

## To do and know something together: overcoming the obstacles and challenges of action-research in making better urban worlds

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Many philosophers and scientists challenge the linear relationship between knowledge and action; a position that calls into question the idea that the answers to our cities and regions' most crucial and wicked problems can be found in 'textbooks' or 'manifestos' – no matter how up to date they might be. Rather, we argue the stickiest urban issues are best tackled by trying, learning lessons from failures, and attempting again to develop knowledge from experience. Embracing this perspective challenges a fundamental building block of institutions dedicated to professional research and higher education and raises important questions: what is the role of researchers and their Institutions, if it is not *just* publishing manuals and manifestos? What does it mean to do research *while* “trying” to make the world a better place, or, borrowing from Boyer’s famous “Scholarship reconsidered” (Boyer, 1990), “engaging” cities, regions, people, and organizations for the purpose of not just extracting data but in collaboration and mutual learning? What does it take to overcome the inevitable messiness and challenges that “trying” and “engaging” involve? The collection of essays in this special issue of *Tracce Urbane* explores the 'heuristic' dimension of obstacles and constraints faced by researchers in their collaborative practices. We chose the dual themes of knowledge-action and overcoming obstacles in part because constructive examinations of the complexities and messiness of participatory research are often missing from the literature. Even if not the first of its kind, we think this collection of essays provides insights into a little explored aspect of engaged research and can help advance the debate on its significance to addressing urban challenges.

Engaged research, participatory research, action-research, collaborative research, community-based research, and cooperative research are some of the many labels used to indicate research that is carried out by 'professional' researchers together with people and/or organizations that are likely to be affected by the research outcomes. Working within these approaches, urban scholars find themselves collaborating – sharing responsibilities

for both research and action – with a variety of urban residents or stakeholders, like grassroots groups, non-profit organizations, coalitions, social movements, but also local administrators, schools, and businesses. The institutions we work for, as well as the communities we collaborate with, however, are not ideal systems, where individuals act in harmony so that a common mission is reached. What can be practiced as an ideal form of ‘engaged research’ in some places is not compatible with cultural or normative frameworks that are present elsewhere. Moreover, despite the vast range of existing scholarship, which is evidence of the practical and theoretical accomplishments of participatory research in many parts of the globe, collaborative research still struggles to flourish in established research organizations and Universities.

Researchers practicing collaborative research and seeking to publish on it in ‘highly ranked’ journals still struggle for recognition. Often, when they write about their work, they spend a significant part of the word count explaining where collaborative research comes from and what it is to an audience that, for the most part, is not fully aware of its specificities, what can and should or should not be expected from it (Saija, 2014). Even in a context where the institutional conversations on engaged scholarship are more advanced, like the US, engaged scholarship is often not considered as valuable as traditional scholarship (Saltmarsh *et al.*, 2009). The struggle for recognition often leads participatory researchers to write about successes rather than failures, on what went well instead of what was very difficult. Narratives tend to skate over the difficulties, obstacles, and messiness of collaboration, sanitizing the research process so that it is comparable to lab testing, in which quantitative analysis of data is produced from representative samples.

This special issue seeks to advance the discourse on engaged urban research, encouraging scholars to explore the difficulties, their frustration and failures, from which very important community benefits are often achieved, and use them to reflect on what they mean to the broader scholarly debate. We have brought together papers that represent the variety of ways in which urban research and collaboration are practiced, across diverse institutional and geographic contexts. Contributions

critically reflect on collaborative research experiences developed all around Italy – Milan, Genoa, Padoa, Bologna, Tuscany, Lazio, Campania, Riace, Palermo – and the world (Slovakia, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Brasil, Mumbai in India, Freetown in Sierra Leone, and New York, Connecticut, Las Vegas in the United States). Together the papers in this special issue suggest that there is much we can learn from interrogating the difficulties of collaborative work and engaging to make better urban worlds.

### **A word on participatory and engaged research**

Action-research and other forms of participatory research are certainly not new. Some have embraced it as a way to develop better knowledge; as in the case of social scientists who realized that ‘the people’, in most cases, know more than anybody else about the phenomenon being studied (Greenwood and Levin, 1998; Whyte, 1991). More recently, natural scientists engaging with complexity have recognized of the inevitable and mutually transformative nature of the relationship between any knowing subject - the researcher - and the object of knowledge (Maturana and Varela, 1980). Other scholars have advocated for a more engaged approach to research in recognition of the siloed nature of traditional scholarly practices and institutions. In the US, a whole movement of scholars have criticized the inability of Institutions of Higher Education, “the Ivory Tower”, to address the most relevant and challenging social issues and insisted that scholars need to ‘engage’ in direct interactions with ‘the outside’ (Boyer, 1996; Boyte and Hollander, 1999; Furco, 1996; Lynton, 1983; Strand *et al.*, 2003; Votruba, 1992).

In the Global South, a focus on participation and collaboration has emerged as a critique of and response to the power imbalance in traditional research relationships and the tendency of traditional forms of knowledge production to reproduce colonizing and oppressive relationships between the targets of aid and those paying for or providing it (Fassin, 2007; Redfield, 2012; Escobar, 2007). In this case, participatory research becomes a way to ‘democratize’ the scientific knowledge production process, making both the knowledge itself and the research outcomes highly sensitive to the experiences, needs, and expectations of the very people affected by it (Fals Borda and Rahman, 1991; Hall,

2005). Moreover, it offers an avenue not only for the decolonizing methodologies (Gill *et al.*, 2012) and the incorporation of new voices (Chambers, 1997), but for the revision of knowledge paradigms all together (Athayde *et al.*, 2017; Cabrera Medaglia, 2004; Fals Borda, 2016).

Various urban scholars have experimented with action-based and/or participatory research. Urban planning scholars, for instance, have often used participatory research to advance our understanding of participatory and co-production planning tools, as well as explore the variety of roles that should/can be played by urban residents in shaping their life environment (Cellamare, 2019; Cognetti and Padovani, 2017; Paba and Perrone, 2004; Porter *et al.*, 2015; Reardon, Raciti, 2018; Saija, 2016). Applied, activist, and engaged anthropologists have employed participatory and collaborative research with marginalized urban communities to document unequal conditions of everyday life, generate various media through which residents can speak back to powerful institutions, instigate advocacy and political action on issues ranging from environmental injustice (Checker, 2005, 2007) to redevelopment of land in urban core neighborhoods (Newman and Safransky, 2014) to human rights of immigrants (Heyman, 2014), to educational (Kwon, 2008) and health disparities (Schensul *et al.*, 2014). Yet, as the papers represented in this issue attest, action-based research is not limited to the fields of urban planning and anthropology. Authors' disciplinary backgrounds include educational studies, urban design and architecture, arts and humanities, as well as urban and medical anthropology and urban planning.

### **Personal vs. Institutional engagement**

The authors included in the "Focus" section ground their work within the framework of a long tradition of action-based, engaged research, despite the very diverse disciplines, geographic locations, participatory methods, populations and urban challenges that are represented. Across such a variety of experiences, contexts, and 'disciplinary' backgrounds, the articles demonstrate that the nature of the obstacles and challenges faced by researchers is highly dependent on the phase of their career and the level of institutional commitment

they have – both of which offer different levels awareness, autonomy, and security. Moreover, their experiences suggest the ways that methodological dexterity, and acknowledgement of failure, discomfort, and difference, and sincere commitment to collaboration and the challenges at hand shape the possibilities of knowledge-action to affect change.

Three papers discuss work developed within a clear action-research and/or community-based research framework, with explicit institutional support and recognition. Two of the three contribute to the international medical anthropology and public health debates on health access, equitable and culturally attuned service delivery, and community-based health interventions.

Martina Belluto, Ricardo Burg Ceccim, and Ardigò Martino reflect on their collaborative work between Universities and Primary Health Care Services in Bologna (Italy) and Brazil, aimed at pushing primary medicine professional culture and practice toward transdisciplinarity, while re-framing sickness within a broader understating of people's social and cultural embeddedness and the need for community-based actions. Public health focused community-engaged collaboration between academic researchers and diverse institutions is also the focus of Diana Romero's article. Drawing on case studies of collaborative research with a public hospital, a private hospital, and a hospitality workers union, Romero explores the ways these projects worked through challenges posed by balancing urgency and academic rigor in research design, partners' different priorities and motivations for engaging in collaborations, and communicating «unwelcome» findings. Importantly, she cautions against the indiscriminate use of CBPR for research involving community stakeholders and other partners, suggesting the need for thoughtful reflection on the pragmatic, methodological, and relational realities and goals of any project before adopting this approach.

Moving from health-focused CBPR to a long-standing tradition in action-research applied to urban contexts, the article by anthropologist Maria Elena Buslacchi and landscape designer Maria Pina Usai hones in on the transformative power of art for the purposeful reshaping of the relationship between people and places. The article presents the case of "Zone Portuaires" in

Genoa, where the development of highly ‘impactful research’ was not necessarily a premise of the work but emerged organically, along with the use of art and storytelling to reconnect the city with its ‘Port’ beyond traditional functional and economic dimensions.

The other articles in the “Focus” section come from early career researchers. Each author reflects on PAR informed doctoral experiences, providing interesting insights into how difficult it is to carry-out engaged research within the span of a PhD, especially outside of a longer and ‘institutionally’ supported process.

John Vertovec examines the way the participatory PhotoVoice methodology offered a mechanism for a group of social entrepreneurs in Havana, Cuba, known as *La Red de Proyectos Socioculturales (La Red)*, enabled participants to see (literally and figuratively) the deeper, often invisible, differences between the organizations and communities they represent, reframe organizational challenges, and ultimately to move from supportive network to action.

Giulia Li Destri Nicosia shows how case-study research on the famous “Riace model of hospitality and multicultural development” (in the Italian region of Calabria) can provide the occasion for a PhD student to develop the desire to switch toward action-research, eventually failing in the face of both poor institutional engagement and lack of participants’ understanding of action-research’s premises and potentialities.

Along the same lines, Marilena Prisco shares the ethical dilemmas that emerged from her interactions with other humans during case-study research on environmental injustice and water infrastructure in small villages in Campania. She uses her experience to push established academics toward a deeper recognition of and more formal training for PhD students on the importance of community-university formal and informal partnerships.

Francesco Campagnari and Alice Ranzini compare their doctoral experiences of carrying out research in support of “insurgent urban practices” in Zilina, Slovakia, and Milan, Italy, respectively. Their comparative analysis points to the importance, but also the challenges, of critiquing such practices when engagement is based on researchers’ personal commitments and relationships.

### **Inside or outside academia?**

Early career scholars' struggles are counterbalanced in the "Backstage" section, where anthropologist Jean Schensul shares her long-term commitment to advancing engaged scholarship within the US academy from the outside. Her article describes a valuable 'organizational' arrangement that bypasses some of disadvantages of academy-based partnerships while supporting and extending the capacity of communities and universities to collaborate with diverse populations. Through examples of health-focused community-based participatory research (CBPR) projects in the US and India, and youth participatory action research (YPAR) projects with African American and Latinx teenagers on health activism and hustling, respectively, Schensul identifies several benefits of this "intersectional" model. In particular it allows for the use of creative, engaging, developmentally appropriate research methods that are not strictly bound by disciplinary expectations in combination of skills that often are not part of academic training. Additionally, the interstitial position of community-based research organizations enables them to facilitate trusting relationships among diverse partners and act as "research negotiators" in ways that can address issues of power and control, differing understandings of and capacity for participation, and the need for extensive and sustainable connection.

### **Observing engagement and educational practices**

The collection of articles in the "Observatory" section offers a window into scholars, former students, and educators early forays into PAR and engaged research. All but one, focuses on educational contexts and forms of engagement with students from high school to University students. They underscore two widely acknowledged, but unevenly accepted, aspects of education-based engagement: students learn better through experience; and educational processes that were traditionally carried out in isolation within schools and universities can have a highly transformative impact on the outside world.

Giuseppe Rizzuto and Stefania Crobe's work shows the importance of action-learning for high school students, which helps grow mutually beneficial relationships between the school and its broader and community. Rizzuto shares lessons learned

as researcher turned educator working with the local Chinese community in the historic center of Palermo, focusing on cultural challenges in diverse contexts. Crobe's work is an experimentation with how to use participatory art-based languages both for educational and urban regeneration purposes.

Aurora Santiago-Ortiz and Lorenza Perini each explore action-learning in the context of higher education. Santiago-Ortiz describes the challenges she faced and the strategies she adopted to establish and carryout PAR projects during a two-semester interdisciplinary undergraduate research course at the only public university in Puerto Rico. Perini shares her experience of teaching an action-learning course with Master-level students at the University of Padova, meant to use participatory methods to generate development ideas for the "bassa padovana" area. In both cases, readers can find interesting insights on how action-learning can be performed in the face of uneven institutional commitment and unforeseen constraints like those imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Former graduate planning students Aline Faiwichow Estefam and Federico Urso offer autobiographical accounts of discovering action research. Urso shares his experience as an architecture student who develops an interest in and begins experimenting with action-research in the context of his thesis on bottom-up practices of revitalization of the Palermo historic market *Vucciria*. Estefam reflects on her experience as international student in a prestigious US planning school involved in a study abroad program in Sierra Leone that partners with a local school. Her contribution reminds us that reciprocity, a corner stone of action-learning, is at risk when collaborations do not openly address existing power imbalances.

The importance of action-learning in education provides the backdrop of the closing piece by Elisa Caruso, a burgeoning action-researcher working with the Buonconvento's community (Tuscany). She describes how flooding issues spur community mobilization around the prospect of a river contract and eventually result in the election of a new local government. Here, despite the negative impacts of institutionalization on the community organizing process, the engagement of the University and the work with local schools provides continuity to the process.

### Is it worth it?

Whether or not and how academia and/or independent community-based research centers embrace the challenges and the messiness of action-based, engaged, collaborative, community-based research, is connected to their willingness to profoundly renovate dominant academic intellectual and educational habits. Is it worth it? And, if so, what does it take? In the “Dialogue” section we turn to non-university people with significant action-research experience to help answer these questions. Here, we take, what seems to us, a very obvious and crucial next step: to explore the productive possibilities of knowledge-action through the eyes of individuals from groups and organizations that have partnered with engaged colleagues and Universities across Italy and achieved results both from a scientific and community perspectives. Facilitated as a panel discussion, we asked them to reflect on how they ended-up collaborating with university researchers, how their relationships have evolved overtime, what have been the common achievements and obstacles. The dialogue that emerged (abbreviated here due to space constraints) points to the importance of failure for building trust and authentic commitment and speaks to the reality of both risks and rewards for community and academic partners alike. More importantly, they offer suggestions on how to move forward, stressing the significance of knowledge for action and their high expectations of the Third Mission, even when they remain unmet by institutions of higher education. These community partners’ insights evince that, despite all challenges, it is worth it and there is more need for action-oriented collaborations than ever.

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