BOOK REVIEW

Wood, L. (2020). *Participatory action learning and action research: Theory, practice and process*. Routledge.

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In her book, Wood (2020) describes participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) as "an emerging philosophy, methodology, and facilitation process for resolving complex problems within the context of sustainable professional, organisational and community development" (p. viii). In the introductory chapter, Wood explains that the book is divided into three parts:

- Part I. Theoretical foundations of PALAR
- Part II. Practice and process of PALAR
- Part III. Reflecting on PALAR

Part I (chapters 2 and 3) focuses on the theoretical base of PALAR. Chapter 2 explains the philosophical principles of PALAR, and the theoretical frameworks that are appropriate for PALAR are discussed in chapter 3.

In chapter 2, Wood discusses how PALAR is rooted in a participatory paradigm with its own ontological, epistemological, methodological, and axiological assumptions. Ontologically, reality is considered participative, multiple, dynamic, and relation based. Epistemologically, the source of knowledge is the critical self-reflection and reflexive dialogue of research participants. Methodologically, PALAR is political participation through collaborative arrangement and inquiry. The axiological foundation of PALAR includes values that foster humanity, justice, democracy, equality, diversity, and the like. From my perspective, it seems that the author does not adequately explain that PALAR is a paradigm most suitable for political contexts. PALAR mainly helps researchers understand reality and knowledge in matters of political operation, social (in)justice, (in)equality, and (in)humanity. It is a methodology that focuses only on social, economic, and political operation and its purpose is to free participants from their operation.

In addition to Wood's thorough introduction of the philosophical base of PALAR, she clearly describes the principles of PALAR as communication, commitment, competence, compromise, critical self-reflection, collaboration, coaching, relationship, reflection, and

recognition. The author describes each principle in the context of PALAR, though I argue that many of these outlined principles are also the principles of other research methodologies. Reflection, critical self-reflection, and collaboration, in particular, are not only principles but also the nature of action research.

Chapter 3 presents different theories that can be used as theoretical frameworks for PALAR. According to Wood, suitable theoretical frameworks of PALAR include experiential learning theory, action learning theory, transformative learning theory, capability theory, complexity theory, self-efficacy theory, and social-ecological resilience theory. Even though the author thoroughly described the theories in relation to learning and human interactions, for the would-be PALAR researcher like myself, it is not clear whether we can use learning theories and human interaction theories individually or in combination. For instance, I would argue that an experiential learning theory that based solely on the model of Kolb's advanced learning cycle is appropriate for action learning, but not for participatory action research. Kolb's learning cycle does not necessarily require multiple participants' collaboration, as in PALAR; it can be done by an individual. In my reading of Wood's book, none of the theories clearly shows the role or nature of participation and collaboration of each participant within the theoretical framework of PALAR, except for with complexity theory. Further, Wood does not justify and exemplify the use of conceptual frameworks and models that can be used in addition to the different theories as a theoretical framework.

Part II discusses the practice and process of PALAR, and is addressed by five chapters (4-8). Chapter 4 explains action learning group formation. Wood states that the "action learning group is at the heart of the PALAR process" (p. 64). As a result, the group is responsible for both action learning and action research, as stated by the author. In this chapter, the author focuses on what is expected from the group in action learning and action research, but does not discuss how action learning and action research in a PALAR project should be practiced. The author does not adequately explain the process within action learning and within action research, nor does she distinguish how the group back and forth from action learning to action research, and from action research to action learning are different (though they have some similarities). Bourner and Brook (2019) provide a fuller discussion of both the similarities and differences of action learning and action research. According to Bourner and Brook, both action learning and action research are action-based, produce actionable knowledge, are problem-centred, involve cycles of action and reflection, and offer solutions to the theory-practice gap. They describe the difference between action learning and action research as follows:

Action research seeks to solve the presenting problem by generating knowledge through taking action within the social system in which the problem is located. By contrast, the role of the presenting problem in action learning is to provide a vehicle for personal learning by the participants. (p. 196)

Bourner and Brook (2019) add, "action learning is also seeking to develop self-knowledge by participants – "know-how" as well as "know-that," and also even tacit knowledge" (p. 198). Given that these differences between action learning and action research were not delineated in chapter 4, readers would benefit from further reading before practicing PALAR. The chapter does not deal with the process of action learning and participatory

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action research in an integrated manner, except for describing the expected qualities and responsibilities of each member and the group as a whole in a PALAR project.

Chapter 5 presents the ethical issues that should be considered in a PALAR project. Wood argues that the ethical procedures that are followed in other educational research are not appropriate for a qualitative research methodology like PALAR. Consequently, Wood suggests that for participatory research like PALAR, ethical considerations should focus on “respect for persons, justice, and beneficence” (p. 67). I appreciate the effort of the author in challenging the status quo of ethical considerations in educational research in different contexts.

In chapter 6, Wood discusses the research design of a PALAR project. According to Wood, the “research design of any project is the blueprint for the action taken” (p. 100). Wood describes the philosophical root of the transformative paradigm for a PALAR research project, and she presents the process of a PALAR project diagrammatically and explains the components clearly. In Wood’s explanation, reflection, action, and learning in action learning and action research are mixed. While reflection is the basis for both action learning and action research, the action proposed to be taken in action learning through trial and error whereas the action proposed to be taken in action research is mainly based on research findings of the action research project. The main intent of both action learning and action research is not to disseminate research findings, rather to learn from experience (action learning) and from research (action research) to improve practice, and to bring about change and improvement in an organisation. Wood’s development of a new methodological model for practising PALAR (as seen in Figure 6.1) could benefit from further explanation as to how the cycle of action learning and action research align. Further, this chapter seems to be missing a discussion of which specific quantitative and/or qualitative methods of data collection and analysis are appropriate for PALAR research projects.

Chapter 7 describes the quality criteria used to validate PALAR projects. Wood argues that the validity measures used for quantitative and qualitative research are not appropriate for PALAR. Rather the author describes how, in a PALAR project, the research process, knowledge production, and authenticity should be validated in other ways. The author describes the types of validity that are applicable to PALAR: process, dialogic, catalytic, and democratic and outcome validities. However, I maintain that validity criteria need to be adjusted for action learning, where the aim is not to create knowledge. If the purpose of a PALAR project is to transfer knowledge to the community, validity criteria should include self-validation, peer validation, and institutional validation, as suggested by McNiff and Whitehead (2016).

In chapter 8, Wood describes how to write up a PALAR project for publication in the context of a thesis, an article, a book, and a book chapter. Wood describes and exemplifies that in writing and publishing the findings of a PALAR project, the group members of the PALAR project should locate themselves in the study, choose the right pieces of evidence from the data, include the voices of the participants, and acknowledge learning, change, improvement and failure within the project. In general, the author develops criteria for writing good academic work from PALAR project.

Part III of the book (chapters 9-10) centres on summative reflections of the author about PALAR projects. Chapter 9 describes the challenges of undertaking a PALAR project, and chapter 10 outlines reflections about the book. In chapter 9, Wood describes challenges and responses in relation to 'institutional processes, policies and paradigms', 'participatory research as perceived by university researchers', and 'the socio-economically disadvantaged context of the research'. Finally, in chapter 10, Wood summarises the philosophical and methodological aspects of PALAR and underlines the importance of PALAR in engaging the community that is part of a problem to solve it collaboratively, and for universities to perform their interrelated functions of teaching, research, and community services effectively.

Overall, this is an excellent book. I strongly recommend the book for undergraduate and postgraduate students that plan to undertake participatory action learning and action research projects for fulfilling requirements for their qualification. I also strongly recommend the book for academics that teach on reflective practice and action research, and/or who undertake such research and provide community services.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

Damtew Wolde Berku has his PhD in Educational Management and is currently working as an assistant professor at the College of Education at the Debre Berban University in Ethiopia. Dr. Berku also holds Bachelor of Education in the English language, and a Masters in Educational Research and Development. His research interests include action research, teacher continuous professional development, academic staff development, ICT in education, environmental education, research and innovation, and leadership and management in higher education institutions. He teaches courses about action research and reflective practice, school improvement programs and education change management for undergraduate students in teacher education and in school leadership programs. At postgraduate level, he teaches education research methodology and education project management in school leadership programs.