

Chapter 43

Participatory and Appreciative Action and Reflection in Adult Learning: Transformation as Appreciative Reflection

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ABSTRACT

Participatory and Appreciative Action and Reflection (PAAR) is a specific approach to learning, reflection and change. In this chapter we are going to identify the characteristics of PAAR approach within the adult learning context. Starting from the relationship between types of learning and types of reflection, we will analyze in particular the differences between critical and appreciative reflection and transformative and generative learning. Then we will explain some theoretical and methodological origins of PAAR approach: Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and Participatory Action Research (PAR) highlighting, in particular, four important shifts that characterize this approach: from deficit-based to strengths based discourses; from self-learning to collective learning; from a one way of knowing to a more pluralistic one; from cycles and spirals of reflection to reflective learning framework with specific intentions of learning, action and change. Finally, we will consider a possible coexistence of critical and appreciative reflection, generally considered antithetical, or difficult to put in practice, in PAAR approach.

INTRODUCTION

When we consider adults in a learning situation, we must consider processes regarding people who are part of a society, within organizations, and within formal and informal groups. In situations where interdependencies expand, where boundaries of organizations and professional roles gradu-

ally fade away, where connectivity is increasing, the learning processes are strictly connected to personal and professional identity construction. Learning processes are in turn mediated, co-created by a network of human or non-human agents, in a context where new technologies take on a fundamental role (Latour, 2005). It means that learning, change and identity creation of individuals and organizations are simultaneous processes influencing each other.

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The Participatory and Appreciative Action and Reflection (PAAR) approach in adult learning is the meeting point of a group of theoretical and methodological perspectives where learning and change processes (at individual, collective and organizational level) are to be considered as a whole. This is possible because PAAR bases its methodological approach on the following shifts:

- from the critical to the appreciative perspective;
- from the paradigm of stability to the paradigm of change, innovation;
- from the retrospective attention to the future attention;
- from “blame culture” to positive appreciation

These shifts are full of theoretical and methodological implications.

Taking these shifts into account allows us:

- to conceive the perspectives of learning and of knowing, together, at the same time. The *knowing* perspective refers to a knowledge-centered point of view, where knowledge is enacted through the action, negotiated and mediated by its acquisition and/or co-creation processes within groups and organizations. The *learning* perspective considers learning as a social activity strictly connected with social and economic conditions, gender, ethnic and linguistic differences, individuals and contexts’ demographic characteristics. Learning is always based on experiences, grounded on the peculiarities of different contexts and is related to reflective processes.

How to combine, in practice, learning (experience-centered) and knowing (knowledge-centered) perspectives?

- understanding that learning and knowing processes are always related to change dynamics. This dynamics refers to the way of acting, thinking, relating, shaped by individuals within different groups or organizational contexts. Focusing on this is important because understanding learning processes allows us to understand change processes and vice versa. How to valorize the transformative and generative dimensions of learning?
- pointing out the value of the tacit dimensions of change processes (Lester & Piore, 2004), not immediately recognizable, describable, and for this reason not easily understood, diffused and adopted. The tacit aspects of change processes can be revealed and managed through a reflective learning process in which problem solving and creative thinking activities are grounded into the individual and collective experiences and are related to the expectation concerning future scenarios. If reflection assumes a central role in learning and changing processes, what kind of reflection might help us to bring out the tacit aspects of changing processes?

In this chapter we will focus on the theoretical and methodological perspectives of PAAR approach: the action methodologies, in particular participatory action research (PAR), and appreciative inquiry (AI). Before doing this we will analyze the relationship between kinds of learning and kinds of reflection. We will consider the relationship between critical reflection and transformative learning and the relationship between appreciative reflection and expansive learning. Then we will investigate some elements of PAAR approach, its basic principles and some of its main aspects, exploring the possible co-existence of critical and appreciative reflection.

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