

Democracy, Work and Humanisation: Dedicated to Werner Fricke for his contribution to action research

This is a very special issue of the *International Journal of Action Research*. The reader will soon perceive that all articles are centred on some key concepts, principles and values that have guided Werner Fricke's work as citizen and researcher. Democracy, work/ workplace, and humanisation summarise Werner's commitments to action research as a tool for making this world a better place for all. In the articles that make up this issue, the constant references to his work are no coincidence. They express a deep gratitude for what has been learned with him and through him, and point to the challenges to recreate action research within a historical moment when important changes are underway.

The editors express their gratitude, as colleagues who have had the privilege of sharing his dedication to the *International Journal of Action Research*.

The special issue highlights the key contribution that Werner Fricke has made to the thinking of many different researchers and writers in the field: he is not easy to compartmentalise, and we can trace his influence around the world. As an editor and editor-in-chief he has been committed to the internationalisation of publishing in action research, against a background of different nationally based movements which made few references to work in other traditions. Without his energy and enthusiasm it is unlikely that the journal would have survived. As it is, we are now working with our third publisher, thanks to Werner's persistent efforts.

Throughout his long research career, Werner Fricke has, in theory as well as in practice, argued for social research to have social impact. His engagement as one of the founders and as editor of an international journal of action research (IJAR and its precursors) is strongly based on this ambition. Of course, this is an ambition that in general is shared by action researchers and action research milieus within the overall action research community. However, as for what it means to realise this ambition, and what it means to carry it out, both theories and practices may differ quite a lot within the action research community: this is also reflected in the articles published in IJAR. In relation to this heterogeneity of ways of working with and presenting scientific accounts of action research, Werner Fricke as an editor may be characterised as a 'rigorous pluralist': he has never had any kind of predetermined/ideological bias as to what kind of action research approach is worthwhile to publish results from, but he has always had very strong views on the double set of criteria that are required for articles on action research to be worth publishing. Any article about any kind of action research had to report *both* on what was the practical impact of the research,

and on the new research based knowledge achieved. Manuscripts that lacked either of these, or which presented either of them insufficiently or just vaguely, became subject to clear demands from the editor-in-chief Werner Fricke regarding what deficiencies needed to be dealt with in order to be published. In this sense, Werner's editorial effort over the decades has been also an effort to maintain continuous improvement of action research. It may still be an open question what has been the impact of the action research community on society at large, but no doubt Werner's editorial achievements have had an impact on the action research community.

In German research on work and labour, Werner Fricke has always been there. He reminded the scientific community that labour research is more than an academic endeavor: it is about employees' voice and participation. Often, his constant nudging was overlooked, sometimes ignored, seldom neglected. But, again and again, his serious and stubborn involvement with participation and action research proved to be the one of the more successful roads to modernisation of work and labour, combining a scientific approach with methods of participation, intertwining theoretical foundation and action for organisational change. Although participation in the sense of workers' emancipation, and not only concerned with optimisation of work processes, has lost momentum in German research since the 1980s, Werner Fricke's ideas are still alive and kicking: maybe today more than ever. One reason for that is that workers' emancipation, in modern but neoliberal labour structures, is needed more than ever. The second reason is that Werner Fricke never stopped his commitment to action research. If it were not for him, action research would be somewhat forgotten in Germany.

As mentioned before, the articles that follow are closely linked to Werner's practice of action research. In the opening article, Bjørn Gustavsen revisits the Quality of Working Life Movement (QWL), which promoted major advances over two decades (1970-1990), both socially and methodologically. The author asks what relevant lessons can be learned from this movement for the present situation, when democracy itself is at risk in so many places. At the core of the discussion is the relationship between theoretical constructions and practical experiences. He concludes his article recognising that Werner Fricke may have been the first of the actors within the QWL movement who fully recognised the need to construct the images to guide the actions of research bottom-up.

Stefanie Hürtgen and Stephan Voswinkel argue in their article that workers are not determined by their social conditions, as they are not simply objects of dominant (neoliberal) discourses. Based on empirical study, they show how "normal" workers, in spite of today's precariousness, have not given up normative expectations; they develop their argument differentiating between claims and desires, considering that not all expectations lead to self-empowerment and/or collective action. They remind the researcher that critical social research must take a responsible approach to the discourses and models that are prevalent in society, and must make a clear distinction between the analysis of discourses and the analysis of people's consciousness. The article is dedicated to Werner Fricke "for his coherent and persevering work on concepts of action research" and the authors' gratitude for his collegial interest in their research.

In the article that follows, Peter Totterdill draws on his previous joint work with Werner Fricke, in terms of bringing together as many stakeholders as possible to unleash the

potential to introduce industrial democracy and worker's participation in regional development. Totterdill analyses an attempt to stimulate workplace innovation in the UK, a country, as he remarks, with no tradition of such policy initiatives, through a coalition of regional actors. Although failing to create sustainable momentum in the region, there were tangible business and employee benefits in several participating organisations, and the results served to inspire policies elsewhere. The detailed description of the research process, and the careful analysis of the results, provide important insights for researchers engaged in workplace studies.

The next articles invite us to look at the founding moment of action research, and the need to face the current risks of social research in general, and particularly action research in academic contexts. Marianne Kristiansen and Jørgen Bloch-Poulsen's article deals with Kurt Lewin's concepts of participation, change and action research in organisations. It discusses the discrepancy between the radical contents of Lewin's theories and the Harwood experiments, calling attention to the need to contextualise historically past experiments. The abundant references to Kurt Lewin in action research papers have not necessarily led to more in-depth studies of his work. In this sense, the study is a major contribution to advancing discussions about action research today. The article ends with a reminder to all of us, linking Werner Fricke to Lewin: "Both Lewin and Fricke have the courage to stick to different ways of thinking and doing, the courage to question basic assumptions."

Davydd J. Greenwood starts his article saying that the best way to honour Werner Fricke is to carry on his work. This means taking up the cause and approaches used by Werner for decades to improve working life and social solidarity. In Greenwood's appraisal, "the industrial democracy movement and the welfare state are in retreat under the global neoliberal attack of the past quarter century. Co-determination in many organisations, and certainly in universities, has been destroyed in most countries, and replaced by the casino capitalist model of neoliberal governance." In such context, action research is not only desirable, but necessary, since from past experiences we know its capacity to liberate knowledge, motivation, and solidarity capable of transforming organisations and working lives, in democratic and more sustainable directions.

Emil Sobottka shares his reading of the book *Demokratisierung der Arbeit: Neuansätze für Humanisierung und Wirtschaftsdemokratie*, edited by Werner Fricke and Hilde Wagner (Hamburg: VSA Verlag, 2012). He suggests a reading of this book in the perspective that Karl Mannheim uses for the analysis of utopias, highlighting the description and critical analysis of the situation, indicating the contours of the utopia that the authors seek to foster through their engagement, examining which are the suggested social practices, and who is considered the leading social bearer of this utopia. The book is an important contribution to keeping the utopia of concomitant democratisation of work and of economics alive.

The appreciation shown to Werner Fricke by the contributors to this issue is all the more ours, as colleagues, who have had the privilege of sharing his long term and restless dedication to the *International Journal of Action Research*.

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