

Book Review

Professional Learning in Higher Education and Communities: towards a new vision of action research: Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt, Margaret Fletcher and Judith Kearney (2015). To be published by Palgrave-Macmillan, UK, around February 2015.

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This new book on Action Research for professional learning pushes the boundaries of models and applications of Action Research in a variety of contexts and countries. The writers advance a model of 'Participatory Action Learning and Action Research' (PALAR), which encourages readers to work towards challenging social injustices and aim for environmental sustainability. They dedicate the book to the memory of Nelson Mandela, whose quotations illustrate each chapter. The book includes a foreword by South African Professor Jonathan Jansen who mentions the gritty realism of the authors' work in disadvantaged communities against, '... the anaemic tradition of distance scholarship removed from the lives of actors in the drama of life'.

What I particularly like about this book is the clarity and honesty with which the authors explain (a) the different, and in some cases less well-known, theories on which their work rests; (b) their wrestling with each other's challenges and comments to jointly develop the PALAR model; and (c) the way in which this book models what it is promoting. While I was familiar with many of the theories on which they draw – and had a doctoral supervisor myself who proclaimed herself unabashedly as "theoretically promiscuous" – some were new to me, such as neuroscience, hope theory, negative dialectics and complexity theory. While the authors don't go into these in depth, they provide sufficient information for

readers to see how these theories - along with Living Educational Theory, Grounded Theory, Critical Theory, Experiential Learning Theory and Phenomenology - underpin the work they present in the book. As an example, the neuroscientific emphasis on emotion in learning is later illustrated by the authors' own struggles to accept and grow from each other's feedback on successive iterations of their work.

The book, after laying out the theories on which the work is posited, presents chapters on professional learning (rather than development), critical reflection and action research. These chapters form Part One of the book. Part Two explains the case studies carried out in South Africa, six African countries, and with a Samoan community group in Australia, using a Leadership Development Model that is clearly articulated in a way to enable others to replicate the work if they wish. As is appropriate, the methods and tools used in these projects were developed with the participants. It is in these chapters that the meta-level concepts of the book really strike the reader, as the authors reflect on their work, reflect on their reflections and grow their methods, and then reflect on these in an exceptionally honest and self-critical way. A feature of these chapters – indeed of the entire book – is the use of helpful diagrams to present the thinking and the processes developed.

The final two chapters present ideas about how professional learning might occur through the writing of action research theses, and the use of the meta-action research approach. I have read a range of documents that expound on this theme in the past, including Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt's work with Chad Perry that several folk I have referred the work to have found really helpful; but the diagram and thinking these three authors articulate, building on work by Gina Wisker, strike me as being particularly clear in separating/joining the action research project from the thesis-writing project. I think this chapter will be very helpful to those supervising action research theses, and students wishing to undertake such study. The book concludes with a very honest summary of the work, the learning and how the authors needed to make adjustments to produce the final work. As it is this kind of meta-reflection they are encouraging readers to undertake, this is a very fitting conclusion.

I believe that the open, self-critical approach of these authors and their clear articulation of the values to which they hold themselves accountable make this a book well worth promoting in this Educational Journal of Living Theories, whose emphasis is so strongly on these values and skills.