, & Olsen, 2003), Romano's (2000, 2001, 2004) advocacy for multi-genre forms which reflect the kaleidoscopic, multi-faceted way in which we know things, and aesthetic thinking informed by Rancière (2004).

Darlene Clover, whose work with homeless women in Victoria, Canada is described here, observes that 'at the heart of arts-based research lies a fundamental belief that creative expression is as vital as rational thought'. Darlene Clover's work also illustrates the idea that there are multiple perspectives on any situation and if we are to deepen our understanding of pressing social concerns, we must strive to see the world through the eyes of those whose lives are most profoundly affected. The arts, and in Darlene Clover's case this includes everything from

decoupage to masks to a marionette, provide the means for these different points of view to be explored and expressed by women whose experiences remain largely unrepresented, even in discussions about the problem of homelessness.

The landscape of homelessness Darlene Clover presents is one unfamiliar to most of us, as is the experience of the long-term unemployed that Ditte Tofteng and Mia Husted presented to audiences in Denmark with the help of actors using scripts that they created from research interviews. Their work with the unemployed, the actors, and the audiences illustrates powerfully how art can allow us to see the unseen, to reveal aspects of a landscape in new and sometimes uncomfortable ways. They reflect that the strong responses of the audience to the portrayals of the reality of the unemployed 'could also be an indication of the difficulty in communicating life, suffering, and dreams of the marginalized world'. The authors explain that including arts like theater in action research is powerful because it 'uses the senses and emotions and therefore can bring up themes that are not normally on the agenda'.

Whereas Ditte Tofteng and Mia Husted discuss the engagement of emotions with the theatre to address uncomfortable realities in society, Charlotte Tulinus and Bibi Hølge-Hazelton focus on conveying the emotional weight of experiences in research processes. Their article 'When the spiral of action research collapses: Transforming communication monologues into collective research dialogues through the arts' dares to reveal problems we encounter as researchers but only very rarely share publicly. Their project ended with discord and a breakdown in communication between the researchers and their community participants. The authors draw on music, images of both figurative and abstract sculpture, and fairy tale narratives and images, as well as on images of actual landscapes in creating an alternative approach to presenting the results of a research project to a group of peers. They also conceive of the dialogue resulting from this disclosure as an opportunity to deepen their understanding of the dynamics they faced during the process. In doing so, they make it possible to return to the data from the project with renewed interest and to approach future projects with greater understanding as well as new strategies for responding to potential problems.

We believe that these articles not only reveal parts of the landscape that tend to be overlooked (such as the views of the homeless and unemployed) or even consciously hidden from view (such as failures in our work processes), they also change the landscape by planting seeds and removing barriers. For example, Ada Freytes Frey and Cecilia Cross have removed from the landscape the paralyzing assumption that subalterns cannot speak because they lack the locus of enunciation (Spivak, 1988). The authors recount how they discovered that 'art can play a fundamental role to overcome the silence produced by subalternization' in their work with poor young people in Greater Buenos Aires. Significantly, the discovery was unplanned; it emerged when the authors realized during the action research that they had to expand the focus of the project from studying the educational experiences of young people to examining the features of their realities which prevent youth from enjoying their educational rights.

In her article, 'Uncharted territory: Imagining a stronger relationship between the arts and action research', Chris Seeley addresses directly the issue of shaping and navigating an evolving landscape: the intersection between the arts and action research. Her challenge to action research is how to deepen and expand our epistemological foundations and practices, so that action researchers increasingly develop skill and confidence in arts-informed inquiry as 'a fundamental and normal way of receiving, dwelling in and making sense of being part of the world'. Thus, Seeley's article is about a merging of worlds, where, in her own words, 'presentational knowing with a sense of purpose meets intentional inquiry with a sense of the importance of aesthetic engagement'.

In looking over the landscape of art and action research, the question arises as to the hierarchical relationship between these two forms of practice. Do action researchers assume the 'high ground', regarding art instrumentally, as a source of techniques for enhancing their practice? In their article, 'The ontological politics of artistic interventions: Implications for performing action research', Chris Steyaert and Timon Beyes warn against this assumption and argue that art practices can be political-aesthetic interventions in their own right that meet action research on equal ground. They describe two fascinating examples of neo-avant-garde art practices that intervened directly in and literally reshaped urban landscapes in ways which were liberating, enlightening, and disturbing. Their concept of 'performance action research' shows how art can be used to 'interfere with how the social is assembled and to provoke new constellations of what is visible and sayable'.

All these articles demonstrate that negotiating a changing landscape challenges us to see the world from a new perspective. Nevertheless, we still expect researchers to render these activities into written form and to adopt a particular rhetorical stance in order to be taken as serious scholars. One of the challenges we faced in deciding which manuscripts to include in this special issue revolved around questions of quality: what does quality in arts-based action research look like? Do the quality criteria established for the journal need to be fundamentally reconsidered in assessing the potential contribution of this kind of work? Although we did not arrive at definitive answers to these questions, we tried to hold lightly onto the standard criteria and select the articles that most intrigued us.

In preparing the special issue, we tried to position ourselves as companions to the authors on their journeys from initial draft to publication. In doing so, we encountered many of the uncertainties and excitements of working with the arts. The precise route and destination could not be known in advance. At times the journeys with authors through multiple drafts were like leaving land to row across a lake shrouded in fog like Lake Constance that Ariane could see from her office window while working on this special issue (see Figure 2). Together with the authors, we looked out for buoys to guide us, wondering how far the other shore might yet be and what we might yet discover.

We felt our way forward with the authors draft after draft, asking questions and probing where we sensed there was more to reveal about a project. We were



Figure 2. Fog on Lake Constance.

enriched by these conversations, learning from the authors' responses, and then experiencing the joy of seeing the fog lift to reveal a lake dotted with other sailboats (see Figure 3). We were excited, too, by the aspirations the authors share with their future readers about challenges yet to come, such as how to extend the reach of their work to other groups in society and how to improve the ability of researchers to communicate their ideas effectively. It is our hope that subtle differences we have enacted in the review and editing process have expanded the ecology of possibilities which both authors and editors are now able to contemplate when considering the form and scope of the academic writing and reviewing in which we become involved.

A similar expansion of possibility has occurred in our collaboration as an editorial team. Working together as team we have felt inspired, energized, and mutually supported throughout a creative process of co-construction in which we had little prior sense of where we were heading, while at the same time experimenting with the kinds of qualities that might get us there. Our way of being and working together has combined a great deal of mutual respect with a strong responsiveness to one another. We were able to be expansive and gentle with one another in the range of issues and details which captured our attention, in the open-minded ways in which we approached questions and challenges, and in the time and space which



Figure 3. Lake Constance, fog lifted.

we gave ourselves to mold our responses. As a consequence, we felt that we could give generously of ourselves and of our time to this special issue and to one another.

Revisiting the metaphor of shifting landscapes, we wonder whether our reflections on the review and editing process reflect not so much a shift in landscape as a shift in focus: a relaxing of the eyes away from the destination (the finished special issue) towards a fuller, more present appreciation of the beauty and possibility inherent within the relational dance of co-construction in which we became involved, both as co-editors and as reviewers supporting authors as they crafted their articles. Something of this relatively small-scale appreciation of qualitative difference and beauty is captured in the photograph of the campion wildflowers growing amidst the grasses on the cliff-face of a coastal path in the southwest of England (see Figure 4).

The photo of the alliums and the peony (see Figure 5) portrays something of the gentleness and loving care with which gardeners tend their plots of earth, and the resulting beauty of the transformed landscape, which inevitably embodies both the cultivated and wild, the sculpted and unpredictable. So too have our authors nurtured their articles, and so too have we sought to assist them in the process, and so too are the finished products alive with their own unforeseen richness and beauty.



Figure 4. Wild campion, southwest England.



Figure 5. Alliums and peony.

Thus, throughout the writing and editorial processes which engendered this special issue, we might argue that we – both authors and editors – have been fortunate enough to participate in what Gregory Bateson advocates as a relaxing of human arrogance ‘in favor of a creative experience in which. . . conscious mind plays only a small part’ (Bateson, 2000, p. 444). Indeed, it is this suspension of conscious purpose, and the possibilities it awakens, that Bateson (2000) identifies as one of the great riches of aesthetic experience and of the creativity and perception of art.

So, what are the ‘bones of the mountain’ we alluded to in the introduction to this editorial essay? We cannot define them here completely; there is a lot of exploration yet to be done. From our work on this special issue we would stress the willingness to reveal and give voice to the hopes and fears of groups who are not heard in society, putting their issues on the map, and also the courage of researchers to address their feelings and failures as much as their findings in the course of their work. We are confident that learning how to work with the arts can help in this process. As Ditte Tofteng and Mia Husted point out, our responsibility as action researchers is twofold: to reveal what is hidden and to help envisage what could be. They conclude from their experience that ‘bringing artistic practice into action research has to do with the ability to retain and produce the productive tension between criticism and social imagination’.

Chris Seeley foregrounds the potential of arts-based action research to contribute specifically to work which responds to the ecological challenges and crises facing us in current times. ‘That which we call “art”’, she concludes, ‘is one way we can break away from the destructive norms of the Industrial Growth Society, and that which we call “action research” is the research attitude needed for a more sustainable future’. We believe we speak on behalf of all of the authors in this Special Issue in expressing an aspiration that arts-based action research, in the various forms and shapes exemplified within this special issue and beyond, contribute to the ongoing development of modes of mutual learning driven by curiosity and joy and underpinned by respect for the infinite ways in which the arts allow us to create and appreciate the changing landscapes before us.

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Should you have comments/reactions you wish to share, please bring them to the interactive portion of our website: <http://arj.sagepub.com>.

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