



"They don't take notes!" Tensions perceived by first-line workers in an action research project

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Abstract

Purpose: To emphasize the importance of taking into account the perspectives of prospective participants and identifying potential tensions in action research.

Methodology: This paper reflects on a (participatory) AR project in which the first author was involved as an kind of embedded researcher. The data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, field notes and observed project activities, with colleagues. The authors conducted a thematic analysis.

Findings: We thematically categorized four types of tensions between both groups. These were tensions connected to: (1) internal facilitators giving guidance, (2) project goals, (3) top-down expectations, and (4) unfamiliarity with AR working formats.

Originality: We challenge the implicit assumption that prospective participants of AR-projects are always willing to participate.

Practical implications: Quintessential to AR is giving the less privileged a voice. For this to work, gaining a good understanding of their perspectives is crucial.

Keywords: Action research, employee participation, participants’ perspectives, facilitation, tensions, insider/outsider.

Introduction

Action research (AR) aims to obtain input from the less powerful into collective design and development projects. Typically, engaged researchers help them to participate in change projects that aim to improve their situation. Ideally, all project participants must be given an opportunity to openly express themselves (Greenwood and Levin, 1998; Levin, 2004; Reason and Bradbury, 2001). Ideal outcomes are for participants (insiders) to gain greater control over their own situation as a group, and for changes to be perceived as real and meaningful (Greenwood and Levin, 2007; Hall, 2001). The responsibility of ensuring these aims are met lies with the action researchers (Greenwood and Levin, 2007; Levin and Ravn, 2007). They must ensure that the other, generally less educated and less privileged, participants are motivated, not subject to constraints, and able to voice their opinions.

However, putting ideals into practice is easier said than done (Levin, 2004). In general, planned change projects are fraught with difficulties and involving the less privileged brings extra dimensions to that. Thus, action researchers are encouraged to evaluate their projects (Arieli *et al.*, 2009). Whilst the outcomes of such evaluations are often specific for the project being conducted, we believe that our evaluation of an AR project in a Norwegian public organization has broader significance. The first author was contracted to study the project as it evolved as an ~~kind of~~ 'embedded researcher'. She approached the second author to reflect on and analyze part of the data from an external point of view, which was detached from AR-perspectives.

The very logic behind AR is that participants are helped by being enabled to improve their situation, which implies that their active cooperation is for their own good and would be self-evident. However, those given a voice may not agree and/or may feel that practical difficulties limit their cooperation. Following the Thomas theorem that states that 'if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences' (Thomas and Thomas, 1928, pp. 571-572), such views may be detrimental to the success of an AR project.

The AR project studied was inspired by "pragmatic action research" (Greenwood and Levin, 1998, p. 152), which promotes (1) the ongoing development and redesign of processes, (2) arenas for dialogue, (3) experience sharing and reflection between researchers and participants, and (4) the use of multiple methods. The project aimed to improve services to the public through collective development. Despite these good intentions, tensions of various natures were observed

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3 between the different categories of participants throughout the project. In this paper, we use the
4 word 'tension' in a broad sense, considering different feelings such as frustration, confusion,
5 inferiority and so on. These tensions became barriers in the process, leading to frustrations and a
6 reluctance to actively participate. Our analysis is inductive. We realize that other tensions are
7 likely to surface in other projects, but nevertheless hope that our thematic categorization of the
8 tensions is meaningful for future action researchers and at the very least, sensitizes them to not
9 take for granted that those whom they want to empower automatically share the researchers'
10 perspectives. In our case, we distinguish between the first-line workers who are given a voice on
11 the one hand and on the other hand, the action researchers and HR facilitators, employed by the
12 organization studied, who are divided into outsider and insider facilitators. Our research question
13 is therefore: What kind of tensions are experienced by first-line workers participating in an AR
14 project?
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25 **Action research**

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27 The history of AR is complex. It is not a single academic discipline but rather an approach to
28 research that has emerged over time from a broad range of fields (Brydon-Miller *et al.*, 2003;
29 Coghlan and Shani, 2014; Reason and Bradbury, 2001). In the 1940s, movements lead by
30 ~~individuals, most notably~~ Lewin and colleagues, influenced and developed AR perspectives and
31 working formats. The school of AR consisted of researchers conducting projects to tackle
32 practical and often pressing issues within organizations and societies (Johansson and Lindhult,
33 2008; Pasmore, 2001). In addition, the practical focus of AR has a strong grounding in grass-
34 roots democratization. Such projects aim at benefiting the less privileged and less powerful,
35 whose input is essential for identifying and analyzing relevant issues. The role of researchers in
36 such cases is to assist participants in voicing their concerns and opinions (Adelman, 1993; Levin,
37 2004; Pasmore, 2001).
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47 Democratic values have therefore been key within AR's development (Adelman, 1993; Pasmore,
48 2001). As in all idealistic movements, strong opinions about 'proper' AR have been voiced, and
49 these opinions do not necessarily coincide (Arieli *et al.*, 2009). This has resulted in the
50 emergence of different strands of AR. For example, questions have arisen as to whether projects
51 conducted within capitalist organizations may be considered AR (Fricke *et al.*, 2022). In addition,
52 as is the case in all idealistic movements, idealists often clash with pragmatists, and AR ideals
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3 may be used against project founders' intentions. In the last few years, a number of projects have
4 been conducted under the banner of AR to improve organizational performance, using employee
5 input to benefit from their operational knowledge yet without any democratic intention
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8 (Boezeman *et al.*, 2014; Busck *et al.*, 2010).
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10 From a more humanist perspective this is seen differently—for instance, within the strand known
11 as pragmatic AR, which informed the project we have analyzed (Greenwood and Levin, 1998). A
12 key principle is the ongoing and purposive redesigning of projects while in progress. To avoid
13 stringent plans and a one-size-fits-all approach, the whole (pragmatic) AR process is an emergent
14 one until the problem at hand has been resolved to the satisfaction of local participants, the
15 resources have been exhausted, or some other event changes the direction of the process or ends
16 it. This process involves complex conversations resulting in ideas, options, and actions being
17 developed and clarified, rather than a single hardline consensus to which everyone is
18 subordinated (Greenwood and Levin, 1998). The terms used in such AR for the researchers and
19 the other participants signal this strand's intentions: 'friendly outsiders' are to help 'insiders'
20 (Coghlan and Shani, 2008; Greenwood and Levin, 2007; Louis and Bartunek, 1992). The
21 adjective 'friendly' expresses how the action researchers are to be seen and/or wish to see
22 themselves.
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34 The promotion of participation is fundamental to all AR strands, including participatory AR
35 (PAR). This strand is based on the belief that by empowering the oppressed and relatively
36 powerless, their capacity to solve problems can be increased, and in turn they can become more
37 independent (Fals Borda, 2001; Smith *et al.*, 2010). Another example is appreciative inquiry,
38 which assumes that knowledge and information are widely distributed and collectively created
39 through conversation. It entails the promotion of strengths, successes, and life-giving forces,
40 rather than the negatives, issues, or breakdowns in the inquiry process (Ludema and Fry, 2008).
41 Within AR the emphasis is on the cooperative process between outsiders and insiders. Put
42 simply, the insider will have a role as a member of the organization when not involved in the
43 study, whilst the outsider will not. The outsider's role will include research activities when they
44 are not involved in the study, whilst the insider's will not (Louis and Bartunek, 1992). However,
45 this divide is not absolute. Examples provided by Louis and Bartunek (1992) show that
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3 throughout the process of insider–outsider collaboration, the roles can change in connection to
4 the degree of involvement in the given setting.
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7 The close and collaborative relationship between outsiders and insiders can be a source of
8 challenges because they are more 'exposed' in AR than in other research approaches (Coghlan
9 and Brannick, 2001). It is important to note that not all participative approaches will result in
10 providing a voice to all participants (Arieli- *et al.*, 2009; Levin, 2004). For example, Drake (2014)
11 illustrated the challenges encountered in an AR inspired project within a correctional facility,
12 connected to power differences and the difficulty of implementing change in such power-dense
13 environments. Other challenges can be connected to the bridging of researchers' and
14 practitioners' different ways of thinking (Titchen and Binnie, 1993), and that the extensive
15 amount of resources needed to conduct and participate in AR are rarely available in real-life
16 settings (Friedman, 2001). As covered in a previous paper (Lebesby and Benders, 2020),
17 discussions about the complex features of the AR participants are often limited, especially at
18 shop-floor levels of organizations. This is also an issue for other organizational development
19 efforts where participation is sought (Balka, 2010; Bossen *et al.*, 2012). Without thorough
20 investigations into the interests, reasoning, and behavior of prospective participants, the very
21 basis of AR is challenged (Friedman, 2001; Gustavsen and Pålshaugen, 2015; Neuman, 1989).
22 The majority of AR literature has been written by its advocates who act as action researchers
23 themselves. Expressing oneself in generally academic terms is an intellectual act and a privilege
24 of the educated, but not necessarily of those who are intended to benefit from AR projects. Such
25 situations may fall under what Bråten (1973) called 'model monopoly', which refers to the power
26 that lays on the 'professional' side, and which increases the distance between insiders and
27 outsiders. Ultimately, model monopoly is a serious threat to the AR process as it draws the focus
28 from local perspectives, which are a cornerstone of any AR process (Greenwood and Levin,
29 1998). Below, we try to understand the insider perspective, while recognizing that we share the
30 intellectual background of most AR advocates. Nevertheless, we think it is possible to sketch the
31 tensions from the insider's perspective. In the following, we refer to those who are to be given a
32 voice within our case, first-line workers (FLWs). We refer to those encouraging the FLWs to
33 participate in the project as insider facilitators. We use these terms to avoid a potential source of
34 confusion: 'insiders' may be understood to comprise all members of the organization in which
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3 the AR project is carried out, which often includes senior staff. This categorization is at odds with
4 our intention to focus on the perspectives of FLWs.
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7 **Research design and methods**

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9 In 2014, the main Norwegian unions at the national level initiated trial projects within several
10 large public organizations. Their primary goal was to improve the quality of services for the
11 benefit of employees and clients through close cooperation between the different organizational
12 units. To achieve this, an AR project was designed to develop stronger union–management
13 cooperation and greater awareness of knowledge sharing and cooperation across organizational
14 levels and locations. The first author was involved in an AR project within one of these
15 organizations. The organization’s human resource (HR) department found that employee
16 participation in external workshops and learning activities seemed predominantly to result in
17 individual learning rather than organizational rewards, such as collective development.
18 Management and HR therefore regarded this project as a good opportunity for management,
19 union representatives, and first-line workers to develop closer relations and to move toward a
20 stronger union–management cooperation.
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31 The AR project was defined as a national agency project, although the main activities took place
32 in one regional department (here referred to as TVD) wherein the regional director served as the
33 project owner. The steering group, providing feedback to the regional director, was responsible
34 for the overall economics, time frame, and quality of the project. The AR project was referred to
35 as ‘TVD-development’, and the department worked on it from 2015 to the end of 2017. TVD
36 employed approximately 500 people spread over a range of professional departments and
37 geographically dispersed locations—so-called traffic stations. At the traffic stations the
38 employees were divided into two main functional groups: (1) the ‘vehicle’ group had
39 responsibility for mechanical matters, tending to vehicles both in the workshop and out on the
40 roads; (2) the ‘mercantile’ group had responsibility for documentation, drivers’ tests, and drivers’
41 theory tests. Common to both groups was the responsibility to stay updated on national as well as
42 international regulations regarding vehicles and roads. They participated in a range of project
43 activities, facilitated by action researchers and representatives from the HR department. The
44 following section provides a description of the AR project activities.
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Project design

The AR project was designed by the HR department, in close cooperation with action researchers. Within the department, project activities were divided into two main parts: management seminars and local pilot projects. The action researchers and the first author (as a PhD student) facilitated, provided theoretical lectures and input, and carried out follow-up research throughout the process. At the end of the project, an evaluation report was written by the research team. Figure 1 provides an illustration of the AR project activities.

Figure 1: Action research project

As shown in Figure 1, the management seminars included theoretical lectures. More specifically, the theoretical themes were organizational theory connected to four perspectives: structural perspective, human resource perspective, political perspective and cultural perspective (Bolman and Deal, 2017). The participants at the management seminars were managers from three different levels, and union representatives. Although the management seminar is not discussed in detail in this paper, a previous paper (Lebesby *et al.*, 2023) showed how managers and union representatives developed stronger relations and a more distinct development focus through this project.

The six local pilot projects were carried out at different traffic stations within specific functional groups. The group sizes varied from around six to 20 employees. Within the local functional groups, the local manager and employees were tasked with reflecting upon their daily practices and together formulating one or two improvement actions to carry out locally. With the guidance of two or three HR facilitators per group, employees participated in group discussions based on relevant themes. Over the course of four meetings, their mission was to collectively agree on some features of their practices that they could improve and try to carry out specific development actions in their daily practice. For example, one group decided to change and improve their meeting structures, while a different group wanted to visit other locations and functional groups to exchange experiences and ensure that they were providing similar services across locations.

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3 Common to both activities was the facilitation from both HR representatives and action
4 researchers. However, within the pilot projects, the HR facilitators had the responsibility of
5 guiding the process, while the external researchers had more of an evaluating role. We found it
6 challenging to define the HR facilitators as outsiders or as insiders, because even though HR has
7 its own internal structure within the larger organization, for this project the HR facilitators came
8 from the 'outside', with the aim of carrying out a project within a specific department. We
9 therefore distinguish between external and internal facilitators, and FLWs.

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11 The project goals were to ensure broad participation, and for local managers to ensure connection
12 between the management seminars and local pilot activities. At the forefront were the ideals of
13 participation across levels and roles within the organization and close cooperation between the
14 participants, as per the AR perspective (Greenwood and Levin, 1998; Reason and Bradbury,
15 2001). The following section describes the research approach and methods.

16 *Methods*

17 This is a qualitative study into the tensions experienced by first-line workers that participated in
18 an AR project. The first author participated in the AR project activities but had a more detached
19 role throughout the project and only joined when the project was already under way. As part of
20 her PhD project, the first author collected data and observed project activities both collectively
21 with research colleagues, and separately. Table I illustrates the research activities, namely the
22 group interviews, individual interviews, and observations.

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40 Table I. Data gathered through the action research and PhD project

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45 The research team conducted 37 interviews in total (15 individual, 22 group [2–3 participants]
46 interviews). The data used in this paper are part of a larger archive and consist of both field notes
47 on project activities and transcribed semi-structured individual and group interviews. The entire
48 body of data arose as a result of all the researchers' efforts to collect field notes and to conduct
49 interviews with managers, union representatives, and participants in the development project. The
50 data analyzed in this paper stem from the pilot projects, focusing on the first-line workers'
51 perspectives.

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3 The interviews were not guided by predetermined research questions; rather, the intention was to
4 collect the participants' own narratives of their experiences during the AR project. By conducting
5 interviews and observing project activities, some tensions were observed by the first author. The
6 second author joined as an external interrogator, helping to reflect and break the empirical data
7 into themes. A thematic analysis is an inductive method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting
8 patterns (themes) within data. The data are organized and described in rich detail (Braun and
9 Clarke, 2006). An inductive approach to analysis is helpful in this case, because of the way in
10 which themes are strongly linked to the empirical data (Patton, 1990), which is crucial when
11 placing participant perspectives at the forefront.
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19 The authors returned to the transcribed interviews and field notes to see whether the tensions
20 could be grouped within certain themes. The phases of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke,
21 2006, p. 87) are as follows; (1) familiarizing oneself with the data at hand, (2) generating initial
22 codes, (3) searching for themes and (4) reviewing of the themes, (5) defining and naming the
23 themes, and finally (6) producing the report. This resulted in four main themes of tensions.
24 Tensions connected to; (1) internal facilitators giving guidance, (2) project goals, (3) top-down
25 expectations, and (4) unfamiliarity with AR working formats.
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32 **Findings and discussion**

33 One specific observation inspired this paper. When some internal facilitators discussed a pilot
34 project's progress, they expressed that the pilot participants were not as engaged as they "should"
35 have been. One facilitator proposed that no progress was to be expected if FLWs "did not even
36 take notes." The facilitator apparently saw taking notes as a prerequisite for progress, which is
37 understandable given the facilitators' educational background and working habits. The finding
38 illustrates a social or cultural divide between the internal facilitators and FLWs, as the latter had
39 less experience with the working format. Below, we group FLW perspectives into four categories
40 of tensions.
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48 *Tensions connected to internal facilitators giving guidance*

49 Many FLWs struggled with understanding the concepts and goals of the AR project.
50 Understandably, this led to a need for guidance and facilitation by the internal facilitators. The
51 first author and her colleagues participating in local pilot activities observed that the degree of
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3 support, or control, from internal facilitators throughout the process varied. For some FLWs,
4 though, the facilitation and guidance became too controlling.
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7 I just jumped on in the beginning. Didn't really know what to expect. Either way, it didn't
8 end up like what we, or I, thought it would. We thought we were going to "dig for gold,"
9 but we were guided onto a totally different path by the HR. (FLW M)
10

11 This experience shows that it was necessary for the facilitators to step in and guide the process
12 from the start of the project. Several FLWs reported that they were not sure what the project
13 centered on and needed guidance and time to understand it. In FLW M's perception, the goal of
14 the project was to "dig for gold," where the gold represented good practices to be shared across
15 levels and groups within the department. Instead, they were guided onto a different path by the
16 facilitator, which in this case was a more problem-focused process, such as asking, "What can we
17 do better?" or "Why are we not efficient enough?" FLW A provided another example of a
18 situation in which the development action was broadly chosen by the facilitator, and not the
19 insiders themselves.
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27 [The topic of becoming multidisciplinary] was something we never chose ourselves. [It]
28 was forced upon us by the facilitators [...] The facilitators were very set on working with
29 becoming multidisciplinary. (FLW A)
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32 Here, the FLW referred to a discussion that came up early in the process about the opportunity to
33 become multidisciplinary. This had a practical meaning, where some employees were encouraged
34 by management to take on additional work tasks, which entailed undergoing training and courses.
35 Becoming multidisciplinary meant that the employees had the competence and knowledge to tend
36 to additional clients at the counter. For example, employees who previously only processed
37 clients regarding matters connected to vehicles were now also able to process clients that needed
38 help with matters connected to drivers' licenses. Ultimately, the focus was on processing clients
39 more effectively. Although this was of interest to management and FLWs, several FLWs
40 perceived it as being outside of the AR project. Several group members wanted to choose a
41 different development action to work with in the pilot project, namely communication skills.
42 However, this did not end up being an option for that functional group. Thus, the question arises
43 as to what happened with the FLW voice in this case. Did they fail to grab the opportunity, or
44 was it taken from them? One final example is FLW M's experience with facilitators picking apart
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3 the suggestions FLWs made. Again, facilitators guided the process in a direction that did not
4 support the FLWs' voice.
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7 Through the whole process we have been told that we should not focus on details, [but]
8 rather have a broad focus. However, I feel like everything that we brought to the table
9 [has] been micromanaged in a way. [...] [HR] focused on the small details and picked it
10 apart. When we came [up] with suggestions, [HR] picked what they wanted us to work
11 on. (FLW M)
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14 Here, we can see that FLWs were engaged in the project, coming up with suggestions and trying
15 to decide themselves which actions to go forward with. Unfortunately, the facilitators brought
16 their own suggestions and actions they considered appropriate. These experiences exemplify the
17 challenges that go against the ideals of the AR processes and ultimately strip away the democratic
18 perspective, as well as making the participants voiceless.
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23 *Tensions connected to project goals*

24 Many FLWs struggled to understand the formulations and definitions that the goals included. The
25 transcribed interviews and discussions with the FLWs indicated that the goal formulations had a
26 very limited connection to FLWs' daily work. Looking into what the formulations
27 communicated, the question arose as to whether they were too theoretical or vague. Two FLWs
28 reflected on why the goals were so difficult to understand.
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35 Well, it [the project] was presented, and I read about it online. The information was there
36 but, still, I haven't gotten the essence of it. It's a bit weird as well, because the language
37 itself is not difficult, but there are lots of words about very little, I guess. (FLW C)
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39 Actually, when we asked around people didn't know what co-workership really was.
40 Neither did I. So, when we had the first meeting, there were several words I had never
41 heard before. There are some folders where I can read about it, but it still doesn't make
42 sense to me. (FLW B)
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45 Specifically, the FLWs were preoccupied by understanding two main parts of the project goals.
46 First, the goals included the concept of expanded union-management cooperation, which the
47 FLWs did not understand. Did the wording say too little, or was the problem lack of familiarity
48 on the FLWs' side? Second, the goals included establishing stronger "co-workership," or a
49 stronger sense of knowledge transfer across organizational levels and locations. Such concepts
50 were not traditionally large part of daily TVD practice. This is not to say that TVD did not have
51 functioning cooperation between unions and managers, or knowledge transfer across locations
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3 and roles; however, it seemed difficult to connect the more theoretical concepts to what
4 employees were familiar with and practiced in their department. Several FLWs had the same
5 experience with trying to figure out what the words meant and navigating vague formulations.
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9 It was very vague. I haven't really understood what this is all about. (FLW G)
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11 No, this is difficult to understand. Because our manager, he attends lots of meetings and I
12 would think that they talk about this project. But we get no information or feedback. Like,
13 are we moving forward, are we standing still? (FLW I)
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16 Thus, the experience was that the project goals were difficult to understand. In addition, the latter
17 quote indicates the lack of information from the manager's side. Looking back, it seemed crucial
18 for the AR process that managers conducted information sessions and around the theoretical
19 concepts. The managers and some union representatives had the opportunity to get somewhat
20 more familiar with the theoretical concepts through the management seminars, as described in a
21 previous paper (anonymous), but the pilot project participants did not have this opportunity.
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23 Thus, the AR project rested heavily on managers being aware of and willing to share their
24 experiences and knowledge from the management seminars during the local pilot projects.
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26 Nevertheless, this connection between the two separate AR project activities was not established
27 at all locations.
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34 The FLW experiences are good illustrations of working with project goals that are not anchored
35 in the specific context, which creates challenges because FLWs are unsure about the direction,
36 success, and potential outcomes of the project.
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39 *Tensions connected to top-down expectations*

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41 Above, we noted that internal facilitators were frustrated that the FLWs did not take notes during
42 a meeting. At the same meeting, the FLWs also expressed frustrations toward the facilitators. The
43 pilot participants expressed that the facilitators expected too much of them and that the
44 facilitators could not possibly comprehend what they needed or could engage in without having
45 some experience of the FLWs' daily work routines. This tension was also revealed during the
46 interviews.
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52 [HR] have been on our case to do things at a certain pace. But they don't know our work
53 or what's possible and [what's] not. They couldn't possibly know these things either.
54 However, I think people would be more positive if they knew more about our day-to-day
55 work life. (FLW F)
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3 It's been OK, the way [HR] come here with their visions, but they [need] to be more
4 updated on our work situation. I think it would make this process better if they got to
5 experience life on the shop floor. Instead, they just come in, conducting some sort of
6 revival meeting, like our last meeting. That kind of stuff won't work for us. (FLW I)
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9 In both cases, facilitator expectations about the FLWs did not translate well into the FLWs' daily
10 practices. First, the internal facilitators were perceived as lacking important knowledge about the
11 FLWs' daily work or perhaps even the scope of action within the functional groups. Second, the
12 FLWs felt that the expectations put on them throughout the AR project (i.e., moving forward
13 more effectively and "delivering" based on the facilitators' visions) were challenging to
14 implement during a hectic workday. FLW I suggested that some of these challenges could have
15 been resolved by IFs being more involved, or at least present for a period, on the shop floor. This
16 has also been suggested in the AR literature (Greenwood and Levin, 1998). However, in this case
17 the distance became a tension in itself.
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21 Another example was the way facilitators tried to mitigate the FLWs' feeling of not living up to
22 expectations. From the outset, the facilitators reassured the FLWs by saying that the process
23 would be created as they went on, and that there were no blueprints. The result was,
24 unsurprisingly, that the FLWs became even more unsure about the process, where they were
25 going, and what was supposed to come out of their hard work. One FLW even indicated that
26 working with such fuzzy instructions made them feel inferior:
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30 I feel like even though HR say that the road is created as we go, we are inferior either
31 way. That you are not at the same... That you do not work in the same way. (FLW K)
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35 This experience is reminiscent of the comment above about FLWs not taking notes and indicates
36 that IFs and FLWs may use fundamentally different approaches and methods in their work.
37 Common to several FLWs is that they sought to deliver on the facilitator order, rather than
38 creating and pushing the process forward themselves. FLW I expressed frustration with not being
39 able to deliver:
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43 I feel like we are expected to come up with something concrete every time. That's not
44 easy. Not to me, anyways. I do not know what the others think about this, but it has been
45 difficult. Apparently they want us, after three hours, to agree on something. (FLW I)
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49 This raised questions regarding to what the FLWs were agreeing and for whom, and in turn
50 regarding the way the AR project was designed. The project itself was promoted as a bottom-up
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3 process. The facilitators, with the best intentions, went into the process with promises of broad
4 participation and structured the project activities in a way that was supposed to give all
5 participants an opportunity to co-create the reflection and development processes. However, the
6 above experiences illustrated a more top-down process, where participation was expected from
7 the manager and facilitator side.
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10 11 12 *Tensions connected to unfamiliarity with AR working formats*

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14 Participating in AR efforts requires significant effort from participants. Several FLWs reported
15 that participating in the project was demanding, but the activities were also quite far from the
16 type of work that was familiar to them. Not only did they have to engage in something additional
17 to their daily work, they were also expected to participate in collective reflection sessions, speak
18 up in front of the group, and come up with tangible actions within a set time limit. FLW H
19 reflected on their experiences with participating in the project activities as follows:
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25 It will often turn into something that you have to use lots of time and resources on, but
26 then you can't do your original work tasks. So it's hard. It is also different than what I'm
27 used to. For example, when I went to school we did not work in groups. There is a lot
28 more focus on such work now. It's something completely different for those of us that are
29 mechanics [...] I guess we are more focused on the technical, vehicles and cars. That's
30 what interests us. (FLW H)
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33 These experiences show the importance of FLWs having some familiarity with the topic, or
34 prerequisites, to fully engage and participate in AR efforts. FLW H worked in the "vehicle"
35 functional group, where work is typically individualistic and concrete. Mechanics are familiar
36 with technical, production-focused matters and found participating in AR activities challenging
37 and simply not within their basic interests. FLW I also experienced that it was difficult to decide
38 on matters or development actions on the spot:
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44 I think it would help [to have] some more input prior to the meetings. Then, we could be
45 more prepared [...] Because the way I work, I can never decide on something on the spot.
46 I have to... I am more old school, so I need to think about it. We do not have the right
47 prerequisites. (FLW I)
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50 FLW I explicitly pointed to feeling unfamiliar with the work format and lacking some of the
51 prerequisites to move forward in the AR process. Feeling unprepared or lacking the time to
52 reflect upon the matters being discussed made it difficult to form and push the process in a
53 direction based on FLW perspectives. Such situations require facilitation, but, as shown above,
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3 too much guidance is also a source of friction. Thus, the question here is whether it is possible to
4 find a good balance for guidance in the case of these FLWs. FLW H provided a good example of
5 how this balance is challenging to achieve:
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9 I was kind of blindsided when I was told to present something. I was supposed to conduct
10 interviews *and* present. That's far outside my comfort zone [...] Also, there is a lot "you
11 have to do this" and "it's not our responsibility" going around. I agree that we have to
12 take action, but not without their [HR/managers] help. (FLW H)
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14 The above quote speaks to the unfamiliarity of the AR activities to the FLWs, which they may
15 even have been uncomfortable carrying out. Ultimately, it seems that the internal facilitator
16 aimed to make the FLWs responsible for AR process, but tensions arose as the FLWs were
17 clearly not ready to take on the unfamiliar tasks that the responsibility entailed.
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22 **Conclusions**

23 We set out to answer the following research question: What kind of tensions are experienced by
24 first-line workers participating in an AR project? We divided these tensions into four themes,
25 connecting tensions to; (1) internal facilitators giving guidance, (2) project goals, (3) top-down
26 expectations, and (4) unfamiliarity with AR working formats.
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31 These challenges exemplify how good intentions to ensure FLW participation may not result in
32 wholehearted participants. The AR project considered here was carried out within a department
33 where the FLWs found it challenging to navigate the intangible goals and unfamiliar work tasks
34 that AR processes typically entail, such as collective reflection and group work. Although the AR
35 project was intended as a bottom-up and FLW-driven process, the above tensions became barriers
36 to realizing this intention.
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43 Empirically, we also found that, from the FLWs' perspective, distinctions can be made external
44 and internal facilitators. The FLWs had different expectations about both groups. They expected
45 the internal facilitators to have a greater understanding of their daily work, but these expectations
46 were not met. We acknowledge that the tensions and distance between the insider facilitators and
47 FWLs are similar to the challenges encountered in other AR development projects (e.g., Drake,
48 2014; Titchen and Binnie, 1993), especially when it comes to bridging understandings between
49 them and the underlying power issues. In our view, the distinction between the outsider and
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3 insider facilitator opens for further investigation into the much-acknowledged insider/outsider
4 distinction found in the AR literature.
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7 Regarding the FLWs' critical perspectives, we found that they perceived the participatory design
8 as mandatory, as something that they were expected to conform to. Thus, instead of being seen as
9 something based on current needs or interests, or on furthering organizational democracy,
10 participation turned into a perceived obligation by the FLWs. To provoke reflection, we coin the
11 term 'prescribed participation' for this. The idea is to emphasize that participation is more or less
12 enforced. However, whilst outsiders, generally with the best of intentions, want others to act in a
13 certain way, these others have their own perspectives on whether to do so. Especially if the
14 participative project is to further organizational goals, prescribed participation has its pitfalls. The
15 notion 'prescribed participation' is meant to draw attention to these potential drawbacks and to
16 stimulate efforts to prevent them.
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25 This paper adds to the AR literature by considering FLWs' perspectives and providing examples
26 of barriers to success in AR projects. However, we must consider the extent to which these
27 findings are relevant beyond this specific project. The project had its limitations and could be
28 criticized for failing to comply with the AR ideal. However, we acknowledge that (AR)
29 development projects, with a more instrumental motivation for employee participation, inherently
30 challenge democratic ideals. Conceivably, applying a more principled strand of AR, such as
31 appreciative inquiry (Ludema and Fry, 2008), might have prevented these challenges from
32 arising, but this suggestion cannot be proven. We can only emphasize that the backgrounds of AR
33 researchers will often differ from those of prospective participants, and that it falls to the former
34 to be aware of this and try to take it into account. The manner in which participation was
35 promoted to participants in our case is unlikely to be unique to AR or other organizational
36 development inspired efforts within organizations; therefore, similar or related tensions are likely
37 to surface.
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48 The challenging task of providing a voice to those involved in any development and
49 participation-based project remains relevant. In addition, we ask whether the pragmatic approach
50 to AR could end up being too pragmatic when 'creating the road as we go' becomes a tension in
51 itself. Clearly, the FLWs' experiences show that successfully complying with AR ideals is
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3 complex and challenging. Future research - and AR projects- should therefore focus on FLWs'
4 perspectives when participation is sought.
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Figures

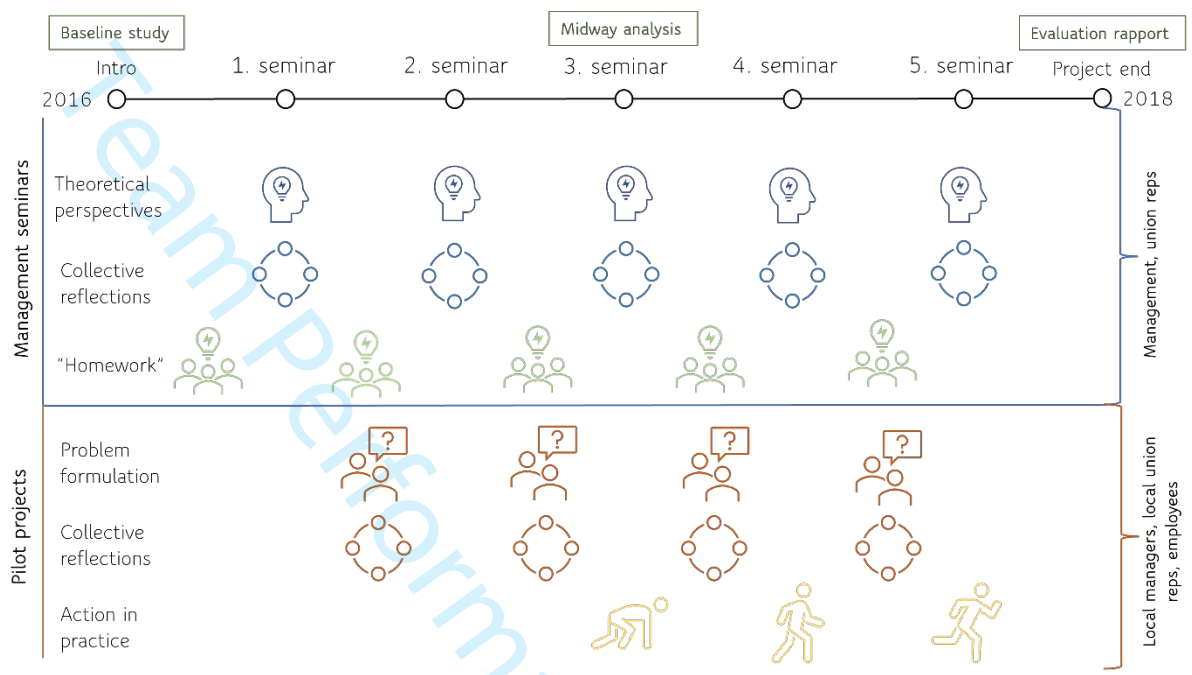


Figure 1: Action research project

Tables

Table I. Data gathered through the action research and PhD project

| <i>Interviews</i> | Project management group + HR | Level 2 management | Level 3 management | Union reps | Workers (pilot & non-pilot) |
|--------------------------|--|---------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|--|
| <i>Pre-project</i> | 1 individual interview | 1 group interview | 3 group interviews | | 2 group interviews |
| <i>Midway evaluation</i> | | | | | 13 individual interviews |
| <i>Project end</i> | 1 individual interview 2 group interviews | 1 group interview | 3 group interviews | 4 group interviews | 6 group interviews |
| <i>Observation</i> | 6 manager development seminars 8 local development pilots | | | | |