

Editorial

Reaching Out – Participatory and Engaged Research for Change

Britta Møller¹ 

Søren Frimann¹ 

Lone Hersted¹ 

Julie Borup Jensen¹ 

¹ Department of Culture and Communication, Aalborg University.

Kroghstræde 3, 9220 Aalborg Øst, Denmark

This special issue seeks to shed light on collaborative and participatory approaches to qualitative research. In this moment of history, it is time to reach out globally, culturally, and beyond human existence to embrace all forms of life. Research, too, must participate in this movement by contributing to global, cultural, human, and more-than-human conversations about the future of our planet, our societies, and our communities. We need to address the political, societal, human, and more-than-human dimensions of local change. In this historical moment, reaching out is not just a metaphor—it is a methodological, ethical, and political imperative.

The special issue emerges from the Danish Action Research Network conference *Reaching Out – Participatory and Engaged Research for Change*, hosted by Aalborg University in November 2024.

The ambition of the special issue is to gather studies from research approaches and traditions that reach out and engage in society to contribute to critical and constructive

change through qualitative, collaborative inquiries. These include action research, participatory action research, design-based research, and related collaborative approaches to research. These traditions respond to a growing call within the research community to move beyond traditional boundaries.

With this special issue, we have invited research traditions and approaches that strive towards goals of democratic participation and dialogue, engaging participants, communities, and society in endeavors targeting change and local and global social value creation. We wish to make room for studies occupied with research approaches and methods for citizen involvement, democracy, education, learning, participatory organizational change, research-practice collaboration, design-based research, co-creation, sustainability, co-design, co-evaluation, and others.

While reaching out to society's big agendas, we also need to address the political and economic aspects of research. In light of the increasing demand for research institutions to attract external research funding, and the pressure on businesses and organizations to inform their practices with research, we also encourage conversations about individual, organizational, and societal freedom, as well as ownership of research. We need to address the political, societal, human, and more-than-human dimensions of local change. We need to enter into dialogue concerning the organizational-cultural and societal-cultural dimensions of worldviews and perspectives on value creation through collaborative research. *How can we help and inspire each other? What kinds of dilemmas and tensions do we experience in collaborative research?*

We invited articles, suggesting the following themes:

- Environmental and social sustainability in an eco-social crisis perspective
- Diversity in cultural worldviews and value creation in research
- Freedom, political interests, and ownership of research
- Aesthetic and arts-based processes of learning and change
- Organizational learning and leadership development
- Professional development
- Qualitative research and participatory research

All of these themes are important aspects of research concerning leadership, organizational learning and development, user interaction and involvement, pedagogy, professional development and practice, co-production, inclusion, and many others. They play out in fields like education, health, social work, sustainable business development, and production, among others.

This special issue features 13 articles, which are organized into four thematic sections:

- (1) methodological approaches to data, change, and ethics;
- (2) organizational learning perspectives;
- (3) diversity and participation; and
- (4) art-based methodologies.

Methodological Approaches to Data, Change, and Ethics

The four articles in this section present distinct yet interrelated perspectives on how methodological choices influence action research and qualitative inquiry. Together, they reveal a shared commitment to exploring the ethical, philosophical, and practical dimensions related to the choice of research methodology in action-oriented contexts.

The article authored by Signe Hvid Thingstrup and Unni Lind “**Analysis in Action Research: Four Analytical Propositions for How to Think with the Ethos of Action Research**” explores analysis in action research as a philosophical and ethical question rather than solely as a technique. Grounded in critical utopian action research, the authors argue that the analytical work in participatory research must reflect the normative and epistemological commitments of the field, including its orientation toward democracy, empowerment, and social justice. Through four analytical propositions—humans are knowledgeable and analytically capable, humans are capable of formulating structural critique, practices are unfinished experiments, and practices contain potentialities—they propose a framework for analysis that honors participants as reflective, meaning-making subjects. Based on empirical examples from educational contexts, the article demonstrates how analytical processes can reveal participants’ capacities to critique and transform their everyday practices. Thingstrup and Lind invite qualitative researchers to engage more deeply with the philosophical foundations that

shape their analytical choices, while emphasizing that analysis in action research is itself an ethical and democratic act of inquiry.

Two articles report from the same action research project. The first of these two articles is written by Nanna Limskov Stærk Christiansen, Britta Møller, and Anne-Birgitte Nyhus Rohwedder: **“Visualizing Change Pathways: Using Theory of Change to Scaffold Collaborative Inquiry in Action Research.”** In this article, the authors analyze and discuss a 3-year project in the field of Danish vocational education, where they combined two different approaches for working with change in organizations. The authors write from a pragmatic, action-oriented perspective, and their inquiry was a hybrid between action research and theory of change (ToC). They argue that ToC, when reconceptualized within the collaborative and reflexive paradigm of action research, can function as a structured framework for the creation of change in organizations, in particular when ToC is used to study and challenge underlying taken-for-granted assumptions among the participants. The study draws on qualitative data based on 15 workshops at five different schools specializing in vocational education, with three sessions across these schools involving the participation of teachers, leaders and researchers. At these meetings, they examined whether ToC could help participants articulate challenges, clarify activities, and visualize desired outcomes of the project. The analysis identifies two key conceptual tensions: (a) between locally developed and generalizing understandings of theory, and (b) between emergent and linear models of change. The article proposes conditions for the meaningful integration of the two approaches, explaining how ToC can function as a complementary approach to action research that is based on collaborative and flexible context-sensitive processes for change.

The second article from the same study (and the third article in this section) is written in Danish and narrated by Anne-Birgitte Nyhus Rohwedder, Britta Møller, Nanna Limskov Stærk Christiansen, and Anna Opstrup Larsen **“Obser-view som dataproducerende metode i aktionsforskning”** [Obser-View as a Data-Producing Method in Action Research]. It examines the potentials and challenges of using *obser-view*, which combines observation and interview into a dialogical process that fosters mutual reflection and professional learning, as a data-generating method in action research within educational contexts. Drawing on empirical material from a 3-year action research project conducted at five Danish social and healthcare schools, the study

identifies the distinctive qualities of obser-view data as micro-situated, processual, and authentic. These are qualities that make such data meaningful for exploring practice and supporting collective inquiry. At the same time, the authors discuss methodological and ethical dilemmas, such as the contextual specificity of data, participant vulnerability, and the researcher's role in data selection and facilitation. By integrating obser-view data throughout the action research cycle, from problem identification to reflection, the article demonstrates how data can both expand the understanding of the problem and strengthen collaborative reflection. The authors conclude that obser-view contributes to an ethics of care in participatory research, where data are treated as a shared and relational resource for learning and organizational development.

The fourth article in this section, written by Anne-Lene Sand, Mikkel Vinding, Lene Tanggaard, and Marie Kremer, “**Fra øjets etik til kroppenes etik: når etik gentænkes gennem sensorisk metodologi**” [From the Ethics of the Eye to the Ethics of the Bodies: When Ethics Are Rethought through Sensory Methodology] explores how sensory methodologies can inform and expand ethical reflection in qualitative design research. The authors argue that ethics is too often handled through standardized or procedural approaches detached from lived, bodily experience. Through two design-based cases—from teacher education and neonatal care—they investigate how sensory awareness, doubt, and embodied reflection can reveal subtle ethical dimensions that traditional frameworks overlook. Drawing on Pink’s notion of sensory participation, Mason’s concept of affinities, and Locke et al.’s theorization of doubt, the article proposes the idea of a “bodily ethics.” This approach emphasizes that researchers use their bodies as instruments of inquiry, generating knowledge through sensation, interaction, and reflexive awareness. By bringing attention to the felt, uncertain, and affective aspects of ethical encounters, the authors invite qualitative researchers to embrace doubt and sensory reflexivity as vital sources of ethical insight. The article makes a valuable contribution to rethinking research ethics in participatory and design-based inquiry by foregrounding the body as a site of ethical knowing and responsiveness.

Organizational Learning Perspectives

The three articles in this section explore how organizational learning can be cultivated through participatory, dialogic, and process-oriented approaches. Rather than relying on

linear or instrumental models, they emphasize learning as a relational and emergent practice embedded in organizational life. Together, these contributions advance a view of organizational learning as a cocreated, context-sensitive process that unfolds through shared inquiry, reflective practice, and relational responsiveness.

The article **“Situated Dialogic Action Research as an Approach to Organizational Learning from within Dialogical Process”** is co-authored by Lone Hersted, Søren Frimann, and Anne Søbye. It explores how organizations can develop learning internally through situated dialogic action research, a research approach that emphasizes relational and responsive processes over traditional linear approaches. It promotes co-creation of knowledge “from within” the organization itself, thus fostering a participatory, organizational environment. The authors conducted a 5-year action research project within a public institution supporting individuals with visual and hearing impairments. During this period, leaders and staff engaged in small-group dialogues and collaborated on targeted actions driven by their own initiatives, exemplifying the principles of situated dialogic action research. The outcomes demonstrated a significant development at the personal, departmental, and organizational levels. Participants experienced increased reflexivity, which led to greater self-awareness and critical reflection. This process fostered a sense of agency and empowerment, ultimately encouraging proactive engagement in organizational change. Overall, the research highlights the potential of dialogical, relational approaches to facilitate meaningful organizational learning and change “from within,” which emphasizes the importance of *reaching out* in participatory processes and internal collaboration for sustainable development.

“Interorganisatoriske undersøgelsesfællesskaber - en mulig vej til ledelsesudvikling og organisatoriske forandringer?” [Interorganizational Communities of Inquiry—A Possible Path to Leadership Development and Organizational Change?] is an article in Danish by Jan Rohwedder and Søren Frimann. The article explores the perspectives that emerge when collaborative management research (CMR) is applied within an inter-organizational context to support leadership development and organizational transformation in a world characterized by complex and dynamic challenges. Based on a Danish research project involving five leaders from public and private organizations participating, alongside two researchers, in an inter-

organizational research community, the analysis focuses on how learning mechanisms and reflective processes can enhance both leadership capabilities and organizational effectiveness. The article emphasizes the importance of psychological safety, diversity in coaching styles, and cross-organizational perspectives as key elements in creating effective inter-organizational development and learning environments. It contributes valuable insights into the potential of *reaching out* by means of inter-organizational CMR to foster innovation, adaptability, and collaborative problem-solving across organizational boundaries, which can promote shared understanding, mutual trust, and continuous learning among diverse stakeholders. The article also discusses the challenges and opportunities associated with implementing CMR in complex environments, highlighting the need for tailored approaches that consider organizational culture, power dynamics, and stakeholder engagement.

The article “**Udvikling af en dynamisk analysestrategi til anvendelse i aktionsforskning**” [Development of a Dynamic Analytical Strategy for Use in Action Research] by Charlotte Reimert Munch presents a methodological contribution to the field of action research through the development of a dynamic analytical strategy designed for participatory and process-oriented studies. Drawing on Bakhtin’s dialogism, Boje’s storytelling theory, Shotter’s notion of witness-thinking, and Harré and van Langenhove’s positioning theory, the article offers a framework for exploring the fluid, dialogical, and emergent nature of meaning-making in organizational life. Based on an insider action research project with 10 managers at a national social care institution, the article demonstrates how narrative facilitation and dialogical reflection can foster learning, relational cohesion, and leadership development. Through an illustrative empirical example, Munch shows how “living moments” in dialogue can give rise to new understandings and opportunities for change. The article contributes to methodological discussions in action research by showing how processual and relational approaches can strengthen reflexivity and ethical sensitivity in collaborative inquiry. It offers an invitation to think dynamically with data and to analyze the unfolding of dialogical processes from within.

Diversity and Participation

The three articles in this section examine how inclusive and ethically attuned methodologies can strengthen participation in qualitative research. Each contribution offers a unique perspective on how to engage meaningfully with diversity—whether in terms of social marginalization, cultural epistemologies, or age—through methodological innovation and reflexivity. Together, these articles advocate for research practices that are culturally responsive, ethically grounded, and sensitive to the lived realities of diverse participants.

The article “**Participatory Social and Educational Planning—A Gateway to Learning from the Margin**” by Ditte Tofteng, Anne Harju, and David Herrera explores how participatory planning can serve as a bridge to inclusion for highly marginalized youth. Developed through an action research project, the article introduces the participatory social education planning (PSEP) approach, which aims to support young people in accessing education, employment, and social spaces. Rather than offering a fixed model, the article reflects on the risks and possibilities that emerge when researchers and practitioners attempt to “learn from the margins.” It highlights the importance of working collaboratively and responsively with youth whose voices are often excluded from mainstream planning processes. This contribution invites readers to consider how participatory methods can challenge conventional boundaries and foster more inclusive, socially engaged educational practices.

The article “**Methodological Decolonization and Local Epistemologies: Practical Insights from the Field**” by Obaa Akua Konadu-Osei explores essential practical, epistemological, methodological, and ethical considerations in the ongoing efforts to decolonize research methodologies within qualitative research paradigms. It emphasizes the significance of addressing common shortcomings encountered, in this case by using self-reflection as a vital element of examining the process of methodological decolonization, particularly through the author’s own experiences conducting virtual qualitative interviews. The study draws on diary entries maintained by the researcher during her doctoral studies. These entries provide a reflective tool to identify and discuss four core themes that influence a researcher’s approach to data collection: epistemology, methodology, data collection methods, and ethics. This reflective analysis highlights the necessity of adopting non-extractive ethical practices,

recognizing the agency of research participants, and navigating social hierarchies with sensitivity to foster trust, regardless of the medium and method used for data collection. Such considerations are crucial for ensuring ethical integrity and cultural relevance in research processes. The article *reaches out* by contributing to the ongoing discussion on methodological decolonization, vividly illustrating how practical experiences, documented through reflective diary entries, can enhance the understanding and enacting of decolonizing research strategies that respect local epistemologies and social dynamics.

The article **“Humor in Studies with Children and Its Effects on the Child-Perspective Research Process”** by Laura Ortju, Oona Piipponen, Tuula Stenius, Antonina Peltola, Elina Weckström, and Johanna Kaitsalmi offers a perspective on researcher-participant interaction when “reaching out to children” through research. Six researchers collaboratively re-analyze data from five distinct studies conducted in Finland and Belgium between 2016 and 2023, involving children aged 2–14. Using abductive content analysis, they examine transcribed interviews, video recordings, and field notes to understand how humor influences the research process. The findings suggest that humor can ease tension, foster trust, and create space for open dialogue, ultimately enriching the data collected. By highlighting humor as a meaningful methodological tool, the authors contribute to ongoing discussions about participatory methods and ethical engagement in childhood studies. Their interdisciplinary approach underscores the value of reflexivity and creativity in qualitative research.

Art-Based Methodologies

The three articles in this section explore how artistic practices such as listening, drawing, and embodied expression can serve as powerful tools for participatory knowledge production. Each contribution demonstrates how art-based methods can deepen engagement, challenge conventional research formats, and open new pathways for inclusive, relational inquiry.

The article **“Reaching Out through Listening: Co-creating Participatory Soundwalks for Collaborative Engagement in Research Findings”** by Bethan Mathias Prosser explores the power of sound and listening as tools for deepening engagement with research outcomes. Drawing from a post-doctoral knowledge exchange project, the author advocates for a participatory ethos in the final stages of qualitative research, one that

invites communities, practitioners, and policymakers into meaningful dialogue through co-created soundwalks. Set against the backdrop of urban seaside gentrification, the project brought together lived experience and professional insight to reimagine how research findings can be shared and understood. By listening together—literally—participants engaged with place, memory, and emotion in ways that traditional dissemination methods often overlook. This article offers a compelling case for sound-based methods as catalysts for curiosity, learning, and connection across academic and non-academic boundaries. It is a timely reminder that how we share knowledge can be just as important as what we discover.

The article “**Dare to Draw in Academia**” by Heidi Hautopp, Julie Kordova, and Mie Buhl offers an invitation to rethink the dominance of text in academic research. Using their own empirical work within higher education and organizational studies, the authors explore how drawing—as both method and mindset—can open new pathways for knowledge creation. Through ethnographic approaches, graphic facilitation, and care aesthetics, they demonstrate how drawing fosters co-creative inquiry and context-sensitive understanding. The article discusses the tensions and negotiations that arise when participants are asked to draw, including moments of discomfort, doubt, and resistance. By situating drawing as a legitimate and enriching research practice, the authors challenge conventional norms and advocate for more embodied, visual, and participatory forms of scholarship. This piece contributes to ongoing conversations in arts-based research and invites scholars across disciplines to consider the transformative potential of putting pen to paper.

The article “**Embodied, Arts-Based and Participatory Research: Approaches to Knowledge Production in Cross-Cultural Educational Contexts**” by Charlotte Svendler Nielsen is based on a 4-year project inspired by participatory action research with a primary school class in South Africa. The article outlines embodied, art-based and participatory approaches to research and learning mainly from a phenomenological, post qualitative perspective. The participants in the project worked together in an interdisciplinary, intercultural group consisting of artist-educators, researchers, and project partners. In the project, they developed and experimented with new strategies for teaching and learning among children in South Africa based on qualitative research methods and art-based educational practices. Art-based methods were included to

scaffold the inclusion of perspectives from the children. The article discusses the potential of these methods to *reach out* and involve participants in a research practice aimed at decolonization. In this regard, the author also critically discusses dilemmas and power dynamics that occur in this process.

Enjoy!

About the Guest Editors:

Britta Møller is Assistant Professor at Aalborg University, Department of Culture and Communication, Denmark. Her research and teaching center on learning processes, care ethics, and organizational change, particularly within elderly care and vocational education. She explores how care and learning are shaped by institutional structures and everyday practices, and she collaborates closely with practitioners to support ethically grounded and sustainable learning environments. Through her teaching, writing, and engagement with the field, she contributes to critical reflections on the role of care and education in organizational contexts.

Søren Frimann is Associate Professor and Head of Section at Aalborg University, Department of Culture and Communication, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities. His research focuses on leadership, leadership development, and organizational learning, with particular attention to action research and action learning approaches. He is interested in dialogical and participatory approaches that support organizational change and explores how collaborative inquiry can foster leadership development, organizational learning, and capacity building across educational, public, and private organizations, drawing on practice-based and relational perspectives on learning and change.

Lone Hersted is Associate Professor in the Department of Culture and Communication at Aalborg University (Denmark). Her research centers on relational and regenerative perspectives on leading, leadership development, dialogically based processes for change, organizational learning and development, co-creation, social organizational sustainability, and action research, among others. In addition to her research and teaching

at the university, she also facilitates dialogical processes for learning and development in organizations. She is also the editor in chief at the International Journal of Action Research (IJAR).

Julie Borup Jensen is a Professor in the Department of Culture and Communication at Aalborg University. She is the head of the research group Collaborative Organizational Learning (CO-LEARN), which does research within organizations, organizational learning, and change with participatory and collaborative research approaches. Her own research is based on action research that takes place within organizations, as well as practices related to education, early childhood education and care, social care, professional development, practical disciplines, creativity, and aesthetic learning.