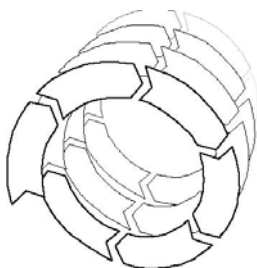# ALARj

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# ALAR Journal

## Volume 26 No 1
## September 2020

### ISSN 1326-964X (Print)
### ISSN 2206-611X (Online)

## CONTENTS

# Editorial

In October 2019, Action Learning, Action Research Association (ALARA) and Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN) held their first co-joint conference. This wonderful event, held in Split, Croatia, was made possible through the tremendous efforts of Dr Branko Bognar and his team from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek. Over 160 participants attended the Conference, representing thirty countries, participating in over 100 sessions, workshops and discussions (not including the many informal discussions). An advantage of so many presentations is hearing and discussing the variety of ways in which practitioners undertake their action learning and action research activities.

None of those present could have predicted the disruption to life (and conference attendance) that 2020 has brought to the world. The social isolation and significant changes to personal and working life has not prevented the authors included here from providing an interesting sample of the presentations at the Conference. The articles cover using two different technology approaches to teach English language, the challenge of engaging teachers in spatial planning teaching, an introspective way to challenge dominant discourses, and an action research method to create a film about action research. I thank the authors for their hard work, undertaken during the stressful times that COVID-19 has produced, as they reworked their presentation notes and slides to double blind reviewed articles in this special issue of the *ALAR Journal*.

The first of these articles is by Vlasta Svalina and Ninočka Truck-Biljan at Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, who have looked at improving teaching English as a foreign language in a vocational school through mobile learning. Two challenges foreign

language teachers face are incorporating state-of-the-art teaching materials and the motivation of vocational school students. The project used an action research approach to motivate vocational school students to use a mobile application to learn about the culture and history of their own town using English, enhancing their skills, while also enhancing the professional teaching practice of the researcher. The lead author explains her journey in identifying the need for a method to motivate learning in her students, the mechanism, and the approach – action research – arising from her own studies. She "decided to start the change in my own educational practice with the help of action research because it involves all components in the educational process, i.e. my opinion and my students' opinions" (p. 25). She sought the assistance of a critical friend (the second author) in her research, whom she consulted during each phase of the research. By involving the students, a partnership arose between the teacher and the students, as they became active participants.

The authors used a questionnaire, diary, photographs, observation, an open-end question after completion of the activity and feedback questions asked a day later to gather data on research activity. They found the students' motivation for mobile teaching increased, although the level of resulting English language skills gained would require further assessment. The photographs and researcher's diary indicated that the students were satisfied, amused and engaged in the activity. The researcher's diary and discussions with the critical friend provided feedback to the researcher on a variety of improvements to the activity. The "students were very impressed and liked the activity so they suggested that we should repeat the same application but this time at the School Library and at the Museum in Tvrđa" (p. 37).

The next article looks at spatial planning, which as the authors, Regina Atzwanger, Peter Kurz and Regina Steiner explain, is about creating living space for present and future generations. Spatial planning relates on a very broad range of issues, including government and municipal regulation, the citizens of the

community under consideration, natural resources, ecosystems, sustainability and so on.

The authors point out that Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) aims for a meaningful and sustainable management of human-environment relationships. ESD integrates ecological, economic, social, cultural, personal and spatial areas into an overarching perspective. Sustainable development could be viewed as a "regulative idea", that one must consider when considering any reasonable question or problem.

> Spatial planning defines public spaces that everyone can use and the condition of the infrastructure. Beyond that, it determines the possibilities of supply and movement, and influences the foundations of our lives – to what extend natural habitats can be protected or disturbed, and how the limited resources land and soil could be used sustainably (p. 47).

Several countries have begun promoting communication of spatial planning issues. The researchers started with two problems – spatial planning education in Austria is weakly supported compared to other nearby countries, and there are few activities supporting awareness, knowledge and skills for students and teachers.

Using interviews, an online questionnaire, evaluation of school workshops, discussion groups and reflections from critical friends, the authors sought to answer their main research question through three sub-questions about why teachers take up the topics, what supports them, and ways to improve the materials and training. They found that "a stronger incorporation [of spatial planning] into primary school education turns out to be a multi-layered challenge" (p. 68). They identified "structural framework conditions as well as individual personal attitudes towards the topic, affecting an implementation into current school teaching" (p. 68). Their method of reflective practice also moved their thinking from ways to improve the materials and training to what the training should look like to be most effective, an area of research on which they have now embarked.

The third article is from Sonia Hutchison, who has used a very interesting technique to explore her Living Theory research. Sonia has split her voice into three voices to create different perspectives on the research. Her storyteller voice tells her story, while in her narrator voice, she provides information about her living theory research, and "analysis through the process of developing an Adlerian understanding of her early recollections" p. 78). She also uses a meta-narrator voice to discuss the content at a deeper level along with critical friends.

Sonia challenges dominant discourses, such as "children in care are more likely than the rest of the population to end up committing suicide" (p. 83), that seem almost to prevent alternatives being considered – almost a self-fulfilling prophecy. She relates her personal story and explores her journey through life in a very open and courageous way. By using Adlerian syllogisms, she was able to understand how her interpretations of her early life experiences influenced her perception of herself and how she acted. She then explores three action statements arising from syllogisms she developed. Her exploration reflects the power of the process and her courage in producing it for this paper. The use of the meta-narrator voice also encourages her to delve much deeper into this exploration.

In her research, Sonia found that an original paper, while discussing the links between parents with schizophrenia producing children with schizophrenia, also introduced

> a more hopeful premise that we will only reproduce failures
> by continuing to look at failures and it is the single success
> that we can find answers to influence further success (p. 84).

She explores how her story might have meaning and may resonate with readers, not because they have similar experiences, but rather that it will evoke images, memories and emotions in others. She relates how a colleague (a member of a research group she attends) used Sonia's story to help professionals working with children see that " ' "Good enough" is just not good enough. Low expectation will only replicate itself' (p. 97)

Amir Har-Gil and Franz Rauch present the fourth article, in which they describe making a documentary film on action research, with that process of documentary filmmaking itself being an action research project. The filming project consisted of three action research processes – the one undertaken by the teachers, that the film team filmed, the filming process itself, and the action research process the team followed.

Unlike the process of making a drama or comedy film, where the process follows the script, a documentary film starts with a plan (the script) and constantly revisits and revises that plan as life happens. The script may have several cycles before reaching its final form that allows the filming to commence, but the real-life situation the director wishes to film has not read the script, and is not bound by it. The end-of-day review of the filming may require changes to the plans for the next day as the script evolves with the filming.

The director was filming a teacher and her students, where the teacher was using action research to try to influence the behaviour of the students, and in particular for the film, the interaction between two students. The director had a film crew and a critical friend who were using action research to produce the film.

This layer upon layer is even more interesting as the authors relate the internal conflict of the film director (Har-Gil), who was challenged by not wanting to influence the "real life" unfolding in the group of teacher and students against the need for a film that is interesting and tells a story. His disappointment in the first session with the students produced a flare-up with the teacher that he then regretted. The subsequent sessions with the students, however, provided material that he could use for the film.

The authors provide many reflections on the filming process. The range of hats worn by the film director and the balancing acts he had to undertake, the presence of the camera and its potential impact on behaviours of the teacher and students, and the difficult question of whether the teacher was successful in influencing changes in behaviour. While they are harsh on the success of the

film (and readers are encouraged to view it – the link is in the article), they do recognise that

> the film might be used best as a trigger … to open a discussion about action research. The discussion might not evolve around what exists in action research as shown in the film, but about what is missing in it. This could lead to interesting and thought provoking insights (p. 127).

In our last article, Vlatka Ivić and Blaženka Šoštarić describe how they faced the challenge of gaining and maintaining the engagement of students in foreign language education by using a self-directed programme in Moodle Chat. They suggest that online reflective group discussion requires active reflection and thought organisation, and therefore "provokes deeper thinking and rethinking of our own and other people's deeds and communicating it to the others in a formal way" (p. 135).

Literature circles are a technique that "involves small, temporary discussion groups of students who have selected the same book, story, poem or article to read and discuss" (p. 138). Rather than traditional literature circles conducted in class, the authors provided the opportunity for students to conduct literature circle discussions in the Moodle Chat environment without teacher intervention. They chose to undertake this project using action research to improving the quality of learning English, their own teaching, and through communicating their learning, the quality of teaching by others. Their research therefore looked at advantages and disadvantages of the approach, as well as whether the approach helped develop other skills, such as soft skills vital for future employment.

Ivić and Šoštarić mention the many advantages of using Moodle Chat for the literature circles, including the benefit of greater involvement of less extrovert students, and the ability to review the recorded conversation for later reflection and analysis by teachers and students. The project has run over six years (since 2014/15), with students asked to reflect on the literature circles approach and to propose improvements. Over the six years 94.4% of students participated, and they spent nearly 50 minutes (55%)

more time involved in the discussions than they would have if they had undertaken the literature circles in a classroom. The authors also found students improved their soft skills. The students made many, sometimes contradictory, suggestions:

> larger vs. smaller groups, with or without roles, randomly selected groups vs. groups selected by the students, etc. …which only confirm that teachers should organise a variety of activities to cater for all the needs and learning preferences in the classroom. (p. 149)

The authors have also found that the research has helped them in preparing for the changes in teaching forced by COVID-19.

While countries struggle to deal with growing second waves of infection under COVID-19, we at ALARA hope that these articles provide insight and desire to explore further the issues covered. We also look forward to when action learning and action research practitioners will meet again, virtually or face-to-face, for further engrossing discussions about action learning / action research projects.

This issue also sees the introduction of a summary box for each article. Readers can provide their feedback on this initiative and suggestions for the questions the editors should ask of the authors (as we seek to find the questions that provide the best content for our readers). Please contact ALARA at admin@alarassociation.org.

Colin Bradley
September 2020

# Mobile learning in the English language teaching classroom: How to improve teaching English as a foreign language in a vocational school

Vlasta Svalina and Ninočka Truck-Biljan

## Abstract

*The main aim of this action research was to investigate the possibility of the improvement of teaching English as a foreign language in a vocational school in Croatia. The main research questions focused on discovering what could enhance student motivation while learning a foreign language, how a teacher could facilitate student ownership of learning, and what were the possibilities of using a mobile application and the topic of cultural heritage in order to foster learning. Previous studies have failed to address innovative foreign language teaching and learning approaches in secondary vocational schools. The action research methods included an anonymous survey, teachers' observation and written interviewing. The collected data was analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. Conclusions that could be drawn encompass the positive students' feedback and practical implications for the vocational school English language curriculum. Students' participation at all stages of the action research made them active partners and thus owners of their learning.*

**Key words:** action research, cultural heritage, ELT (English language teaching) classroom, mobile learning, motivation

### What is known about the topic?

New trends in foreign language teaching involves teaching and learning via portable devices, such as mobile phones, to enhance students' motivation and to teach them more about the main concepts of their own cultural heritage, while also preparing young people for the job market in the European Union and the rest of the world through a modern approach to teaching foreign languages.

### What does this paper add?

The paper is the realization of a new curriculum that emphasizes the development of communication competence, digital literacy and intercultural competence using a mobile phone app to motivate the students to learn English and about their own culture and history. The development of those competencies is also an important educational goal for foreign language teachers.

### Who will benefit from its content?

Teachers of foreign languages in vocational schools and their students will benefit from the content of this study.

### What is the relevance to AL and AR scholars and practitioners?

- By including the students as partners in collaborative action researches, teachers as action researchers could make them associates in the process of the subject curriculum development;

- The role of a critical friend, as an action research concept, was to provide support for critical reflexion, give constructive and impartial feedback and ensure objectivity during every stage of the action research process;

- Action research could enable a collaboration and strengthen the interaction between two educational levels, i. e. the secondary school and the university, and thus open two different perspectives on a problem;

- This action research could be an example of solving real-life problems that involve taking action, learning during the process and reflecting upon the results;

- Action research is a powerful way of getting an insight into theory and teaching practice and could be implemented in the ELT classroom in order to improve both teaching and learning.

## Introduction

Due to the recent curricular reform programme School for Life in the Republic of Croatia, numerous teachers need to adapt to the curriculum changes and technology development in Croatian classrooms. Following new trends in foreign language teaching

involves teaching and learning via portable devices, such as mobile phones, to enhance students' motivation and to teach them more about the main concepts of their own cultural heritage. In addition, the reform is also designed in such a way to prepare young people for the job market in the European Union and the rest of the world through a modern approach to teaching foreign languages, which includes citizenship and cross-curricular topics, as well as the application of modern teaching methods and technology.

The focus of this paper is important because it is fundamentally the realization of a new curriculum that emphasizes the development of communication competence, digital literacy and intercultural competence, i.e. knowing one's own culture and appreciating the culture of the country of the target language. The development of competencies is an important educational outcome for students on the one hand, but also an important educational goal for the teacher on the other hand.

Being a foreign language teacher in a vocational school of economics and administration in Croatia has both advantages and disadvantages related to the adaptation of the curriculum to the particularities of the profession and the interests of the students. In the Republic of Croatia, one or even two foreign languages are obligatory subjects during the non-compulsory 3-year or 4-year secondary education, and they are taught from A2 to B2 level according to the Common European Framework of References for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001). Being a dominant business language, English is the first foreign language learned by the majority of the vocational school students in Croatia. The curricula for vocational schools differ from grammar school curricula in a way that they incorporate English as a global language, as well as English for specific purposes. So, two of the most interesting educational challenges for foreign language teachers are incorporating the state-of-the-art teaching materials on the one hand and dealing with motivation of vocational school students on the other. Given these challenges, teachers constantly try to improve and update their theoretical knowledge and skills through continuous professional development organized by the

Ministry of Education. For example, extensive in-service teacher training that links theory and practice gives all foreign language teachers the unique opportunity to act as reflective practitioners and implement action research in order to solve their own professional problems and improve their teaching practice. This paper presents action research aimed to motivate vocational school students to use a mobile application in order to learn some interesting facts about the culture and history of their hometown and enhance their English language skills, as well as to enhance the professional teaching practice and motivation of a teacher.

## Cultural heritage and mobile learning

There are many studies focused on the value of cultural heritage and its role in the learning process. For the purposes of the present paper, the following definition of the Council of Europe's Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (Zagato, 2015, p. 144) has been applied.

> Cultural heritage is a group of resources inherited from the past which people identify, independently of ownership, as a reflection and expression of their constantly evolving values, beliefs, knowledge and traditions.

It includes all aspects of the environment resulting from the interaction between people and places through time. Some authors speak of cultural heritage in general, while others focus their studies on particular types of heritage, such as built heritage, movable heritage, archaeological heritage, etc. (Dümcke & Gnedovsky, 2013, p. 6). According to a study by Cramer "both cultural education and cultural heritage education are left more to the teacher's and the heritage educators' personal appreciation" (as cited in Gesche-Koning, 2018). Gesche-Koning claims that "cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, concerns both the past and the present, integrating also the arts" (2018, p. 9). However, Ott and Pozzi (2011) claim that the use of ICT (Information Communication Technology) may contribute to people realizing that the past is important and to appreciating the "Knowledge Society" of today. According to March, different web tools like

WebQuests "have been pointed out as a powerful method allowing inquiry-oriented activities based on online resources" (as cited in Ott & Pozzi, 2011, p. 3). The same authors (Ott & Pozzi, 2011) write about ICT as a tool, which offers numerous possibilities of discovering new, unexplored links to provide a "global" point of view of Cultural Heritage. García-Sampedro (2018) claims that learning outside the classroom involves non-formal settings, higher motivation and unforgettable experience embedded with heritage as a context of learning.

The above-mentioned studies show that the topic of cultural heritage is not only significant because of its cultural and historical importance for a single country or a specific town, but for cultural awareness on a much larger scale. The studies also indicate that the topic offers numerous possibilities for both outdoor and indoor activities. Above all, because of the lack of cultural topics and issues in English language lessons in the curriculum, and its importance for the economy and tourism in the eastern part of Croatia, it is vital to integrate cultural education and cultural heritage education into Croatian classrooms. Learners need to recognize and understand their own values and attitudes in order to develop a broader understanding of others and the world around them. In an interesting study of socialization, Kim (2003) writes that both cultural and linguistic symbolic systems are important because they play an important role in shaping the individual and his or her perceptions of the persona. Moreover, Phinney argues that:

> … independent of their self-identification, people can have both positive and negative attitudes toward their own group. These attitudes have been examined in over half of the studies reviewed by the author. Positive attitudes include pride, pleasure, satisfaction, or contentment with one's own group (1990, p. 11).

The use of different motivational strategies plays an important role in every subject at school, including foreign languages. According to Dörnyei, "motivational strategies are techniques that promote the individual's goal-related behaviour" (2001, p. 18). The author

explains what key factors are included in motivational teaching practice. Furthermore, the main components of motivation in foreign language teaching are creating the basic motivational conditions, generating initial motivation, maintaining and protecting motivation and encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation. Firstly, in creating the basic motivational conditions three important factors must be considered, appropriate teacher behaviours, a pleasant and supportive classroom atmosphere and a cohesive learner group with appropriate group norms. Secondly, generating initial motivation means to enhance learners' values and attitudes toward a foreign language, to increase their success expectancy, to make teaching materials learner-friendly and to create realistic beliefs. Thirdly, maintaining and protecting motivation means according to Dörnyei (2001), to make learning enjoyable, to present tasks, to set learners' outcomes, to protect / increase their self-esteem, to allow them to have a positive social image, to create their own autonomy, to promote their strategies for self-motivation and cooperation among other learners. The last, but also very important factor is encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation, which means, to promote motivation itself, to provide feedback, to increase their satisfaction, to offer rewards and grades (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 29). Dörnyei (1990, p. 3), one of the first authors to write about motivation while teaching a foreign language, states that students' aim is to master the foreign language as well as possible while learning it at least partly in the host environment. The same author (Dörnyei, 2018, p. 1) notes that "motivation concerns the direction and magnitude of human behaviour, explaining the choice of a particular action, persistence in it, and the effort expended on it". In addition, Alizadeh (2016) emphasises motivation as a key factor for success or failure, and states that success in a task leads to motivated students and that a learner can be successful with the right motivation. The author Kabooha (2016, p. 1) thinks that the acquisition of a second or foreign language is certainly one of the most challenging things "a person may experience in his or her lifetime" and recommends the use of well-selected film clips to motivate students in learning a target language. Gamlo (2019) also focuses on motivating students

and discusses his study which showed that using the application called Learn English Grammar in grammar lessons was more effective than traditional teaching methods. Authors Talandis and Stout (2014) conducted an action research about students' motivation concerning learning foreign languages and stated that their analysis "revealed that [they] had achieved [their] course objectives" (p. 10). Their basic aim was to show the students that speaking English was a reachable aim.

Regarding mobile learning, there are many ways the authors explain its meaning. Behera (2013) summarizes mobile learning as deliverance of education using any portable device. Sönmez, Göçmez, Uygun and Ataizi (2018) emphasize that mobile learning is an attractive tool as it enables students not only to obtain information but also to communicate and socialize at any time and any place. The authors define it as a new emerging technology in education. One of the pioneers concerning mobile learning, Prensky (2006), claims that children today want to be engaged and points out that their games not only do that but also teach them valuable lessons just the way we want them to learn. Furthermore, Prensky (2001) calls these students of today Digital Natives, the ones who are native speakers in the way of the digital language and the digital virtual world. Matijević and Topolovčan (2017) point out a discrepancy among experts: those who claim that students are addicted to smart phones and those who see positive opportunities in using the same tool in their classrooms. They claim that from the pedagogical perspective mobile learning is a challenge for both pedagogists and psychologists and that it is important to teach children from their early childhood how to make use of new technologies in their daily lives. The authors also claim that the school's task is to educate students how to use these interactive programmes using Web 3.0 technologies on their smart phones and tablets.

## Defining the research problem and research context

In Croatian vocational schools of economics and administration, there are three major study programmes: Administrative Clerks,

Business Secretaries and Economists. All the students enrolled in the Administrative Clerks and Business Secretaries programme continue to learn the foreign language which they have learned for five or eight years in elementary school. Therefore, at the beginning of secondary school it is their 6th or 9th year of learning this foreign language. They can also choose a second foreign language, usually German or Italian. In Croatian primary schools, one foreign language – usually English – is a compulsory subject from the 1st to the 8th grade. Most schools offer another foreign language, usually German, as an optional subject from the 4th to the 8th grade. According to the Croatian National Curriculum, there are some differences in the levels, meaning that the first foreign language should be taught at A2-B2 level, whereas the second foreign language should be taught at A1-B1 level. In secondary schools, students usually continue learning the compulsory subject as their first foreign language and the optional subject as their second foreign language. However, there are some students who decide to "change" their first language during the transition from primary to secondary education and continue to learn the language they have learned for fewer years. Possible reasons for poorer grades in secondary school are poor previous knowledge, poor grades in primary school and choosing to learn the second foreign language as their first in secondary school. There is also the well-known practice that excellent students for the most part enrol in grammar schools, whereas students with very good, good or even sufficient grades choose vocational schools for their future education. However, the English curriculum for vocational school programmes such as the Administrative Clerks programme is created for more advanced students and encompasses elements of English as a global language, as well as English for specific purposes in all four years.

My contribution as co-author of this paper is my teaching background. I[1] have been teaching both English and German as the

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[1] This part of the text is written in the first person singular as the first author (teacher) has conducted the survey in her own classroom practice with the help of the second author (senior lecturer) who was her critical friend.

first and second foreign language for the past 21 years at the School of Economics and Administration in Osijek, Croatia. In addition to being a secondary school teacher, I was promoted to a teacher-mentor and then to my present status as a teacher-advisor. In addition, during the past ten years I have been the head of the Osijek-Baranja County Council for English language vocational school teachers, in charge of the in-service teacher training.

This year's generation of third graders (school year 2019/2020), who learn English as the first foreign language at the Secondary School for Economics and Administration in Osijek, Croatia, have been learning English for 11 years and they have not shown themselves to be especially interested in "traditional" teaching and learning. English language skills are very important for students of secondary vocational schools in Croatia. According to the Ministry of Science and Education

> Learning and teaching English encourages and ensures the development of communicative and intercultural competence, contributes to the overall development of students and has a positive effect on the development of all core competencies (OG, 2019, p. 3[2]).

According to the Decision on the Subject Curriculum for English in Secondary Vocational Schools at Level 4.2., the educational objectives of course teaching include among others "independent and accurate use of language in speech and writing in different contexts of the school, local and wider community, including the digital environment" (ibid, 2019, p. 3). The importance of understanding and respecting other cultures and one´s own culture is well explained in the following quotation:

> Starting from the realization that language is a means of communication, students develop the ability to understand, express and use strategies for acquiring knowledge about

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[2] Decision on the Subject Curriculum for English in Secondary Vocational Schools at Level 4.2. in the Republic of Croatia. NN 10/2019, (211). NN 102/2017. Zagreb, Croatia: Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia; 2019 (in Croatian, translated by the authors).

> language and develop a general idea of language as a
> system. In addition, they master the language activities
> required to communicate with native and non-native
> speakers. By communicating, they learn to recognize and
> respect the uniqueness of other cultures, develop cultural
> awareness, intercultural competence and multiculturalism,
> and build their own positions and roles in different
> communication relationships. This develops the
> competencies needed for lifelong development (2019, p. 3).

However, in the meantime, my students have not made the progress that was expected. Although I have tried to motivate them for learning by using different strategies, in different ways, so far only mobile learning has proved to be of interest, as they have always been ready to solve tasks by means of mobile devices – their smartphones. One example of a popular activity among my students is *Kahoot!*, a game-based learning platform that is very often used for educational purposes, and currently very popular among foreign language teachers and students at all levels of education in Croatia. The students like it the most and even prepare the tasks themselves. Licorish, Owen, Daniel and George claim that:

> participants reported that the use of Kahoot! fostered
> interactivity and engagement during lectures, through
> answering questions, participating in quizzes, and
> discussions triggered by Kahoot!. The use of Kahoot!
> encouraged wider participation in class as opposed to
> conventional classrooms where discussions are often
> dominated by a few extraverted students (2018, p. 795).

While teaching these third grade students, studying literature and recent research in this field and after much consideration on how to improve the foreign language skills of students at a vocational school, I came up with the idea to implement mobile learning about cultural heritage during English language lessons. However, the idea to use action research came gradually.

Because of my wish to enhance my professional teaching practice, both as a reflective practitioner and a teacher, I decided to enrol in the Postgraduate doctoral study programme in Pedagogy and

Modern School Culture at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Osijek, Croatia. My particular field of interest includes foreign language teaching and personal and professional development of teachers within that context, as a part of lifelong learning. Since I have for the most part concentrated more on language teaching and learning approaches in secondary vocational schools, I felt the need to focus more closely on pedagogy as a science of education. Since pedagogy is not my primary profession, the postgraduate doctoral study programme was especially beneficial for me as it broadened my knowledge about students' motivational and educational aspects of both formal and informal learning.

Furthermore, the doctoral studies led to my involvement in the action research programme led by Dr. Branko Bognar, Head of the Postgraduate doctoral study programme in Pedagogy and Modern School Culture at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Osijek, who pioneered action research in Croatia. I was particularly interested in this type of research because it involves changes in both perspectives with me as a teacher and a researcher at the same time. I decided to start the change in my own educational practice with the help of action research because it involves all components in the educational process, i.e. my opinion and my students' opinions. Bognar (2006) claims that the main point of action research is the action itself, and the data gathered are teacher's feedback to improve and change the activities in the teaching process if necessary. What is more important, the author states that the teachers in the modern school who cope with changes cannot be only "users" of the results of different research data but they should also be active participants in the whole process of research. Since action research includes the concept of a critical friend, a senior lecturer from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Osijek, was invited to act as a critical friend. According to McNiff (2002), critical feedback and evaluation are crucial for the quality of the action research: "Your critical friend (also called a 'critical colleague' or 'learning partner') is someone whose opinion you value and who is able to critique your work and help you see it in a new light" (McNiff, 2002, p. 22). The critical

friend in this particular case is also a foreign language teacher, a colleague and the co-author of this paper. Her role was to provide support, give constructive and impartial feedback during every stage of the action research process and ensure objectivity during planning, collecting and analysing data.

## Methodology and research questions

The methodology for this action research included the following steps as suggested by McNiff and Whitehead (2010, p. 10): identifying the research issue; identifying research aims and formulation of research questions; setting out a research design; taking action; gathering data; generating evidence; making a claim to knowledge and linking it with existing knowledge; testing the validity of the claim and submitting the claim to critique; explaining the potential significance of the study and generating theory from the research.

The aim of this action research was to motivate vocational school students to use a mobile application in order to enhance their English language skills and learn some interesting facts about the culture and history of their hometown.

My research questions were:

1. What increases student motivation while learning a foreign language?

2. How can a teacher of English as a foreign language facilitate students' ownership over their learning?

3. Does mobile teaching promote positive students' feedback and their active participation?

The action research methods included an anonymous survey, observation by the teacher described partially in the researcher's diary, photographing, and written interviewing. During the research, a questionnaire, a researcher's diary and an open-ended question were used as instruments in order to increase the credibility and validity of the results by instrumental triangulation. The first survey was conducted by the first open-ended

questionnaire before the action research and the second one after the action research. The major ethical issues, such as informed consent and respect for the anonymity of the participants, during conducting this action research were respected.

The first instrument, a questionnaire, consisted of the socio-demographic part, asking for the gender and the age of the participants. There were six closed questions: 'How familiar are you with e-learning as a teaching method?'; 'How often do you use technology in the classroom?'; 'How often do you use technology outside of the classroom?'; 'How often do you mention the culture of the town of Osijek during any subject?'; 'How would you estimate your knowledge in the subject English language?'; 'How would you describe your satisfaction with former and current teaching at your school?'. There were also two statements for expressing the level of agreement or disagreement: 'I am interested in the culture of the town of Osijek.' and 'I am interested in the English language as a subject.' The questionnaire had the following yes-no question: 'Would you like to apply modern technology in teaching, that asks for further explanation (If yes, how?)'. The questions covered the three main topics: the use of e-learning and technology inside and outside of the classroom, the topic of the culture and history of the town, and English as a foreign language as a school subject. The questions aimed at habits and opinions were answered using a five-point Likert-type scale, where one (1) was either not at all / rarely / never/ a little / bad – depending on the question, and five (5) was either often / always / totally / or excellent – again depending on the question. There was also one yes-no-question. The two last questions asked for explanations and therefore were created as open-ended questions.

The researcher's diary was based on the teacher's direct field observations during the action research. The students were photographed during each phase of the action research. A final open-ended question used in the post-action research phase was the instrument that aimed at obtaining feedback and opinions from the students. All the questions were written in Croatian, because the intention of the action researchers was to obtain the students'

opinions and their feedback instead of testing their English language proficiency.

In order to increase the objectivity and validity of this action research, a critical friend was consulted during each phase. The students were asked about their opinions and ideas during the planning, conducting and evaluation of the action research. By including the students in the action research process, a certain partnership between the teacher and the students and among the students themselves was created. The students were not seen as a sample, but rather as active participants and partners. Although McNiff (2002, p. 22) talks about the people from the professional circle of the action researcher, the students could be considered as a validation group because they offered very useful and honest critical feedback.

## Action accompanied by data gathering

In cooperation and agreement with my third grade students, I decided to conduct an Actionbound survey that included questions related to cultural heritage, as well as general knowledge of English. The sample for this action research consisted of 19 students (n = 19), with 17 female and two male students. Six students were 16 years old, and 13 of them were 17 years old, although age was not considered to be relevant for this research. What is Actionbound? It is an application designed "for playing digitally interactive scavenger hunts to lead the learner on a path of discovery" (Actionbound, n.d.) through "multimedia-based hunts" called 'Bounds' (ibid.). A Bound is an interactive hunt and it is a similar game to other scavenger hunts but it also includes the Internet, media files and content created by the player. This application is a part of augmented reality, where real and virtual worlds merge in an interaction through the use of smartphones or other devices. The persons who prepare and create tasks, usually in form of quizzes or missions, create a timeline of places with the use of QR-codes, GPS coordinates and puzzles, questions or mysteries. In the educational context, the teacher creates a 'Bound' – a place where the students should come using GPS. Coming to

the appropriate place, they should have answered the questions or completed the task given by the ´Bound´.

My students and I, together with my critical friend, planned to use the mobile Application – Actionbound – during a 45-minute English lesson outside the classroom in October 2019. The students were supposed to learn elements of Civic Education, which is a new subject in the Croatian vocational schools' curricula according to the new Curricular Reform in 2019. The students were supposed to learn some interesting facts from the history and culture of the old part of town, use English throughout the Actionbound activity and practice the use of information and communication technology. All content in the application was in English. The topic of the lesson was getting to know the old part of the town of Osijek – Tvrđa. I have thoroughly and thoughtfully prepared the mission in advance by writing different questions and assigning tasks that related to all four skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. The students had to scan the QR code and start the Mission and then they were able to choose which 'Bound' to do first. If they did not know the answers, they had the option to skip the task. They could see the points they accumulated and they could stop when they were satisfied with the achieved points.

Before the Actionbound outdoor activity, the students had been given a 45-minute lesson in the classroom on how to use the application and how to download it on their IOS and Android devices. The application supports both operating systems. The students were divided into groups of three or four. Informed consent was the major ethical issue in conducting this action research. All students signed the consents for being photographed and for the questionnaires. They were previously given oral and written assurances that their statements (answers to the open-ended questions) will be used only for research purposes, and that their written and photographic material will be kept anonymous. The majority of the students consented to be photographed for the purposes of the research. Permission to carry out the action research had been previously sought of the principal, and in collaboration with the school pedagogue, we checked that all

students had permission to be involved in outdoor classes. The preparations took longer than the implementation itself, but this did not discourage me, but rather gave me the strength, enthusiasm and wish to continue my action research. It encouraged me because I did not want to disappoint my students and diminish their desire for continuing learning English with the help of mobile learning inside and outside the classroom.

The activity took part in Tvrđa (Eng. Fortress). It is a beautiful old historical baroque part of the town of Osijek, the district centre of the region of Slavonia and Baranya in the eastern part of Croatia. There were three main stages: Grammar, Vocabulary and Evaluation. Each stage encompassed from one to three locations. The number of locations depended on their walking distance from the starting point. Each location, for example the Votive Statue of the Holy Trinity or the Archaeological Museum of Osijek, was described in up to 10 sentences in English. All the stages consisted of different task types, such as gap filling, multiple choice or sentence completion tasks, for example: "Complete the sentence with the Past Perfect or the Past Perfect Continuous form of the verb in the brackets", or "Why did the church need renovating?" Everything was in English. The students had to find the spot, to take a selfie in front of a certain found object and do the tasks. The students enjoyed interacting with me in case they needed something explained. Most of all, the students were very excited about the Actionbound application with which they were collecting points. After some time, the first team came with all the correct answers and they were declared winners because they scored the most points. The students were very happy after the winner was declared. During the following class in the school, I asked them if they wanted an oral interview or to write down their opinions on a piece of paper. They told me they would rather write their opinions. Some signed their papers, some wanted to remain anonymous and only one student present did not want to give his/her opinion. The fact that almost all students explained their opinions in more than two sentences and described their feelings of satisfaction in English could be considered as proof of a successfully organized and conducted action. This outdoor activity

shaped teaching and learning around an interesting application and the mobile phones that students currently use and like, during an enjoyable outdoor class according to a well-prepared lesson plan and the action research plan.

I was happy because the mission was successfully completed, and all the outcomes were achieved. It was obvious according to the photographs and my critical friend's opinion that the students were happy, satisfied and motivated for further mobile language learning.

## Data analysis procedures

The gathered data was analysed quantitatively and quantitatively. The results of the Actionbound application were calculated on the spot and checked by examining the screenshots with the final scores. The group with the best score was declared the winner by the students and their teacher. The photographs of screenshots were afterwards examined and analysed by the teacher and the critical friend.

Since the students wrote answers in Croatian, the critical friend and I first translated all the answers from the questionnaire and the written interview into English. The closed questions from the questionnaires were quantitatively analysed by the SPSS 20 Programme for Statistics. The researcher´s diary was analysed qualitatively. It was analysed in such a way that the chronological sequence of events during the research process was monitored and attention was paid to statements that referred to the teacher´s opinions. The answers to open-ended questions in the questionnaire and the final open-ended question, which the students had to write after the finished action in Tvrđa, as well as during the follow-up lesson at school, were analysed qualitatively. The students' papers with answers (the written interview) were translated, read, and the key phrases were identified, named and categorized. The phenomena were described according to semantic relationships. All the quantitative and qualitative data analysis procedures were conducted by the author and the critical friend in order to achieve objectivity and the researcher's triangulation.

## Results and discussion

Nineteen third grade students (n = 19) who participated in the outdoor lesson, completed the questionnaire after the action. The quantitative descriptive analysis of seven closed questions showed that slightly more than a half of the students (53%) had a small familiarity with e-learning as a teaching method, that many of them (74%) sometimes use technology in the classroom, but that the vast majority (79%) of the students use technology outside the classroom. When asked about the frequency of mentioning the culture of the town of Osijek during any subject, more than the half of the students (58%) stated "rarely". However, 48% of the students were a little, and more than 30 percent (32%) quite interested in the culture. More than half of the students (58%) estimated their English language skills and knowledge as good. It is very unusual that the same number of students, exactly 32%, were very little, a little bit, and quite interested in the subject English as a foreign language. Approximately one third of the students (32%) declared that they were satisfied with their former and current teaching at their school. However, 90% of the students concluded that they would like to apply modern technology in teaching. It could be concluded that the students have more interest for modern technology than for the culture of their town. Although they are moderately satisfied with their former and current lessons and methods of teaching, the vast majority would like to apply modern technology in the classroom. From their self-evaluation, it could be concluded that the students are aware of their rather average level of English language skills and knowledge.

In the last question, the students needed to explain how they would like to apply modern technology in instruction (during lessons), and 15 of them wrote a few sentences giving some interesting suggestions. The data was analysed through the process of naming and categorizing key terms mentioned in the answers into six categories (see Table 1). A fourth of the students (27%) mentioned the use of mobile phones.

| How? | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| No response | 4 | 21.1 | 21.1 | 21.1 |
| Quizzes | 4 | 21.1 | 21.1 | 42.1 |
| Applications | 3 | 15.8 | 15.8 | 57.9 |
| Interesting activities | 1 | 5.3 | 5.3 | 63.2 |
| **Mobile phones** | **5** | **26.3** | **26.3** | **89.5** |
| Smartboards | 1 | 5.3 | 5.3 | 94.7 |
| Presentations | 1 | 5.3 | 5.3 | 100.0 |
| Total | 19 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Table 1: *How would you like to apply modern technology in teaching?*

The quantitative analysis of 17 written answers to final open-ended questions distributed after the outdoor activity shed some light on the way the students reacted to the Actionbound activity. The quantitative semantical analysis revealed five categories that could be named as: 'Yes or no?', 'Why?', 'Where?', 'How?', and 'When in the future?' All students felt very positively about the outdoor activity. When giving reasons, they mentioned the following things: "the advancement of technology"; "not classical teaching"; "positive atmosphere, successful completion of the task"; "the professor's cheerfulness"; "companionship"; "learning English"; "getting to know the town and learning English"; "repetition of vocabulary and grammar of English"; "competitive spirit"; "indirect learning"; "team games"; "a new way of modern learning"; "we worked together" (anonymous sources). They also suggested that this way of teaching should be applied in history lessons. The category 'How?' described how they felt during the outdoor classroom activity. They used the following words: "cheerful"; "interested"; "pleased with the accomplishment"; "fun"; "socializing"; "being cheered up"; "laughter"; "instructive"; "hard-

working"; "enthusiastic"; "excited"; "proud"; "splendid", and
"overjoyed". Two of the students wrote about the future actions
(category "When in the future?") stating that they expect similar
activities in the future, hoping that their teacher was satisfied with
their results. One of the answers deserved to be fully cited, because
it mentions all the segments of the planned action research:
language, culture and history and motivation:

> I really like the Actionbound app. We worked in groups,
> communicating with each other, repeating vocabulary and
> English grammar, and learning about the history of Osijek.
> It was interesting and helpful and I think it would be good
> if we worked in this way in other subjects as well (an
> anonymous student).

The results showed that students were less motivated before
implementing mobile teaching by Actionbound. It also showed
that their opinions changed after the outdoor activity.
Consequently, it may be concluded that the undertaken action had
an impact on their motivation. Whether it had an obvious impact
on their English language skills and whether it improved their
knowledge in the field of culture and heritage remained an issue to
be further investigated by questionnaires, quizzes or tests. The
students managed to find all the clues and answer the questions
and they also claimed to have learned a lot. However, those claims
could not be real evidence of acquired knowledge. All groups were
satisfied because they acquired some points and learned a lot
about the place where they attend school and revised English
vocabulary and grammar.

All the photos were collected and analysed. The students
photographed themselves in front of the Bounds they found,
looking satisfied and amused.

The researcher's diary was read in order to re-examine and
reconstruct the chronological sequence of undertaken activities
before, during and after the implementation of the action by means
of the Actionbound application. According to the notes from the
diary, while preparing for the outdoor activity, I was concerned
about what the weather would be like, and whether everything I

had planned would be completed in a predetermined time. I was also a little bit worried that some of the students would not be sufficiently interested in participating actively. During the activity, I tried to follow individual teams and record my observations in a diary. Although I carefully selected important locations, I later realized that I needed to think more about the distance between them. Some teams of students had to walk faster in order to visit every location they were given in the application. When analysing the diary entries, I realised that when planning outdoor activities, it was important for the teacher to walk the entire route on her own, to be able to accurately determine the time needed to get from point to point, from location to location. I was very pleased to see the happy faces of students proudly showing each other their cell phone screens with results, and at that moment, I noted in my diary that it would be good to take screenshots of their cell phones so that it would also count as proof of a successful activity. My preconceived idea about how the students might react and work was incorrect, because all of them were interested, understood the written instructions, and solved all grammar and vocabulary tasks. The outdoor activity timeline has proven to be well planned. The last sentence from the diary could be seen as a certain conclusion from the teacher's perspective:

> I felt happy because my mission was fulfilled, the outcomes
> were achieved and the students were satisfied and
> motivated to continue developing their digital literacy,
> intercultural competence, and English language learning
> (the teacher).

During the retrospective evaluation, the feedback from the critical friend and the students as a validation group was collected. The critical friend expressed her positive opinion about the carefully planned outdoor activity. If I were to repeat the Actionbound activity, I would plan each step in advance in more detail. I realized that the post-activity phase should include students´ discussions and sharing their learning experiences, presenting what was learned in an interesting way in form of photo-exhibitions, posters, short essays, etc. The teacher and the students should summarize the experience of connecting the cultural

heritage, the English language and using a modern mobile application. Such outdoor activities could be incorporated into the subject curriculum. My diary and the discussions with my critical friend gave me the insights to what could be improved. I have learned a lot about this new approach to teaching.

The previously stated research questions were taken into consideration once again:

1.    What increases the students' motivation while learning a foreign language?

2.    How can a teacher of English as a foreign language facilitate the students' ownership over their learning?

3.    Does mobile teaching promote positive students' feedback and their active participation?

The interesting and previously well-planned outdoor educational activity that combined modern mobile technology, mobile phones, culture and heritage, cooperative learning as a part of Civic Education, and English as a foreign language as a means of communication, managed to increase student motivation. According to the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the gathered data, 17 students expressed their positive opinions and reported increased motivation for learning the subject content and language. Therefore, the first research question was answered. As for the second research question, the mere action research in its different stages from the stating of the problem and planning, through the implication of a certain action and evaluation, could be seen as a good opportunity to include students as partners rather than just participants. Their active role as a validation group could help the ELT to facilitate the students' ownership over their learning. By including the students as partners in collaborative action researches, one could make them associates in the process of the subject curriculum development at a vocational school. That could be the answer to the second research question. The Actionbound outdoor activity has promoted positive feedback and the students' active participation. Therefore, the claim to knowledge could be that the mobile learning in the ELT classroom

could motivate students for learning the content of the subject through English as a means and for learning English as a foreign language as a subject and thus improve teaching and learning at a vocational school. This claim to knowledge could be validated by applying similar activities in the future with different groups of students and by implementing the activity into the subject curriculum within the vocational school curriculum. According to the previously mentioned steps in the action research, the claim to knowledge could be submitted to critique (according to McNiff and Whitehead, 2010) by publishing the research and making it available to the public.

## Implications for practice and future research

According to the analysed data gathered by different instruments, the students were very impressed and liked the activity so they suggested that we should repeat the same application but this time at the School Library and at the Museum in Tvrđa. The Actionbound application activity could be seen as an example of good practice, because it may be used in different subjects, like history, or the Croatian language. The students could be motivated to search for additional information in the virtual world and encouraged to bring together the knowledge that they acquired in different subjects. The student and the teacher could organise outdoor activities. The application could help a teacher to put theory into practice and motivate students for learning by using their mobile devices. It could also enhance creativity. The potential significance of the study lies in combining a modern approach to teaching and learning about cultural heritage in English in order to motivate students for learning and developing communicative skills in English as a foreign language in a vocational school.

The learnings from this action research could improve future teaching and learning by means of motivating modern technologies. As applications develop and change rapidly, better collaboration could be achieved with students who could suggest teaching applications. Teachers also need to monitor the development of the IT and mobile applications if they want to

refresh their teaching strategies and make teaching more interesting to students. This action research can be used as a basis for similar action researches in the future. It should always be checked in advance whether students have the necessary mobile phone access, which needs to be taken into consideration during lesson and action research planning.

The further follow-up activities could include, for example, testing students' English and subject knowledge afterwards in order to see whether there were some improvements, preparing an exhibition of short student essays, posters or photographs, as well as possibly repeating the action research and including this mobile teaching and learning activity in the formal English as a foreign language curriculum at vocational schools.

## Concluding remarks

The analysis of the data collected before, during and after the implementation of the action research using mobile learning outside the classroom revealed that the research questions have been answered in the following way:

1. The students' motivation while learning a foreign language could be increased by introducing modern technology and modern teaching methods on the one hand, as well as facilitating independent learning on the other hand. Interesting topics and well formulated tasks together with the teacher's support and cooperation encourages students to excel;

2. English language teachers could facilitate students' ownership over their learning by careful pre-planning and the use of modern teaching materials;

3. Mobile teaching promotes positive attitudes and active participation.

Therefore, our claim to knowledge could be that mobile teaching and learning could improve motivation, English as a foreign language competence, speaking while walking and looking for

bounds, reading tasks, listening to each other and writing the answers in the application, cultural competence and develop interest for learning about culture and heritage in a foreign language. In addition, the students and their teacher developed better cooperation. All participants in this action research enhanced their reflexive approach to teaching and learning. Action research is a powerful way of getting an insight into theory and teaching practice and could be implemented in the ELT classroom in order to improve both teaching and learning.

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## Biographies
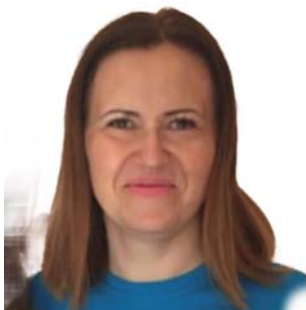
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# Spatial planning as a topic in primary school classes

## Regina Atzwanger, Peter Kurz and Regina Steiner

## Abstract

Spatial planning is about creating living space for present and future generations. However, participation in this area, which affects all people directly, requires knowledge and a reflected engagement with the basics of spatial use and design. One of the few programs of support on this topic for primary schools in Austria are workshops and teaching materials as part of the project "Spatial Planning Takes on School" of the Environmental Education Centre Styria. A team comprising of a teacher and two teacher trainers is evaluating and further developing this support program by means of Action Research. The research question is: "How should teaching materials and teacher training be designed so that teachers are able and willing to integrate the topic of spatial planning into their teaching?" This question is explored in a research design linking personal experience in conducting the workshops with data gained from outside perspectives.

**Key words:** Education for Sustainable Development, participation, primary teacher education and training, spatial planning, teaching material

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**What is known about the topic?**

The topic of spatial planning is considered relevant for sustainable development. Appropriate competences of a broader population can contribute to the idea that land use issues should be negotiated in a participatory way to be sustainable.

Research into current teaching materials on this topic in the German-speaking countries provided only meagre results: The very few support measures were mainly designed for the secondary level and some of them were not up to date and there

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was no evidence that this material had been tested or evaluated.

### What does this paper add?

The paper discusses a novel application of spatial planning as a topic in primary schools in Austria and possibilities to cultivate competence in that area.

Participative Action Research (PAR) helped to evaluate further develop measures for implementing this topic in school. For that purpose, one of the astonishing results was that teacher training seems to be far more important than teaching material and school workshops.

### Who will benefit from its content?

The findings could be interesting for primary school teachers and teacher trainers, especially for in-service training, and persons responsible for designing curricula.

### What is the relevance to AL and AR scholars and practitioners?

- The paper shows an example of PAR, where an Action researcher and two external experts set out on a journey together. On the way, they experience unexpected alterations of interests and research aims.

- It could be interesting for scholars and practitioners to see that the principles of AR correspond very well to the educational concept of Education for Sustainable Development, because both define a reflective shaping of society as a target perspective. We see the link between action research and Education for Sustainable Development in a concept of learning that unfolds in autonomous and cross-linked as well as research-reflective engagement with the world.

# Introduction

When pupils are mature enough to spend time in the community without their families, this also affects the network of extra-familial social affiliations, economic and spatial aspects that make up the larger living space of every human being (Downs & Stea, 1982). In the Austrian curriculum, the topic "Spatial Planning" is located in the learning field of "space" ("geographical perspective") as part of the social and natural sciences, where children have to learn, for example, "to understand the relationship between man and landscape by means of a practical example" (BMBWF, 2012, p. 97).

It is precisely this living space that spatial planning also deals with (ÖREK, 2011). What makes this theme so relevant for our time and interesting for children is that:

- everybody lives in this relationship and has immediate access to it;

- it is necessary to maintain a mindful approach to our living space that maintains natural resources (Essl et al., 2018; Weber, 2019);

- there are now major ecological, but also economic and social problems due to the overuse of space and soil (Umweltbundesamt, 2016).

Spatial problems are caused not only by governmental and municipal regulation but also by individual decisions. In democratic societies, which are oriented towards Agenda 21 (United Nations, 1992), the involvement of citizens is important. One major objective of the Agenda 21, the action plan for the 21st century, adopted by the United Nations at the World Conference in Rio de Janeiro 1992, is that every local government should draw its own local Agenda 21. Decisions within the spirit of Agenda 21 are only sustainable if they have been created in participatory processes. For many problems of urban development, there are no simple and clear solutions. To find solutions, creative new approaches are needed, which may come from young people in particular. A school that feels obliged to support its students in the development of their action competences cannot leave out this area. This is also called for in the current Austrian curriculum for primary schools: The lessons should "gradually lead the pupils to a differentiated view and understanding of their world and thus enable them to act consciously, independently and responsibly" (BMBWF, 2012, p. 84).

## Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in primary school

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is committed to the meaningful and sustainable management of human-environment relationships. Currently, the United Nations have defined 17 goals for sustainable development in AGENDA 2030. Goal 4 (Quality Education), goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and goal

15 (Life on Land: protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems…) are particularly relevant to the topic of spatial planning. In 2020, the UNESCO starts with a new ten-year World-Action-Plan "Education for Sustainable Development: Towards achieving the SDGs" (UNESCO, 2019).

At the core of ESD is a comprehensive concept of development that integrates ecological, economic, social, but also cultural, personal and spatial areas into an overarching perspective. From that perspective stems the emancipatory potential and educational substance of the concept of ESD. Like human rights, sustainable development may be regarded as a "regulative idea" which inspires social learning and shaping processes. The notion of "regulative idea" is derived from the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1787/1956) and may be understood as an epistemological construct. Regulative ideas can also be understood as "pre-concepts" (Dewey, 2011) without which no reasonable question can be asked and no problem identified. Therefore, uncertainty and fuzziness is a constituent element of this regulative idea and allows us to reach consensus in an ongoing process of negotiations (Berger & Luckmann, 2005).

The "German Society for the Didactics of Social and Natural Science Education in Primary Education" propose the acquisition of "Gestaltungskompetenz" as the overarching goal of ESD, "which focuses in particular on thinking in contexts, foresighted thinking and visioning, critical-reflective judgement and discourse skills as well as participatory planning and implementation skills" (GDSU, 2013, p. 77).

Rieß (2010) considers early learning to be important for ESD and points to positive motivational and developmental psychological preconditions that primary school pupils bring to the subject. However, especially in the field of ESD, it is of crucial importance that the topics which are dealt with are selected and prepared according to age (Stoltenberg, 2002, Künzli & Bertschy, 2008; Knörzer, 2002, Hauenschild, 2014, Hauenschild & Bolscho, 2015). Learning for ESD calls for learning "oriented towards the patterns of perception and interpretation of the learners in their everyday

life, their age-specific learning requirements and previous experiences" (Hauenschild, 2014, p. 133). Hauenschild names the following aspects as useful prerequisites for learning processes for primary school children:

- Global perspectives must be identified in local contexts and related to individual action in manageable contexts.

- Outdoor learning in real world settings should additionally support the experience of participation.

- Individualized and constructivist-orientation – i.e. open learning arrangements and methods as well as forms of discovering and action-oriented learning enable self-responsible, cooperative and participatory learning (Hauenschild, 2014).

## Spatial planning as a field of learning and experience for ESD

When they enter school, the reality of life for children expands and includes orientation of their immediate surroundings. By walking their way to school alone, students become independent participants in public space. Long before that, they start perceiving what happens outside their own four walls – and are thus confronted with the cultural achievement of designing spaces (i.e. spatial planning). Spatial planning defines public spaces that everyone can use and the condition of the infrastructure. Beyond that, it determines the possibilities of supply and movement, and influences the foundations of our lives – to what extend natural habitats can be protected or disturbed, and how the limited resources land and soil could be used sustainably. To be able to act in our society, children need to understand cities and communities as complex systems of competing interests, which have to be shaped by certain rules and solutions that have to be found again and again in order to live well as responsible citizens.

There are scattered points of reference in the current curriculum concerning the following topics: as starting points, children should

be able to orient themselves in their home town, acquire knowledge about its spatial organisation and changes in time, as well as interpret and draw up maps; in a second step, questions of future developments can be guided by visionary, action- and problem-oriented approaches. Role-plays as well as expert discussions are useful methods, whereby questions and the children's individual levels of experience and development form the reference points.

Children are not small adults; therefore, in relation to developing their spatial planning,

> it is important to ensure that it is about initial insights and the recognition of connections and not about superficial, questionable conceptual knowledge. When selecting learning content, the focus is on the children's world of life and experience, not on the system (Stern, 2009, p. 104).

Even phased models that assume a step-by-step development of spatial perception, spatial imagination and spatial thinking determined by age (Piaget & Inhelder, 1999) have meanwhile been relativized in various respects (Sodian, 2008, Greenfield & Schmitt, 2005, et al.) The educationalist and media pedagogue Stefan Aufenanger argues that children develop something like "cognitive complexity", which includes learning to move on a cognitive level in hypertext spaces, i.e. non-linear spaces (Rapp, 2002). This ability could support learning for sustainable spatial planning if the teachers are aware of spatial thinking and address it in their lessons. However, it is often difficult for teachers to access suitable teaching materials, and there is a lack of role models and possibly a lack of personal experience with this topic.

## School workshops "Spatial Planning Takes on School"

In recent years, several countries (such as Switzerland and Finland) have been looking for ways to promote the communication of spatial planning issues. In Austria, there are only a few approaches for this. In cooperation with the Ministry of Education, five architects and experts of spatial planning

developed a handbook for primary school teachers that can be downloaded for free "LebensRäume 1" (Atzwanger, et al., 2014)[1]. Since 2014, the Styrian government (Department of Spatial Planning) in cooperation with the Styrian Environmental Education Centre (UBZ) has been supporting the project "Raumplanung macht Schule" (Spatial Planning Takes on School). Within this framework, Regina Atzwanger designed school workshops to (1) introduce the topic of spatial planning to young people, (2) raise their awareness of sustainable spatial development so that they can develop appropriate attitudes and (3) promote skills that allow them to play an active and creative role in planning processes. Based on reflections of these practical experiences she published another handbook (Atzwanger, 2017).

The workshops are methodically designed in such a way that the children can work independently; problem and solution oriented, in and on their own living environment, according to their personal abilities. They should be able to recognise, articulate and negotiate connections and the different demands of stakeholders.

So far, more than 3,000 students have been able to deal with spatial planning issues. In every class, only a few of the many topics could be dealt with at a time, because the workshops were conducted by an external expert constrained by time.

| Themes | Contents |
|---|---|
| Basics and developments | Growth and change of settlements; working with models; creating and reading maps; negotiating the use of space; spatial and functional connections |
| My surroundings | Raise awareness of close surroundings; discovering paths, buildings, stories and places; localizations, reading maps; drawing |

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[1] See: https://www.ubz-stmk.at/themen/raumplanung/

| Themes | Contents |
|---|---|
| The ground | Who does the ground belong to? The functions of a settlement; settlements and urban sprawl |
| Social aspects | Living in a settlement together; negotiate spatial interventions; to voice your opinion and to look after others; valuing different contributions |
| Economics | How does a municipality work? What does it mean to do business? What's important in a municipality? What is the place for the children and what can they contribute? |
| Mobility | How am I travelling? How do diverse road users cover distances? What consequences do these behaviours have; how can we contribute to an environmentally friendly mobility? |
| Time | History as a factor influencing developments: the past – the present – the future; planning |
| School projects | In the fields of art and culture: getting to know each other and connecting within the community; being active in public space |

Table 1: *Topics of school-workshops (adapted from Atzwanger, Kurz & Steiner 2019)*

The photographs in figures 1, 2 and 3 show instances of the methodical and thematic variety of the workshops.

*Figure 1.* Planning our place together (Regina Atzwanger, 2016)



*Figure 2.* Investigations in the village (Regina Atzwanger, 2018)

*Figure 3*. Role play "local council meeting" (Regina Atzwanger, 2017)

## The Research Project "Spatial planning as a topic in primary schools"

The research project "Spatial planning as a topic in primary schools" (2017-2020) was conducted at the University of Education of Upper Austria and the Private University of Education, Diocese of Linz, with the purpose of evaluating these educational approaches. The project involved a mixed team of a practitioner/action researcher and two researchers, one of them an expert in spatial planning, the other in Education for Sustainable Development. Their common concern for launching the project was to set a groundwork for an improved incorporation of the topic of spatial planning in Austrian primary school education.

### Starting points

Starting points for the presented research comprise problem-situations on two different levels: On the one hand, there is the observation that the topic of spatial planning is generally weakly anchored in primary school education in Austria, compared to other European countries, such as Switzerland, Finland or

Germany. There are - on the other hand – comparatively few extracurricular offers supporting awareness, knowledge and skills on the topic with pupils as well as teachers. The question, how to improve support structures in that field, was brought to the attention of the actual research team by Regina Atzwanger, who has been involved in the development and application of workshops on spatial planning in primary school classes for several years. Atzwanger, who is a skilled spatial planner and teacher, contributes long time experience with teaching spatial planning issues as an external trainer in schools, as well as an action researcher, who records, reflects and analyses teaching experiences within recurring cycles of individual teachers' action research. The initial goal of a 'formalized' research project focused on improvement of the concrete teaching materials and methods by involving an 'outsider's' perspective, contributed by external experts. Yielding a 'scientific', systematically reflective approach to evaluation that also incorporates the class teachers' perceptions / participation – so the assumption – might help in further developing the workshops in spatial planning provided by Atzwanger on a data and evidence based foundation. Another aim was to investigate whether the school workshops and teaching material developed, used and further developed by Atzwanger would encourage teachers and enable them to conduct teaching on spatial planning themselves and what kind of additional support they would need. However, research interests broadened beyond the specific case within the team during discussions in the fore field of the project, asking for structural, institutional and individual reasons for approaching the topic "spatial planning" in primary school classes – or not doing so. Starting from the initial evaluation approach, further research questions have been derived, addressing issues that are more general. These contain the questions:

"*How should teaching materials and teacher training be designed so that teachers are able and willing to integrate the topic of spatial planning into their teaching*?" divided into a number of sub-questions, such as:

1.    *"Why do teachers take up these topics in the classroom?"*

2.      *"What supports teachers in integrating the topic of spatial planning into their teaching?"*

3.      *"How could we improve support services (e.g. teaching materials and further training)?"*

## Research design and methodological framework

The described setting qualifies the project as "*multilevel research*" (Somekh, 1995, p. 349), an approach characterised by collaboration between practitioner researcher and researchers who contribute an 'outsider's perspective' on the investigated topic. Somekh (1995) describes "*multilevel action research*" as "*Individuals at different levels in the formal structures of the institution, whose involvement in the micropolitics of the institution is of different kinds, work together collaboratively*". Within action research, such settings of "*´second order` action research*" (Elliott, 1988) have a long tradition, reaching back to the pioneering works by Kurt Lewin (1939, 1952). In the case of the presented study, cooperation between practitioner researcher and external experts methodologically aims at various goals. While the 'outsider-researchers' provide time and resources for the acquisition of data and function as 'critical friends' in the advancing process of development, the practitioner researcher contributes insider-knowledge that feeds in the process of data analysis and interpretation (Somekh, 1995, p. 341; see also Burmeister & Eilks, 2013, p. 64f.). While the common ground for research is formed by the interest in an 'improved praxis', to which the various perspectives may contribute. However, one also should be aware of the different research interests and expectations conducting the different members of the research team, resulting from their different backgrounds, experiences and skills. Therefore, a central part within the research process contains ongoing discussions, involving all members of the research team in a democratic setting to clarify their positions. Beyond that, team communication is a central factor in interpretation and validation of the data gained in the research process. Communicational validation forms the key methodological tool to triangulate data (Burmeister & Eilks, 2013, p. 66). Referring to Altheide & Johnson (1994), criteria guiding this form of qualitative interpretation are
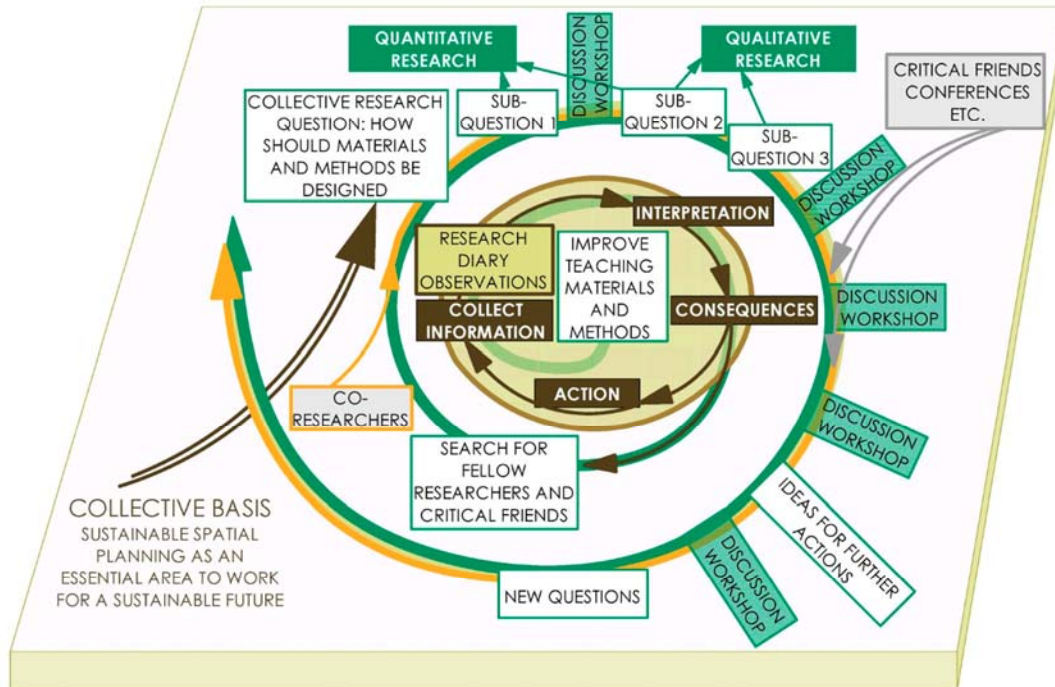
Fig 4: Participatory Action Research in our project

plausibility, credibility, relevance and importance. Triangulation as a method integrating different perspectives (collecting data in various ways and researchers' different professional backgrounds) offers the opportunity to meet the quality criteria.

Figure 4 provides an overview of the design of the conducted research. The core is formed by the teaching project "Spatial Planning Takes on School" and its evaluation. This part of the project draws upon:

a)    Ongoing evaluation accompanying the school workshops conducted by Regina Atzwanger, including notes on the planning specialist's observations during the school workshops collected in a research diary.

b)    External evaluation, based on fourteen in-depth guided interviews (qualitative research) with teachers who had used the offer of school workshops for their class and with participants in further training workshops. Interviews were conducted by Peter Kurz and Regina Steiner, who were not involved in the conception of the school workshops and teaching materials. Along with questions on quality of the provided teaching materials and methods, we asked about teacher's motives for requesting school workshops for their classes, reasons for the choice of topics (which indirectly indicated their understanding of spatial planning), the presumed competence-gain of the pupils through the workshops, and what they wanted regarding further support, the design of teaching materials, and further training. The evaluation of the interview data we analysed according to Kuckartz (2016) using deductive and inductive categories.

Teachers' assessment and their contribution to the development of materials and methods used in the workshops are important inputs within a participatory process of practical improvement. The goal of this part of the project was to generate data and knowledge for further development of the teaching project (cycle of action research). Making this development process visible and

accessible for other researchers, particularly teacher-researchers, was also a goal of this part of the study.

Another part of the research study contains an explorative study (quantitative research) of teachers' ideas on the concept of spatial planning, on the current significance of the topic in class and on requests for support services. The online questionnaire survey consisted of a mix of open, semi-open and closed questions. This also provided suggestions for the preparation of the interview guidelines and supported the contextualisation of the interview results.

We sent the online questionnaire out with the help of the Austrian Ministry of Education to all primary school directors in Austria. We asked them to forward the questionnaire to the teachers of their school. A total of 1057 primary school teachers from all Austrian provinces (4% of all primary school teachers) returned the questionnaire.

## Analyses and discussion of the results

In five one-day workshops, the research team (the action researcher and both external experts) discussed the interpretation and results of the analysis, contrasting data from the research diary, the quantitative survey and the in-depth interviews. This provided the chance of communicative validation of the outcomes (Altrichter & Posch, 2007). After that, we were able to identify key topics and questions, but also existing obstacles for further development. These findings form the groundwork for the improvement of the school workshops as well as starting points for upcoming research activities.

We will now present the data and the joint interpretation of the results along with the research questions. We have divided our research question "*How should teaching materials and teacher trainings be designed so that teachers are able and willing to integrate the topic of spatial planning into their teaching?*" into three sub-questions.

## Sub-question 1: "Why do teachers take up these topics in the classroom?"

In order to answer this question, we first wanted to find out (1) what motivated teachers to take up the topic so far, (2) why teachers had booked school workshops on spatial planning, and (3) whether and why they subsequently wanted to incorporate these topics into their lessons independently. For this question, the results of the quantitative study provided valuable information, namely that many of the respondents perceive spatial planning lessons in primary school as an important subject area, but that the significance of this subject area is low in comparison with the many other requirements in school lessons. This view is congruent with the fact that the topic is not explicitly mentioned in the current curriculum and not significantly mentioned in school textbooks.

It was a surprise to us, that on the other hand, so many teachers (46% of the respondents) stated that they address spatial planning issues in some form in their lessons. Analysis of the results of the questionnaire survey (Atzwanger, Kurz & Steiner, 2017) revealed that:

- Teachers who wanted to deal with this topic in class (1) stated that they had already had personal experience with spatial planning, (2) had a high level of awareness of participation and (3) had an above-average level of information on spatial planning issues.

- The general understanding of spatial planning is highly associated with topics such as mobility, green spaces, local supply, playgrounds and meeting zones. In this context, it was revealing for us to evaluate the associations of the group that states that they deal with the topic of spatial planning in their teaching in comparison with the group that does not. The ranking according to the frequency of naming terms is largely the same in both groups, but the absolute frequency of named terms as well as their variety is distinctly higher in the first group than in the second (see
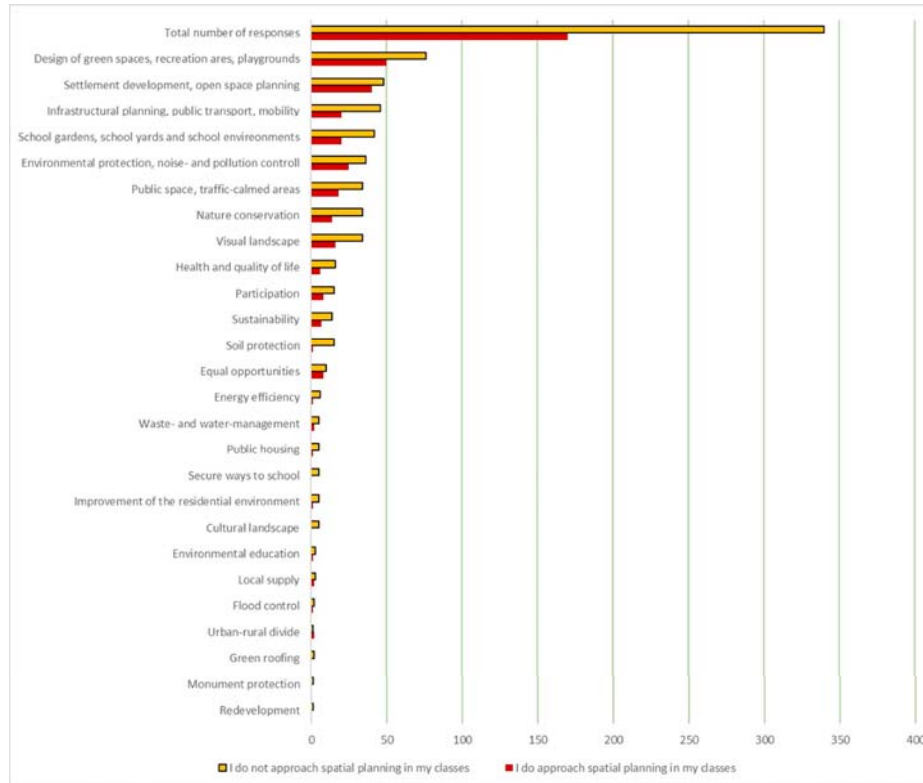
Fig. 5: Terms associated with "spatial planning" by Austrian primary school teachers

Figure 5). We interpreted this in the way that those teachers who deal with spatial planning in their lessons have a more precise and differentiated understanding of the topic.

- Just under 10% of those questioned said that they did not have difficulties in implementing the topic.

This data was also a surprise for us. However, these figures are put into perspective when we relate them to statements from the interviews that inform us about the notions of teachers of spatial planning lessons previous to the school workshops. Most of the teachers interviewed have so far understood spatial planning in the classroom to mean above all finding one's way around the school environment and reading and drawing up plans. "*We already do planning work, so we draw up plans [...] and then we always deal with our school environment [...], but I would not have done a district or a village planning or something like that*" (I7/240-246)[1]. The school workshops made them aware that topics of spatial planning are broader and can link several areas of social and natural science teaching in an interdisciplinary way.

Of the teachers who stated in the questionnaire, that they did not deal with the topic spatial planning in class, 90% answered that the reason for this was that they had too little teaching material. Around 75% said that they did not find links in the curriculum and 72% said that they considered the topic not to be age appropriate.

Concerning the perception of the age-appropriate nature of the topic of spatial planning in primary schools the responses of the interviewed teachers varied considerably. From "*They can't imagine what a square metre is; is it the house from above or not? I think that comes later in the children's brain development*" (I3/210-213) up to: "*they should indeed be challenged a little*" (I4/241). The two quotes illustrate a different estimation of children's abilities and how this should influence teaching. We discussed that teachers' assessment

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[1] Citation of the original statements is done as follows: Example: (I1/12-15), where I = interview; 1 = number of interview; 12-15 = continuous line in the interview

of the appropriateness of addressing spatial planning in their teaching depends on whether or not they think their role is to work with what children bring to the topic or trust their experience by challenging them. However, most of the teachers interviewed agree that the capability of learning spatial planning depends essentially, on how the subject is taught. It is important to let the children work independently and vividly, "*the children need that [...] you hold something in your hands and they are allowed to do something with it*" (I3/92-95) or in role-play "*if you play the local council and these individual fractions (...) and who is responsible for what*" (I1/614-616).

The topics of the school-workshops were integrated into "normal teaching" to varying degrees. Some teachers said that it was easy to connect to it, while others saw the workshops as something isolated: "*we liked it, of course, but [...] that's over now*" (I3/8-10). Some of the interviewees would also carry out parts of the school workshops in future classes themselves. In this case, the workshops could be seen as further training on the job for the teachers involved.

Nevertheless, most of the respondents did not feel capable of providing such lessons themselves. Lack of material, too little expertise and, above all else, too little time are the most frequently cited reasons.

School workshops on spatial planning are readily booked by schools if they are free of charge and recommended by colleagues or other persons of trust, we were informed by teachers in the interviews. However, even for booking this offer of external experts giving lessons to the children the limited lesson time was mentioned as an obstacle.

When teachers then become aware of the complexity of the topic in the course of the workshops, the majority of the teachers interviewed find that they hardly dare to conduct such lessons independently in the future. Rather, they would book such school workshops again in later classes. In our team, we discussed whether teachers would book the workshops when children had to

pay for it (the school-workshops were free in the phase of the government project). Furthermore, this would require many more experts to offer such workshops.

## Sub-question 2: "What supports teachers in integrating the topic of spatial planning into their teaching?"

- *Curriculum*: As it was the case with the questionnaire survey, the interviewees also mentioned stronger anchoring in the curriculum as an essential prerequisite. Among other things, stronger references to the topic or its different aspects should be given in the curriculum. In addition, the appropriateness of the topic should be emphasized more, for example by means of topic suggestions and examples of lessons connected with curriculum guidelines. A new curriculum is currently being developed. Regina Atzwanger and Regina Steiner had the chance to contribute to the development process and bring in the experience from our research and development project. Spatial planning will hopefully gain stronger emphasis in the curriculum.

- *Teaching material:* Teachers, who say in the questionnaire, they deal with spatial planning in class, state that they consider links of the topic in the curriculum or current developments in their vicinity as their motivations. They hardly mention missing availability of teaching materials or too little support from experts as obstacles. However, when it comes to the question of the support that would make it easier for them to deal with spatial planning in the classroom, the desire for teaching materials comes first (75%), far ahead of the demand for further training (30%).

  Even when we asked our interviewees for the reasons why they would not work on the topic independently in their classes, they mentioned – beside too little expertise and, very often, too little time – that they missed teaching and learning materials. Only a few of the teachers interviewed were aware of the existing teaching materials for spatial planning, provided by Atzwanger, which was already available for

free on the webpage of the Ministry of Education for several years. We discussed how this teaching material could be made more accessible to teachers. But in addition, some of the persons interviewed said, it was unlikely that teachers would search for and print out materials from the Internet and would bother to make themselves familiar with the subject matter, since the amount of material for primary school was already almost impossible to manage, especially since the subject matter was not included in the regular textbooks.

Regina Atzwanger brought a lot of teaching material to the school workshops, like big maps of the villages, baskets full of wooden houses to build towns or villages, laminated cards for role plays, picture cards for several activities, etc. If such material was available, one teacher stated, she would be able to motivate her colleagues in school to do the same. Also the so called "community game" with laminated cards in the school's media room would be such an incentive (I1). Two other teachers regret that they do not have this sort of teaching material, and therefore are not able to teach the way the external expert does (I7, I9). In addition, teacher 8 informed us that the implementation of such a lesson requires too much preparation "*you just can't always put so much effort into a single topic [...]*" (I8/120).

We discussed these results controversially in our validation workshops: One idea was to compile the teaching material used in the workshops as a kind of material package (possibly for borrowing) for further use by teachers who had already participated in a school workshop. Observations during workshops by Atzwanger confirmed our assumptions that the provision of materials alone cannot drive the content of the lesson: to simply "do something" with the materials can lead to a wrong and undesired learning outcome.

> "I'm always glad when class teachers participate ...
> But today, once again, a negative experience: it

would make sense for some of them to have more knowledge about sustainable spatial planning: The children build a place with the model houses. We have discussed why we humans have to take animals and plants into consideration and the children had largely understood that this means we shouldn't just put our houses everywhere, but rather should move them together to leave space for nature as well. Nevertheless the teacher says, when it's her turn: "I'm putting my house in the green - there's so much space anyway, because I need that" (research diary, May 21, 2018).

Teachers need to develop understanding of the current spatial planning discourse, in their training, through further training and through media specific to teachers. This could support them judging whether their work with the children is going in a meaningful direction, what suggestions, information and support the pupils need and what they could research and find out for themselves.

- *Further training*: Both the questionnaires and the interviews showed that the desire for further training as a support measure is low. Most of the teachers interviewed were not sure whether they would attend a further training course on the subject. In any case, the prerequisite for that would be that something "practical" happens there, that they *work on it and talk about it themselves and also prepare teaching material"* (I7/470- 471), or perform the activities themselves in the same way as they will do it with the children later on:

  "I would probably need some kind of seminar so that I can simply try it out myself, how do I draw up a plan or how do I simply start the whole thing. Experiencing it myself, so that I can pass it on" (I6/325-339).

## Sub-question 3: "How could we improve support services (e.g. teaching materials and further training)?"

In our discussion sessions, this question was the one we dealt with most intensively and in more detail.

- *School Workshops and Teaching materials:* The school workshops were judged very positively by all teachers interviewed, among other things for this reason: *"I think it was very vivid, very action-oriented and the children were simply constantly involved, so it was a very lively workshop"* (I11/102-103).

  The interviewees also gave suggestions for further development of the workshops and materials. One teacher (I2) said, the materials should be linguistically adapted, according to the needs and prerequisites of the pupils, so that it is always easily understandable for the respective children (for example, if their mother tongue is not German). She also describes the differences in spatial perception between children who can walk to school and those who are taken to school by car every day and hardly know the school environment.

  Here we saw a possible further development, together with the Institute for Inclusion on the University of Education in Upper Austria, to expand the teaching materials and school workshops and enable differentiation, both linguistically and for different levels of achievement.

  Another teacher would find it useful, in the light of the limited teaching time, to combine the topics of spatial planning with other subjects by *"partially inserting mathematical calculations somewhere"* or with language teaching, such as *"words relating to it or with generic terms of something"* (I10/307-312).

  In fact, it is in the nature of the topic spatial planning, that it covers many different school subjects. Already during the conception of the workshops, it seemed to be a problem for

Regina Atzwanger to pack the various aspects of the topic into a workshop of a few hours.

> "Why is one workshop enough for other topics, and everything, what is important, is covered? I try to reduce ... but there are so many different aspects of spatial planning, which all seem important to me! (...). How can we satisfy our needs? How does it work in relation to space? Why should I be respectful of others? How do we negotiate different needs? How has all this developed over time and how should it continue? What is a "surplus" to our places, like art and culture (…). There are so many aspects which are closely interlinked with each other and the children should be allowed to work on all of them… it really can't be done in two hours!" (Research diary, April 15, 2015)

Teaching interdisciplinary should be given high priority and be an issue already in initial teacher training.

- *Teacher Education and Training:* However, as a conclusion from the discussion workshops, we came to the understanding that it should not be that much a matter of further developing the teaching materials and the workshops, but that it would be more purposeful to focus on teacher training. What could be the best way to start so that teachers would be able to deal with this topic independently in their classes?

An entry in the action researcher's diary shows how important it is for teachers to let the children make their own experiences:

> "Today in the third grade – I let them build a fantasy place with the model houses: A boy takes the biggest existing building (the church) because he wants to put it on a central place. Another child asks what is going to happen now (after all, others have already built in this place), but the teacher of the class says, "Just let him try!" The boy sees that this is not as easy as he thought and he has to move two other

> buildings before he can put the church on the place he wants to put it. The arrangement of the houses looks much better now ... but he wanted to put the church there! After doing that, he asks himself "WHY did I move the churches there now?" Then he puts the model house back in its previous place. Not much has changed in the model ... but the child has seen how it could be, by trying it out, and he changes his own plan – for that he has my respect! – and we all are one insight richer" (research diary, March 12, 2016).

It is a characteristic of spatial planning that content is consistently interlinked and raises complex issues and that there are no single right solutions. It is essential that teachers are able to deal with such dilemmas (e.g. conflicts of use in public space) (cf. Frischknecht-Tobler et al., 2008; Ohl, 2013; Mehren, Rempfler & Ulrich-Riedhammer, 2014). This is a fundamental topic of ESD, requires a different approach to teaching design and at the same time contains great potential for education and learning (Rauch & Steiner, 2012). This also concerns the individual attitudes and behaviour of teachers, which are oriented towards the values of ESD: justice, equal opportunities, resource conservation and management, etc.

According to Lipowsky (2014), effective advanced training courses are problem-oriented, situated and offer process accompanying in a long-term way. As a measure for improving the effectiveness of school workshops and also as preparation for the future work of teachers, we considered effective further training formats, for instance: a workshop conducted by a person with spatial planning and didactical expertise in their own class, followed by an obligatory reflection and processing by teachers after the workshop. In our opinion, it would make even more sense to combine the school workshops with long-term training programs, trying out elements of the workshops in one's own class and reflecting on this with colleagues. Internal or inter-school

training in the region could also be a reasonably long-term measure.

To us it seems equally important to introduce the topic spatial planning in connection with didactical principals of ESD (Künzli & Bertschy, 2008; UNESCO, 2005) already in initial teacher training.

## Summary and outlook

Spatial planning is a complex issue, and the idea of a stronger incorporation into primary school education turns out to be a multi-layered challenge. During our investigations, we could identify structural framework conditions as well as individual personal attitudes towards the topic, affecting an implementation into current school teaching. While framing structures as the curricula may more or less explicitly provide starting points for an involvement in questions of spatial planning, it is strongly up to the teachers' estimation and interpretation how this translates into teaching practice. This area of tension between institutional structures and individual "habitus" (Bourdieu, 1974, see also Giddens, 1992) provided stuff for most extensive discussions within our research team. As crucial question, we could identify teachers` attitudes towards spatial planning. Setting this question within a broader context, we could link it with teachers´ approaches, abilities and willingness to deal with "open ended settings" (Gijselars, 1996) in their teaching practice. The more teachers are willing and able to engage with such situations – so our conclusion – the better they seem to be prepared to address problems in spatial planning in their classes. We further conclude that teachers' training on the topic "spatial planning" – possibly based on concepts as "problem-based learning" (Barrows 2005) – may be the key measure for an improved implementation in primary school education. Beyond raising awareness for the topic and imparting of certain technical skills (mapping, principles of a sustainable spatial development, abilities to take multiple perspectives), teachers' training would have to focus on the unfolding of specific approaches to thinking and teaching. In the

context of ESD or political education, the evaluation of decisions, actions and measures is a decisive field of learning. Problem-oriented learning in this sense would not only be up-to-date, but could also be adapted to the respective age of the children. Another future opportunity lies in the demand for inquiry-based learning (Bertsch, 2016; Levinson, 2017), which could be very well combined with spatial planning content.

Experiences from the conducted research have consolidated our conviction that spatial planning is a suitable, true to life field of (and for) learning, even as early as in primary school classes. Spatial planning may be seen as a learning environment of "ill structured problems" (Gijselars, 1996), which don`t function as objects of demonstration for "one real solution", but for the discursive and cooperative searching and finding of "one possible solution". This demands open-mindedness from children, but equally from the teachers in their understanding of teaching.

These findings draw strongly on the methodological settings used in the presented research, particularly on the combination of "reflected practice" (Altrichter & Posch, 2007), gained from action research methodology and the "outsiders" perspectives on teachers' attitudes, inquired in the social scientist analysis. Juxtaposition of the outcomes from practical teaching experiences in school workshops, information from teacher interviews and the data from a broad quantitative survey nourished the stuff for discussion. Contradictions and questions rising from the different levels of data and information raised the demand of interpretations that would not have come on the agenda otherwise. The viewpoint that started from "concrete practice" (Dewey, 1935) not only guided interpretation of quantitative data – we would not have been able to draw any conclusions from the quantitative survey – but also brought research back to an "actor-centred perspective" (Van der Ploeg & Long, 1994). This gradually led away from the question "how have teaching materials and teaching environments got to be designed?" to the question "how should teacher training look to make teachers able to teach the topic appropriately?" Exploration of this question will be the subject of our upcoming

research. Therefore, however, we will also have to concentrate our attention on the children's perspective – a group of actors (probably the central ones in the field of education) that has not been in the focus of our research yet.

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## Biographies

Regina Atzwanger is a qualified teacher of music. Additionally she has studied architecture and has a PhD in Spatial Planning. She teaches social sciences in primary education at the Private University of Education, Diocese of Linz and at the University College of Teacher Education Styria. She invented the workshops "Raumplanung macht Schule" - workshops for teaching spatial planning in schools and created teaching materials for this purpose.
Since there are hardly any comparable offers on this topic, cooperation and discourse with others in the field of teaching Built Environment Education and Action Research is always a special concern of hers to improve her work.

Peter Kurz is professor for education in ecology and earth sciences at the University of Education in Upper Austria. He has academic degrees in landscape- and environmental planning and in environmental education and a PhD in land use sciences. He has been working as a field researcher in inter- and transdisciplinary projects on regional development and landscape management. Therefore, he has been utilizing and developing participatory action research designs. His research interests contain sustainable land-use practices, maintenance of biodiversity within human shaped environments and questions of knowledge transfer on the mentioned topics.

Regina Steiner is professor for social sciences in primary education at the University of Education in Upper Austria. She is also primary school teacher and has an academic degree in Biology. She has worked over 20 years for an NGO on Environmental Education and ESD. She holds a PhD in education specialising in ESD in teacher training. She is part of the international network "Environmental Education and school initiatives (ENSI)" which has close



links with AR. Since 2000, she was organisational leader of a network on AR ("ENITE") in teacher training and among other things developed and leads a course of studies on AR and ESD ("BINE") for teachers and teacher trainers.

# New ways of representation: How can I represent Living Theory research in a way that creates new knowledge and resists hegemony?

## Sonia Hutchison

**Video of presentation at CARN-ALARA Conference**

**(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OsJFMZwT-No)**

## Abstract

*This paper will explore whether a layered approach to writing up Living Theory research provides a way to show development of my new knowledge in which I resist hegemony.*

*Each layer will present different forms of learning through the use of three voices.*

- *My storyteller voice will allow my story to stand for itself.*

- *My narrator voice will introduce my living-theory that is emerging from my research and an analysis using an Adlerian understanding from my early recollections.*

- *My meta-narrator voice will ask questions using an approach that is consistent with a Deleuzian ontology.*

*This paper will weave my three voices as a new approach to representing Living Theory to show how I developed my values of love, hope, justice and participation in my challenge of dominant discourses. The dominant discourses explored are the cultural expectations for children in care, how to undertake a restructure and traditional forms of research.*

**Key Words:** Living Theory, Adlerian Theory, Deleuzian Ontology

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**What is known about the topic?**

Living Theory is a well-established approach to action research to improve practice and enable individuals to create their own living-theories. Adlerian Psychology is established in using early recollections to gain greater understanding of adult lifestyle. Deleuzian ontology questions the concept of being, as all things are in a process of becoming; a constant state of difference and repetition.

**What does this paper add?**

Different ways of knowing that links childhood autodidactic learning to formal learning as an adult. It adds a creative method of writing using three-voices which adds a way to challenge the dominant discourses on how academic writing should be presented with a way that is creative and critical using a Deleuzian ontology which brings a high level and complex philosophy into the grounding of practices.

**Who will benefit from its content?**

Scholars and practitioners looking for a more creative and liberating way to present their research and learning. Action Researchers interested in creating their own living-theory; Adlerian Psychology and integrating a Deleuzian ontology into their writing.

**What is the relevance to AL and AR scholars and practitioners?**

- Provides questions of importance to AL and AR scholars and practitioners in terms of child wellbeing; improving practice and AR. Encourages scholar and practitioner creativity and criticality in writing up AL and AR.

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# Introduction

| NARRATOR | This paper is an experiment to try a new way of representing my research, where I split my voice into three voices for different purposes. Each layer will present a different depth of learning through the use of three voices. |
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| | • My storyteller voice will allow my story to stand for itself for myself and in the process of putting it to other practitioners allowing them to take from it what they |

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| | understand. |
| | • My narrator voice will provide the explanation of my living-theory that is emerging from my research. In the narrator role, I will provide analysis through a new method for understanding my interpretations and actions through the process of developing an Adlerian understanding from my early recollections. My narrator voice will also guide the reader to areas of my learning that influences my practice, theory and knowledge. |
| NARRATOR | • My meta-narrator voice will ask questions, along with critical friends Jack Whitehead (Personal Communication, May 20, 2019) and Jason Hocknell-Nickels (Personal Communication, May 25, 2019) causing my thinking to move to a deeper level, as my narrator voice will attempt to answer questions posed. I will take an approach that is consistent with a Deleuzian ontology. |
| | I imagined a way of writing that would allow me to tell my story in my academic writing unimpeded. I designed a method of writing where my storyteller voice tells my story unimpeded. In this paper, I chose to look at my very early childhood. However, in order to meet the academic purpose of writing to create and communicate new knowledge, I recognise that I needed to explain why my story is significant; what sense I made from my story; how I behaved in the world; the difference I have made and the learning I have influenced. I designed |

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| NARRATOR | the idea of a narrator that would make sense of the story for myself and for other people. However, I have had feedback on my academic writing that I can make things too straight forward, seem as if I know everything and not challenge myself to learn. I was influenced from reading St. Pierre (2019) and Mazzei (2016) and had the idea to create a meta-narrator voice that would ask questions to challenge myself to think in different ways about my story and the sense I am making of my story. In this way, my meta-narrator is helping me to creatively and critically engage with ideas by sense-breaking, introducing new ideas and asking questions. Living Theory is a qualitative approach. By introducing ideas consistent with a Deleuzian ontology (Mazzei, 2016; St. Pierre, 2019), I am enquiring whether this assemblage of ideas will help me enquire into my life and practice as I resist hegemony. By Deleuzian ontology, I am meaning to think about being in the world differently, rather than assuming there is a 'right' way of being, which assumes a dualism of right and wrong, but rather that there are many ways of being. In fact, a Deleuzian ontology questions the concept of being, as all things are in a process of becoming; a constant state of difference and repetition (Deleuze, 2014). Therefore, asking questions is as important as finding answers and that a multiplicity of answers that work in some circumstances are more realistic than a single truth (Barad, 2007). |
| | When I shared my first draft with other people, they asked their own questions. I realised it would add another way of thinking about my research by introducing the questions they were |

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| | asking through my meta-narrator. As a result, writing this paper has used action reflection cycles to imagine possible solutions to enabling my academic writing to contain my story, make sense of my story and critically question my story in a way that challenges dominant discourses. I tried my ideas and adjusted the method in further action reflection cycles to improve the comprehensibility and usefulness. |
| NARRATOR | My research is a self-study to understand, explain and improve the difference I am making through my actions and the influence I have on practitioners who can have an influence on improving the lives of others. I am researching how I have been able to achieve a useful life where many other children in care have not and how my experiences and reflexivity on my experiences as a child in care has improved my practice. From this understanding, I am creating original knowledge as my living-theory emerges out of my explanation of my educational influence in my learning, the learning of others and the learning of social formations (Whitehead, 2018). |
| | I weave my three voices together as they interact with each other. In order to help the reader identify which voice I am speaking in, I have responded to Margaret Wadsley, a critical friend, who expressed confusion when I used the convention, such as in a screenplay, by putting the name of the voice I am using in capital letters and centred. Instead, I added boxes with the voice I am using on the left-hand column to make it clearer which voice is being used. My partner, Ben Mousley, suggested adding additional clarity by using different forms of |

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| NARRATOR | text, therefore my narrator voice is in ordinary text, my meta-narrator voice in bold and my storyteller voice in italics to assist the reader to identify the voice. |
| **META-NARRATOR** | **Foucault saw discourses as**<br><br>**ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them (Weedon, 1987, p. 108).**<br><br>**Santos (2014) introduced the idea of epistemicide. This relates to knowledge from people lacking a voice in the academic world, being extinguished by a lack of recognition. In common with Foucault, Santos saw that those who held power due to their gender, race, position were silencing voices of those they deemed to be less than. Santos particularly focusses on knowledge that is created in the Global South, however, practitioner research across the world is often seen as less important, valid and rigorous. Does my research relate to epistemicide? Which discourses are dominant and how do I trace their effects?** |
| NARRATOR | I see a number of dominant discourses in the literature that I have challenged throughout my life. This paper will focus on the dominant discourses that have affected me regarding children in care and in traditional research. I have created a diagram to illustrate the dominant discourses to show how I think I have challenged them through my actions in my life. |

# Dominant Discourses are:

**Children in Care:**
- ➤ Outcomes most likely suicide / prostitution / prison / addiction / unemployed
- ➤ Voiceless
- ➤ Problematic
- ➤ Damaged
- ➤ A job

**My ways of challenging dominant discourses:**

- ✓ I went on to live a useful life
- ✓ I made my voice heard
- ✓ I maintained my well-being (well-be(com)ing)
- ✓ I lived my values – and changed course when they were negated
- ✓ I am a feminist
- ✓ I am creating a new research method (ERs)
- ✓ I am creating my own way of representing my research (3 voices)
- ✓ I am creating my own methodology (living-theory/post qualitative)
- ✓ I am making my case for self-study (Merton)

**Research:**
- ➤ Third-person is best
- ➤ Scientific Method is the gold standard
- ➤ Must follow a set form of representation
- ➤ Self-studies are less valued than other forms of research

Diagram 1. Dominant Discourses

| NARRATOR | The diagram shows how I have acted to challenge dominant discourses as a child in care and as a researcher. I will explain where I have experienced many of the dominant discourses being perpetuated. |
| --- | --- |
| | In 2015, the then prime minister David Cameron, voiced a dominant discourse that children in care are more likely than the rest of the population to end up committing suicide, in prostitution, in prison or be unemployed. I am not claiming this is untrue, as third-person research identifies that statistically people who have been in care are more likely than the general population to end up with these outcomes (The Centre for Social Justice, 2014; Bradshaw, 2016; Department of Education, 2017). Rather, my concern is that third-person research and scientific methods, such as statistics and quantitative methods, are viewed as the gold-standard. Therefore, narratives that children in care are persistently having worse outcomes than the rest of the population dominate, which I think is problematic. My life and self-study research have found ways I have challenged these dominant discourses as shown in my diagram. I agree with Whitehead (2016) that Living Theory research provides an alternative to epistemicide. I aim to do this by creating knowledge that provides alternative discourses that could challenge those that dominate and provide a more hopeful and balanced dialogue. |

# My story as research

| STORY TELLER | *I was born in 1979, at which point I had already been put on a child at risk register, both my parents were known to have substance misuse issues and schizophrenia. I went into two short-term care placements, neither of which I can remember before I was put into long-term care when I was 3 ½.* |
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| NARRATOR | As a child, I learnt about the dominant discourses that were being told in research about children in care and born to parents with mental health problems. The statistical outcomes for my life were poor. For school projects I did, I discovered that third-person research into children born with both parents having schizophrenia found a 36.6% chance of that child getting schizophrenia compare to 1% chance of the general population (Slater and Cowie, 1971). I also found that the education outcomes for children in care were much lower than their peers. This led me to feel there is a lack of hope within the third-person research. I learnt about the idea of self-fulfilling prophecies that at school was accredited to Merton (1948). This made me determined that my life would not become a fulfilment of the child in care of parents with schizophrenia self-fulfilling prophecy. As I have been researching my practice, I read the original paper and learnt that Merton was not introducing the idea of self-fulfilling prophecies, but rather a more hopeful premise that we will only reproduce failures by continuing to look at failures and it is the single success that we can find answers to influence further success. I have been motivated to research my own life, as I feel in comparison to |

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| NARRATOR | the expected outcomes, I have gone on to have a useful life. I mean useful in the sense Adler describes, 'in the interests of mankind generally. The most sensible estimate of the value of any activity is its helpfulness to all mankind, present and future' (Adler, 1964, p. 78). With this meaning of useful, I equate my life with success, and I have the hope of influencing others to learn to find their own success and those they work with to learn to find their version of success. As many professionals reduce their expectations for children in care or with other difficulties in their life which can inadvertently perpetuate self-fulfilling prophecies. |
| *STORY TELLER* | *The only memory I have of living with my biological mum (mum-b) and dad (dad-b) was when I was three years old of me running down the stairs to the dinner table where my mum-b and dad-b are sat. I spread my jam on my toast with my knife. I remember travelling to my foster family's house, I felt sick in the car and when I arrived, I remember seeing my three new foster brothers looking down the stairs at me and being so scared that I would not let go of my mum-b's leg and went into the toilet with her. I did not say anything all day until the evening when my foster dad (dad-f) was tucking me into bed and tickled me. I told him to stop. My foster parents used to say that once I started talking, they could not stop me.* |
| NARRATOR | In my research, I have been using early recollections and Adlerian syllogisms to enhance my understanding of the significance of my story. Adler believed: <br><br> There are no 'chance memories'. Out of the incalculable number of impressions which meet an individual, he chooses to |

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| | remember only those which he feels, however darkly, to have a bearing on his situation. Thus, his memories represent his 'story of life', a story he repeats to himself to warn him or comfort him, by means of past experiences, to meet the future with an already tested plan of action (Adler, cited in Powers and Griffith, 1987, p. 187). |
| NARRATOR | My storyteller has introduced my earliest recollections to enable me to show how I have been able to connect the interpretations I made about myself in my early life with my adult practice. I will explain how early recollections helped me understand how I challenge dominant discourses. Robyn Pound, a fellow Living Theory researcher who is influenced by Adler, worked with me to collect my early recollections. She recorded and guided my process to develop Adlerian syllogisms. "Relatively little is known directly about children's experience of the transition into foster care" (Mitchell & Kuczynski, 2010, p. 438). Whilst I am unable to question my three-year-old self about this experience, by using the process of creating Adlerian syllogisms from my early recollections, I have been able to understand how my perception of myself and how to act was influenced by my interpretation of early life experiences. |
| | The Adlerian approach differs from the Freudian approach where people are believed to be driven by their biological urges with pleasure as a key driver. Adler insisted both heredity and environment are factors in the development of an individual's personality.  It is the use that |

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| NARRATOR | people make of them that provides them their style of life for achieving their goals. Adler believed that having social interest where there is equal concern for the self and others is healthy. He believed, 'that early recollections are always consistent with people's present style of life and that their subjective account of these experiences yields clues to understanding both their final goal and their present style of life' (Feist & Feist, 2008, p. 87). Adlerian Syllogisms differ from the Socratic Syllogisms that have a logical proposition that leads to a logical premise and conclusion. In an Adlerian syllogism, the conclusion is a metaphor for understanding a person's style of life "entering the domain of creative imagination where metaphoric imagery can become a key that unlocks new possibilities for self-created 'insight' and therapeutic change" (Kopp 1995, p. XIV). As a research method identifying the purpose of the insight is useful not for therapeutic change but for practice improvement. Therefore, I am using early recollections to help me gain understanding of myself and influences of my particular constellation of values to give me insight into the choices I made up to now and how I might tackle contradictions to improve my practice in the future.

The process of creating an Adlerian syllogism ends with a statement of action with the final statement beginning "Therefore I must …" For the purposes of this paper, I have not included whole syllogisms, I have listed the action statements. These helped me reflect on how I came through care so successfully, the courses of action I take to improve my practice and how I |

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| | am able to take a Living Theory approach to my practice where I am happy to ask questions of the kind 'How can I improve my practice' (Whitehead, 1989). |
| | My three action statements are therefore I must: |
| | • Eat my toast. |
| | • Hold my mum's leg but I had to let it go. |
| | • Laugh and talk; carry on back to control. |
| NARRATOR | Whilst these may sound insignificant, they have helped me to realise, as Adler said, early recollections contain information about how I see myself with other people and take action now as an adult. As I worked with Robyn and was invited to join an Adlerian Skype research group, I was able to understand the courses of action I take. They are to be contained; have a resilient ability to carry on; to be adaptable; be resourceful and find a safe route. These ways of being helped to ensure I avoided the harmful impacts of being in care that constitute the dominant discourses around children in care and have helped me as an adult. My containment is shown in my action statement to eat my toast, rather than getting upset at being in a difficult situation with ill parents, I quietly continued looking after myself. My containment in a work context means that even when there are challenging circumstances such as gaining a large contract and needing to restructure, I am able to stay calm. As a result, I am able to think through my courses of action and I can be adaptable and change direction when needed without blame or drama as I did when I had to let go of my mum's leg. This leads to my |

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| NARRATOR | resourceful resilience to cope as I did when I had to look after myself by eating my toast as a child, despite my parents mental and substance issues. In work, even when I struggled with HR issues or make or break funding issues, I was able to carry on. In order to help me I was resourceful and got help from people with more expertise, such as Chris who helped with the restructure I will explore in this paper (Hickey, Hutchinson & Trumper, 2014). I stayed safe in these processes by choosing people to help that share similar values for the flourishing of humanity and through self-care (Hutchison, 2015). They also helped me to take a Living Theory approach and be robust enough to hold my practice up for suggestions of improvement from colleagues, beneficiaries and peers (Hutchison, 2013; Dyke and Hutchison, 2018).

Understanding the motivation for my actions helps me to recognise not just the benefits but also the limitations of my courses of action. For example, I realised my containment can mean people do not realise what I am feeling, and this has helped me to improve my communication. An example in practice is when I was feeling stressed at work, when I raised the issue in supervision, I was able to explain that I might not appear stressed due to my containment, however, it was being problematic and I needed their help to resolve the issue. This led to my supervisor taking me more seriously as they acknowledged they had thought I was okay because of how calm I seemed.

'Ethically, researchers need to examine who they are' (Mertens, 2017, p. 18), my early recollections have given me greater insight into who I am and |

| NARRATOR | how I can transform myself with this knowledge. I agree with Martens (2017) that this 'personal transformation is a necessary component of research that is designed to support change at the societal level in the form of furthering human rights and social justice' (p. 18). |
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| **META-NARRATOR** | **A living-theory is an explanation by an individual for their educational influence in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formation in which they live and work (Whitehead, 2018).** |
| | **I perceive an educational process as one in which individuals develop their potential (be it intellectual, emotional, and psychological, and it's usually all three), and ground this greater awareness by taking increasing responsibility for their own learning. I see it also as having to contain learning about one's own existence in the world of others, and ways which can singly and together lead to hope in the flourishing of humanity (Laidlaw, 2018, p. 31).** |
| | **What is my educational process that my research has developed? How has my intellectual, emotional and psychological potential developed? How has this increased my responsibility for my own learning? What learning have I gained about my own existence in the world? How has this led to hope in the flourishing of humanity?** |
| NARRATOR | To show how the early recollections and Adlerian syllogisms have helped my understanding of my practice and influenced my learning. One example of educational influence I had on my learning when I was leading a carers' |

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| NARRATOR | charity was a restructure that we carried out due to gaining a much larger contract. During the process, I found myself to be a living contradiction. I felt that I did not have the knowledge or experience to carry out a restructure, so I brought in an HR consultant, Chris, that I thought shared the same values as me, to help me get it right. However, a possibility to force a decision on everyone came up. For a while, I worked with the idea that we would take this path, as it seemed easier to let Chris take control.<br><br>In a paper I wrote with Chris and my deputy, David, (Hickey, et. al., 2014), I now realise that Chris identifies that our approach was challenging a dominant discourse on restructures. Chris said, normally<br><br>    change is achieved but the difficulties of achieving the change has left people feeling bruised and battered rather than energised and enthused. Most change processes occur in a values vacuum. Organisational goals and priorities dominate and the majority of employees are involved but not engaged. This usually increases people's cynicism and disengagement and frequently lowers morale. (p. 10).<br><br>However, my feelings of discomfort became so strong as I realised, we were working in a values vacuum, meaning I was no longer living my values in practice. I now realise I ended up using a course of action that is reflected in my syllogisms. Whilst I had been resourceful to find Chris to help in the first place, I realised I needed to be resilient and brave to ask Chris to find a |

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| **NARRATOR** | different way of working. I not only called on my ability to adapt but also asked Chris to adapt the way we worked so that I could return to working within my values of love, hope, justice and participation.

In this action reflection cycle, I needed to imagine a different way of working that was not going to negate my values. I put into practice my imagined possibilities by asking Chris if we could do the restructure in a different way that was consistent with my values. This helped take me back to a safe place where I was able to work within my value base. Fortunately, I had been right about Chris's value base and he was delighted to find a new way to deliver the restructure that, rather than being top-down and impositional, would instead involve staff to co-create the solution.

We had a day to consult staff on what a restructure would look like. David created a 'you said we did' document to show how we put their views into practice. This enabled me to return to my value of participation by which I mean to "actively engage people with shaping and changing the world for the better" (Hutchison, 2014, p. 2). We made it possible for everyone to apply for the new roles which enabled me to return to my value of justice by which I mean "acting to ensure that people are treated fairly and right" (Hutchison, 2014, p. 2). We acted on people's desire to have more communication by giving regular updates and having opportunities for people to be heard as the lack of communication was causing people anxiety. This allowed me to return to my value of love, by which I mean "a powerful force of compassion |

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| NARRATOR | and action to improve another's life for the better" (Hutchison 2014, p. 2), by reducing the anxiety people were feeling. I also reassured people there were more jobs than people, to reduce their anxiety and to return to my value of hope, by which I mean "to hold open a space for better possibilities" (Hutchison, 2014, p. 2). |
| | I learnt that living according to my values improved the outcome of the restructure, whilst I still did not get everything right and realised there was more to learn. I reflected on the things that could have been improved with a member of staff in 2014 that I wrote up in a paper, he identified I could have given 'more time to apply for the new roles' (Hutchison, 2014, p. 12) and greater understanding of the difficulty of change for people. I continue to find this feedback useful to improve my practice and am mindful to be less urgent and give people more time to adapt. However, the implementation of the restructure enabled us to develop a charity that has led to many carers' lives flourishing. The video below is shown as evidence of the carers we supported and those involved in the organisation's flourishing. |

Video 1. Carers' Centre Annual General Meeting and Celebrating Carers 2016 clip at 1:21:33 showing embodied expressions of human flourishing.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d-cBi2_OFr0

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| NARRATOR | The day celebrates the great activities carers had taken part in during the year and shows the Carers' Centre went onto flourish after the restructure under the influence of my values- |

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| NARRATOR | based leadership. The Annual General Meeting (AGM) is a time of reflection about what the charity achieved in the year before and is combined with an Award ceremony to celebrate the carers and the community for their support of carers. The successes being celebrated derived from the Carers' Centre team functioning effectively to listen to and support carers for their flourishing. The health of the organisation financially shows the belief and confidence of our funders in our work. The improvement in my practice of returning to living my values during the restructure showed me that using my values as standards of judgement helped improve my practice and helped me support the staff and volunteers effectively to facilitate these achievements. I am using the video-clip above from the Carers' Centre AGM from the 1:21:33 mark to show my embodied expressions of pleasure from the carers and those representing the businesses who gave awards out, as well as the host and myself, as we are smiling and laughing whilst we are having our photos taken. In the video, I see myself living my relationally dynamic values of love, hope, justice and participation. I have included this video because I agree with Whitehead (2018), 'the expression of energy in the meanings of these values cannot be communicated using only words on pages of text' (p. 76). I am hopeful that you will experience the life-affirming energy of my values in action, as I feel them in watching the clip again. |
| | Chris acknowledged that I influenced his learning, as he said in the joint paper we wrote in 2014, the experience helped him 'realise the |

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| | importance of exploring and articulating the values underpinning the process of restructuring teams and organisations' (Hickey, et. al., 2014, p. 11). His learning shows that the dominant discourse, that had been part of in his practice, had been challenged. New ways of working emerged, that prioritise values and have more potential for human flourishing. |
| | By revisiting this example of practice and my childhood early recollections and finding new learning and greater understanding, I am more clearly able to see that I am always in a process of becoming and influencing others' process of becoming. |
| NARRATOR | My research is developing my living-theory of caring as mutuality as a form of caring where everyone in the caring relationship is able to influence each other in a way that enables myself and the others to thrive. Part of my leadership of a charity is caring for those who work with me. I have come to see that in my practice example of the restructure, I had initially been allured by the idea of caring as authority, where I could use Chris's authority as the consultant to force through change. However, the staff's reaction was one of anxiety and my own reaction was one of discomfort. I was not aligned with my values, but by changing the approach to be more inclusive and collaborative (Hutchison, 2014), the caring became more mutual and increased the ability of all of us to thrive more effectively. My understanding emerging from this paper is realising the importance of becoming and challenging dominant discourses as I theorise about my own way of living in the world. These need greater exploration and are areas I will |

| NARRATOR | research further as I continue to create my living-theory of caring as mutuality. |

# Critical Findings

| NARRATOR | This paper has given me a small space to experiment with my attempt to use three voices. Through my storyteller voice telling my story with no analysis, I have been able to address a concern I share that |
| | 'it is presumptuous to believe that one can analyse a …story (Clough in Goodley, Lawthorn, Clough & Moore, 2004, pp. 121-122). I see the writing of a narrative as an analysis of data. In this analytical process meaning is made from the data and it is rendered intelligible to the reader' (Rea, 2008, p. 49). |
| | By telling my story, as it is, the reader is offered their own opportunity to resonate with it and find meaning from my story to influence their learning. |
| **META-NARRATOR** | **Jack Whitehead said 'Your storyteller voice does stand alone. You are claiming that it has meaning for those who read it. Can you point to any evidence of such a meaning for those who read it? Do you have anyone in particular in mind when you make this claim about the meaning for those who read it? I would find it helpful to understand what you are meaning by 'resonate'.** |
| NARRATOR | I am basing the claim that my story could have meaning and resonate, from my experience of |

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| NARRATOR | telling my story to others, from the response of people I tell my story to, who often say they are inspired. Whilst people have not had the same experience as me, they are often able to be more in touch with their own story as a result of hearing mine. I experience this as people open up more about their own story after hearing my story. |
| | By resonate, I am meaning, evoking images, memories and emotions in another person. Donna Gaywood, a member of conversation café, a research group I attend each week, gave an example of the influence of my story in her practice. She explained how she used my story to challenge the practice of the professionals who could not understand Donna's insistence on the need to spend extra resources for the child to fully access the curriculum despite the child being behind their peers. A social worker explained that 'given the boy's background and early experiences, he (was) doing very well' (D. Gaywood, personal communication, October 6, 2019). Donna wrote to me about how the situation evoked strong emotions in her and how she made 'an impassioned speech about the need to offer children who go into care the same expectations we have for other children, that they can and should achieve all they are capable of. I spoke of cultural and social capital and the importance of using the extra money available to increasing this, so that they could achieve. "Good enough" is just not good enough. Low expectation will only replicate itself' (D. Gaywood, personal communication, October 6, 2019). |
| | Donna explained she used my story as an |

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| NARRATOR | example of a reason not to accept low expectations for children in care but to expect children in care can also be successful. She was able to use my story to affect change. I was delighted to hear Donna using my story in an attempt to influence the practice of a social worker whose actions may have been inadvertently perpetuating the dominant discourses around children in care that they will have poorer outcomes than other children.<br><br>When I thought about having a storyteller, I particularly had in mind a member of staff, who said he had read one of my papers and had to go and lie down in a darkened room because he had found it so complex. I thought of the idea of telling the story without analysis allowing others to draw their own learning from my story. My storyteller voice has only told a very small part of my story, due to the limited length of this paper and the large amount my narrator and meta-narrator voices have been able to bring to the paper as a result. I am keen to develop this method of writing further and I am planning to write my thesis in this way.<br><br>My voice, as narrator, has acted as the sense maker that has led the reader to the conclusions of my research. Therefore, my narrator voice uses a Living Theory approach to look at how the courses of action I have developed from my early life have led to being able to live a values-based approach to improve my practice from my educational learning. In this paper, I have briefly introduced a research method using early recollections and Adlerian syllogisms, that is new to Action Research. I have found that the ideas of becoming and challenging dominant |

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| NARRATOR | discourses are emerging. My narrator voice has responded to both my storyteller voice as the story unfolds and my meta-narrator voice that has been questioning and critiquing. |
| **META-NARRATOR** | **Jack Whitehead said: 'You are claiming that the use of the Adlerian Syllogism is new to action research. What meaning of action research are you using? Is this meaning illustrated in your writings?** |
| NARRATOR | I am meaning Action Research in the broadest sense of identifying a concern, imagining possibilities, acting on those possibilities to improve practice, analysing the data and making public my findings. For example, writing this paper has been an action. I have taken my concern of creating knowledge in a way that resists hegemony, imagined a new way of representing my research, put that into practice, analysed my findings, made those public to critical friends and responded to feedback in a new action research cycle to refine the process. As a result of this question, I have also included and improved my analysis of an action research cycle in my approach to restructuring the Carers' Centre.

My narrator voice has been challenged by my meta-narrator voice and had to find new answers that have taken my learning to a deeper level. I am not meaning deep in the sense of a hierarchy, rather I am meaning it metaphorically, like a lake where at the surface you can only see a part. As you dive deeper, you are able to see new and different perspectives. My interweaving of voices has become a |

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| NARRATOR | research method in and of itself, as a method of deepening my learning. The very process of writing has been a process of becoming and has been another action for me to analyse. |
| | My voice as meta-narrator has acted as a questioning and critical voice of my narrator voice's explanations which is consistent with a perspective of a Deleuzian ontology of entanglement, assemblage (Mazzei,2016) and immanence (St. Pierre, 2019). |
| | I chose to take an approach that is consistent with a Deleuzian ontology because |
| | the challenge for social inquiry using a Deleuzian ontology of entanglement (Barad, 2007) and assemblage is to attend to how being, doing, and living can be different so as not to reproduce the same methods with a different language (Mazzei, 2016, p. 153). |
| | Therefore, a Deleuzian ontology provides my meta-narrator a voice that is able to question the hegemony of academia (McPhie, 2014). |
| **META-NARRATOR** | **Jack Whitehead asked me to communicate my meaning of a Deleuzian ontology in my writings.** |
| NARRATOR | In response, I will communicate my meanings of a Deleuzian Ontology. I am meaning a belief that we are all interconnected with all things, that our being is entangled with all other beings and non-beings; that we are affected by and affecting all things and that we and all things are in a constant process of becoming. I am meaning that my meta-narrator has brought assemblages together. Assemblages mean constellations of |

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| | ideas and experiences that create new understandings and I have constellations changing throughout the paper. I resonate with St. Pierre (2019) that we and the world we are in is "always differentiating, always becoming, never static" (p. 5). St. Pierre (2019) explains that "in an ontology of immanence, one becomes less interested in what is and more interested in what might be and what is coming into being" (p. 4). Therefore, my meta-narrator has asked questions from a perspective that everything and everyone is interconnected, being interested in what might be, drawing from many constellations of ideas and experiences in a spirit of enquiry of becoming. |
| NARRATOR | Using three voices is in line with Deleuze's idea that he poses in conversation with Foucault that "it is always a multiplicity, even within the person who speaks and acts. All of us are "groupuscules" (Foucault, 1996, p. 206). Therefore, having three voices is a way of showing how my "theoretical action and practical action" (p. 206) are not singular or static but multivariant; evolving; living. Using new ways of representation is consistent with Living Theory which necessitates Living Theorists to create their own way to represent their living-theory (Whitehead, 2008). |
| | As I have taken a Living Theory approach to writing this paper, part of my process is to identify areas where I can improve my practice. I realised, my meta-narrator voice, in only including my own questions there was just a single point of challenge which whilst extremely useful was limited. Therefore, to improve the method of the three voices, I added the |

| NARRATOR | comments and questions that have arisen from those who have helped me craft this paper. They act as additional questions the meta-narrator poses. This is in line with my value of participation as I have given voice to those who have taken the time to be critical friends to help me improve writing this paper. This has added an iterative process of continual questioning, creating a further process of becoming through the meta-narrator which is consistent with a Deleuzian ontology. |
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## Conclusion

| META-NARRATOR | **Jason said: 'As a reader I would have welcomed, in your conclusion, a short summary of your new knowledge that has been created in this new writing process as a section or subsection.'** |
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| NARRATOR | In response to Jason, writing in three voices has created new knowledge for me, I have found my own understanding and learning shifting as I have realised myself in a process of becoming that challenges dominant discourses. My meta-narrator has created knowledge of how to add a creative approach to critically engage with my writing. Using an Adlerian process of early recollections to create syllogisms has developed as a research method which has also helped me to understand the entangled link between my early childhood and my practice and the continual process of becoming that I experience and is accelerated by my Living Theory research. |

| META-NARRATOR | Jack queried that as the use of the Adlerian Syllogism is a method that helps individuals to comprehend life goals, he asked me to point to evidence in my writings that my continual process of becoming is accelerated by my Living Theory research. |
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| NARRATOR | I have introduced a new use of early recollections. Early recollections are usually used for therapy, supervision and coaching. I have used them as a research method to help me understand my life goals and inform my values in relation to my self-study, to help me understand more fully how I came through being a child in care without the usual outcomes and instead went on to have a useful and successful life. It has helped me understand the courses of action I take which have enabled me to live my values more fully. |
| | I think my practice example shows how Living Theory accelerated my process of becoming, I was able to return to my values and find a solution to an area I felt I did not have enough knowledge or experience in. Living Theory gave me an approach to recognise I was experiencing myself as a living contradiction and to identify that I was not practicing in line with my values. This helped me speed up my process of becoming by giving me a way to improve what I was doing. By naming my values of love, hope, justice and participation, I was able to use them as standards of judgement for improving my practice in an area of leadership I was working in for the first time. Whilst getting closer to my values did not mean I did everything perfectly, it meant I was able to improve the process and was |

| NARRATOR | able to develop a values-based practice where the charity was able to flourish. |
| | I think taking a Living Theory approach has helped me resist hegemony in my research as my research is showing that no one is dominating over anyone else, rather, that myself, others and the social formations I work within are in their own process of becoming, which my actions have helped to influence. |
| **META-NARRATOR** | **Jack asked: You make a claim that 'taking a Living Theory approach has helped you to resist hegemony'.** |
| | **Can you see any evidence in your writings that the social formations within which you work have been influenced by your actions, in their own processes of becoming?** |
| NARRATOR | To answer Jack's question, I edited the paper to make it clearer that taking a Living Theory approach has helped to resist hegemony. I brought in my practice example of leading a restructure and the video of the AGM to show that the social formation of the carers' charity I led at the time was in a process of becoming that I influenced. I show that I resisted hegemony by challenging the dominant discourse that a restructure should be a top down process and found a way to make the process values-based. The process of using my three-voices is a creative process that breaks with the hegemony of traditional academic writing. The challenge of my own voice and my critical friends has taken me to new places in my research, as becoming and resisting dominant discourses have been introduced and has provided me with many |

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| NARRATOR | more questions than I can answer in this paper. I have found much merit in my three-voices and will continue to develop this writing style in future and continue to answer the questions I have been posed in my process of becoming. |

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# Biography

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I have been involved in charity leadership in the UK for the last 15 years and have been researching my own practice for the last 10 years. I am interested in how my values emerged from my childhood in care and helped me to create standards of judgement to improve my practice. I am currently studying my Ph.D. at the University of Cumbria with a methodological interest in Living Educational Theory, Adlerian Psychology and Deleuzian Ontology.

# The making of a film about action research as action research

## Amir Har-Gil & Franz Rauch

## Abstract

*In the following pages, it will be argued that the process of action research and the production of a documentary film are structurally comparable. Based on this assumption, this text tells the story of the making of a film on action research. It describes the process starting with the decision about who the protagonists will be, followed by script writing, filming and editing. The core issue is the film director's strong intervention during the filming phase, which is reflected in the light of his different roles and with respect to ethical considerations. The paper closes with reflections on what a documentary film can convey about action research.*

**Key words:** Action Research, Documentary film, teacher professional development

### What is known about the topic?

Conceptualising documentary filming as action research is a fairly new topic. Presenting the process of Action Research in a film has rarely been attempted as well.

### What does this paper add?

The paper tells about how documentary films can use action research. Three concurrent action research processes can be distinguished in this paper: Firstly, a teacher using action research to improve her work. Secondly, the personal impact of the action research approach on the film director, and thirdly, the similarities between the action research spirals and the film making process spirals.

The film can be downloaded from the Internet for free and offers the possibility to reflect on action research. The film does not show an example of good action research but the authors (film director and critical friend) try to reflect critically about their work.

**Who will benefit from its content?**

Researchers and filmmakers might benefit. Educators might also use the film in courses and workshops.

**What is the relevance to AL and AR scholars and practitioners?**

The use of films and clips are very common especially in social networks. Films are also used more and more in research communities. Educators might use the article and the short film "Jack the Lion," and discuss action research and try to analyze it.

## Introduction

This paper tells the story of the making of a documentary film on action research in Israel and Austria. An Austrian university commissioned the film with the aim to show an action research process focusing on the participating teachers. The film crew consisted of two people - the film director and producer and a cinematographer, both Israeli citizens. The team further included an assistant and sound woman (Austrian student) and a critical friend (member of the film crew), a researcher at the university. The authors of this paper are the film director and the critical friend.

The role of the critical friend in the project was to assist, "through questioning, reflecting back and providing another viewpoint, prompting honest reflection and reappraisal, a seeing anew that may be challenging and uncomfortable, yet enhancing". (Swaffield, 2008, p. 323) An alternative view is that the role of a critical friend is to provide moral, intellectual and emotional support and challenge within a relationship of trust (Day, Gu, Townsend & Meredith, in Press). On this project, the critical friend tried to provide assistance aligned to the latter description.

In the paper, we touch on three action research processes occurring during the filming. These processes were the action research project by the teachers, the documentary filming process, which followed a similar spiral process to action research, and the action research process the film director and his team followed.

# Film making as an action research process

Action research is different from many other research approaches in that the intent of creating change is a part of the project from the beginning (Rodriguez, 2012). Action research aims to empower people and groups to cope with problems in their practice, to carry out and assess innovations, e.g., to further develop their professional practice on a long-term basis. This is the primary aim, which was captured in a succinct definition by John Elliott (1991, p. 12) who stated that "action research is the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of the action within it". It aims to feed practical judgement into concrete situations, and the validity of the 'theories' or hypotheses it generates depends not so much on 'scientific' tests of truth as on their usefulness in helping people to act more intelligently and skilfully (Dewey, 1997). Action Research is a form of self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social (including educational) situations, in order to improve the rationality and justice of (a) their social or educational practices, (b) their understanding of the practices, and (c) the situations (and institution) in which these practices are carried out. (McNiff, 2013). It can be said that good action research pursues practical purposes; it is collaborative and participatory by involving the people concerned into the research process and agreeing upon ethical rules for the collaboration; good action research is responsive and developmental and connects theory and practice (Stern, Townsend, Rauch & Schuster, 2014; Rauch, Zehetmeier & Posch, 2019).

John Grierson wrote that "the documentary should be the creative interpretation of actuality" (quoted in Paget, 1990, p. 14). This means that making a documentary is an ongoing process in which the film director tries to express reality as he sees it. Making a documentary film is a process of research, from the moment of finding a subject to focus on, through the stage of learning about it, the filming and the editing stage. Unlike in dramatic films, all stages in documentaries are flexible, and changes are part of the process. In every stage, the director and the crew have to reflect and rethink how to present the subject in an honest way, about

ethical problems toward the protagonist and the audience, about the budget, and so on. Therefore, processes of action research and processes of documentary research have a lot in common (Har-Gil, 1998).

Filming is a reflective process consisting of various steps, such as writing the script, filming and editing. In each step, only after several cycles of viewing and reflection is the essence of the film attained. Yet, questions remain as to whether the film was successful in expressing the reality of the story filmed and in focusing on those items that express this reality during filming. There are no straightforward answers to these questions. Different photographers and directors show different realities when filming the same subject. (Rabinger, 2015)

So far, only a very small number of films have been produced using the methodology of action research. Woelders (2007) describes a classroom-based action research study designed to investigate how historically themed films can be used to scaffold activities engaging middle school students to conduct inquiries into the past and critically evaluate feature films and documentaries. Furthermore, Mebratu and Ma (2011) employed ethnographic methods of grounded theory, documentary content analysis (audiotapes, cameras, films, videotape, interviews etc.) and action research to study educational problems through data gathering, interpretation and analysis.

An important component of action research is reflection, and there are several reasons for films being powerful tools in promoting reflection (Tan, 2006). The main reason is that films are narratives propelled by, in this case, the viewer's reflection and thinking.

When the film director started working on the project, he found similarities between Kurt Lewin's reflection process of action research (1946) and the documentary process, which he had known mainly from the practices as a documentary film director and a researcher in the field of cinema. Table 1 below compares the stages of the documentary filming process with the action research cycles (Har-Gil, 2015)

**Stage One**

| Documentary script development spiral | Action research spiral |
| --- | --- |
| First idea of the script / Script revision | Planning |
| Research and writing draft of the script | Acting |
| Reading the script | Observing |
| Coming up with new ideas for the script | Reflecting |

Completed script

**Stage Two**

| Spiral of documentary filming | Action research spiral |
| --- | --- |
| Filming procedures | Planning |
| Filming | Acting |
| Observing the filmed materials | Observing |
| Developing new ideas for further film processes | Reflecting |

First version of film

**Stage Three**

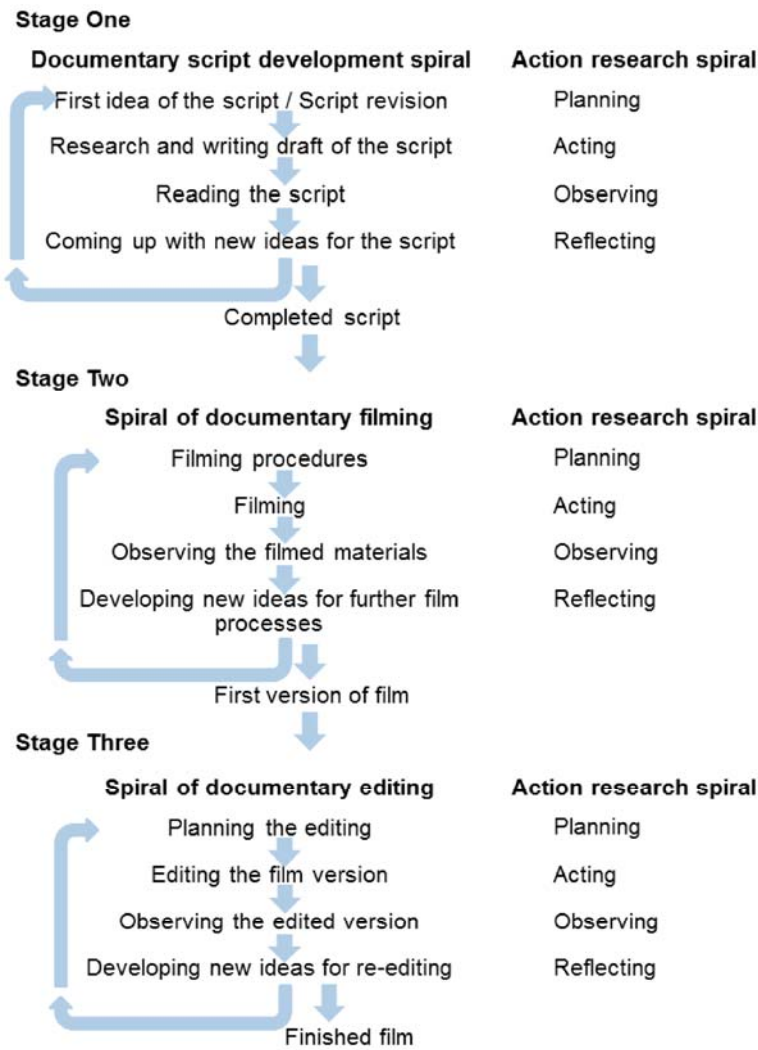| Spiral of documentary editing | Action research spiral |
| --- | --- |
| Planning the editing | Planning |
| Editing the film version | Acting |
| Observing the edited version | Observing |
| Developing new ideas for re-editing | Reflecting |

Finished film

Table 1: Stages of documentary filming process and action research cycles

The table shows that action research and research of documentary cinema (Hal-Gil, 1998) have the cyclical process and the iteration of activities and reflections in common.

We argue that the structure and system of Action Research is very similar to cinema production and one can therefore draw parallel lines with the documentary cinema (Har-Gil, 1998).

In the first stage of the development of a script, there is the idea of the film's topic followed by the need to investigate, where and whom to investigate. The beginning, (acting) before writing the script leads to a deeper knowledge of the topic, which in turn leads to renewed observation and the need to change the script. Changing the script leads to a renewed look at the script's strengths and weaknesses (reflecting), which in turn leads to the need to delve deeper into new points.

The filming stage resembles action research as well. After the script, the following has to be prepared: Initial plan of where, when and how many filming days are needed; Subsequently, the first filming day (acting), then looking at the material filmed in the first day (observing), followed by reflections and then renewed planning of the second filming day. This cyclic process takes place every day until the end of filming.

The editing stage too resembles the spiral of action research. It involves meticulous observation of the material filmed and enables the film maker to evaluate the success and quality of the footage that has been shot to combine the various sections of the film into a whole, which might be classified as 'acting' in the Action Research spiral (i.e., Lewin, 1946).

 As described, the production of a film is divided into the three parts: script development, documentary filming and editing. This paper will follow these steps focusing on the first and second stage as the filming team was involved in these phases and not so much in the editing which was done predominantly by the film director in Israel.

# The making of the documentary film "Jack the Lion"

## Script development: Processes and decisions prior to the filming

The main idea of the documentary film was to show the process of action and reflection in a school setting.

Teachers at two schools in Austria were interested in participating in the film project. Walter[1] is a history teacher in an upper secondary grammar school and wanted to focus his action research project on studying the history of the Holocaust in Austria. The students were asked to look at the sense of guilt in parents or grandfathers of Austrian students.

Isabel and Mary, two teachers at a middle school, wanted to carry out a one-week stay with a class of 11-year-old students out of school in the countryside with the goal of enhancing communication and cooperation in the class.

As a Jew and someone whose (distant) family perished in the Holocaust, the film director was very interested in the subject proposed by Walter. However, he was afraid that he would not be able to distance himself emotionally and that his own personal view as a Jew would be stronger than that of a film director. Even though the subject proposed by Isabel and Mary is not as powerful as the Holocaust topic, it is a highly visual one. The film director imagined different children in their creative mode, making fun, laughing. The teachers would try to inspire them to try, to dare, to overcome obstacles, to listen to each other and to find the good side of working together. It would not be easy for the teacher, but she would succeed. The children would struggle but at the end, they would create something they could never imagine they could do by themselves. They would be very proud of the group. Some of the quiet kids (one of them might become a protagonist in the film) would show their hidden imagination and creative abilities.

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[1]    All names of persons were changed for ethical reasons.

The process would empower many individuals and the group as well.

The next question which occurred was which one of the two teachers would be the action researcher and which one would be the critical friend; both are experienced teachers but also very different. Mary enjoyed a strong position and high status in the school. She was vivid, open minded, critical and reflective. Additionally, she had already gained experience in action research projects. The assumption was that Isabel as a teacher would behave intuitively and her music and art abilities, emphasized by her audio-visual activities with the students would improve filming. Mary was more critical and could enable Isabel to discover aspects she was unaware of or did not expect. Teachers first engaged in action research like Isabel may lack self-confidence, but they may improve.

Compared to Mary, Isabel seemed more introverted and hesitant and, moreover, action research was new to her.

With this perspective in mind, Mary appeared to be the preferred action researcher. However, if Mary was chosen, Isabel would have to play the role of Mary's critical friend. This might be difficult for Isabel as Mary is very self-confident and ambitious. On the other hand, Isabel might be the better choice for showing the process of reflection and its possible influence on thinking and acting authentically due to her hesitant personality and lack of experience in action research.

After some discussion, the two teachers decided that Isabel would be the main character and Mary her critical friend. We named Mary's position the internal critical friend as opposed to the critical friend in the film team, a researcher at the University of Klagenfurt (see introduction). The film director wrote the script and rewrote it after feedback from the researcher at the University (the critical friend).

# The process of documentary filming, intervention and reflection

## The plan

Isabel was attempting to improve her relationship with the children and the relationships among children in the class as the head teacher. The film director decided to concentrate on a one-week stay of the students and the two teachers in a camp in the alpine countryside with the aim of revealing some elements of the action research done by Isabel. Isabel went through a process of reflections and conclusions based on her actions. Every evening, she met with her internal critical friend Mary in order to summarize the day's activities and to outline the program for the following day. Additionally, the critical friend talked with them every few days.

As a basis for the reflections during the action research process, the following methods were applied by the action researcher, Isabel: teacher's diary, notes compiled by the teacher and the critical friend, home video, feedback from the children, learner diaries. Isabel took the basis of these methods from a publication for action research practitioners (Feldman Altrichter, Posch & Somekh, 2018) and received some methodological support from the critical friend.

## The aims

Long before the filming started, the film director had a strong idea about the stages of an action research process. He wondered if he should tell the teacher what he is looking for. But, on the other hand, he was afraid that it would lead to a situation where the teacher would ask him, in every step, if what she is doing was okay. The film director wanted to document a real Action Research process like 'a fly on the wall' without interventions. The cinematographer knew about this dilemma. This made him more alert, to look for specific objects for the film. This development points to the unpredictability and creative potential of action research projects (McNiff, 2013).

However, the objectives were less clear, mainly because the teacher herself had more general educational aims while the film director was looking for specific objectives: Isabel wanted to improve the class atmosphere whereas the film team wanted to obtain visual impressions through which action research processes could be made visible.

The filmmaker's fantasy went beyond individual work with every student engaged in his own work. His goal was rather teamwork with mutual help resulting from cooperative efforts of several students. It would be easy to present visually the transition from a situation in which each student is engaged in his own work to a situation in which students help each other in common creation. This was an educational goal which could be recorded and filmed and have audio-visual results. However, the filmmaker could not and did not want to force ideas upon the teacher (Isabel). The educational goals had to come from her. The need for visual results was also due to language problems: the filmmaker did not speak German and as both the children and teachers spoke German, he needed a translator. Hence, the more visual the subject chosen by the teacher, the easier it would be for the director to film and focus on the situation in a more precise way.

Additionally, the film should concentrate on only two to four children because it is much easier for the film crew and the audience to follow the process with a focus on only a smaller number of individuals.

It was the goal of the film team to negotiate this issue with Isabel in line with the participatory character and the values of action research. Participants are seen as equals because of their different kinds of expertise and frames of reference (Elden & Levin, 1991). In a meeting between the director, the cinematographer, Isabel, Mary and the critical friend, it was agreed that Isabel would focus on two children whose relationship with each other she wanted to improve:

1. Sonja, a talented and musical girl and a class leader, stubborn, with very high self-esteem.

2.    Jack, a chubby short and shy boy who felt rejected and not accepted by the class.

It is important to state again that the objectives of the film were to record and show the process of an action research project rather than to create a film about the relationship between the two children. The goal was to document the action research of a teacher who attempted to change this relation through her own interventions.

## The filming process

One of the challenges for the film team was to decide on the extent to which the filming should focus on the two children or on the teacher showing her reactions in given situations. The film director made decisions on the spot according to his and the cinematographer's view based on the action research process in stage two described in the table 1 above.

The film crew asked the teacher for the detailed program and selected one or two activities for every day. Additionally, an interview with the teacher about her aims for the day was filmed every morning as well as the reflections with her critical friend in the evenings.

The visual aspect was the main decisive reason for choosing the activities to be filmed. For example, the first activity for the children was about working with clay. The film team expected to film a creative process with good possibilities of capturing the different characteristics of Jack and Sonja. The crew hoped that this would emerge through the individuals' work with clay: the figures they would choose to create, their individual shaping processes, speed, imagination etc. These were the reasons why it was decided to focus on the pottery activity.

## Disappointment

When the pottery activity started, all children sat in absolute silence and listened to the instructions. Every child received a lump of clay and was told to form a ball, the size of a tennis ball. All the children formed a ball of the same required size. Those who

had finished first waited until the rest were done. Then, the children received instructions on how to cut the ball into two exact equal halves with the help of a wire. The joint activity continued until all pupils had resembling products, which could only be distinguished by the name each child had carved into it.

The children worked in a uniform manner. The film crew had expected the activity to enable the children to express their imagination, but they merely had to follow clear guidelines and were taught the technique of creating pottery. It seemed more like a technical training session about how to work manually instead of a creative activity - like soldiers who obey instructions but don't ask questions.

During a reflection with the film team, Isabel pointed out that these strict introductions caused conformity but were not beneficial to the project as all the children had produced comparable objects. This would not have been the case if they had been allowed to work freely and create individual objects. Isabel countered that it is important to work carefully when making pottery so that it does not break in the oven. But, if so, why did she plan a pottery activity and not, for example, a collage activity in which creativity is promoted?

Other than expected, the film crew achieved almost nothing from this activity. Both the cinematographer and the film director felt that they did not have a film at all since nothing visible or observable had happened between the two main characters Jack and Sonja.

Later in the evening, during a conversation over coffee with Isabel, the film director made some very strong and emotional comments, first and foremost about the lack of creativity during the pottery class. He strongly expressed his opinion that the teachers did not allow the children to develop any creativity and that the whole activity was led by uniformity. The comments were so sharp that the cinematographer who was sitting aside and heard the conversation came over and told the film director that he felt ashamed of what he had heard. He did not agree with the film

director's tone. In his point of view, the film director should have expressed his opinions in a more gentle and polite manner rather than being so blunt. The film director agreed, on the one hand, with the cinematographer who suggested an apology. On the other hand, he felt that, as the director, he was responsible for the film. He had to produce a film with some drama and feared that the film might not accomplish the goals. Furthermore, he had brought a cinematographer from Israel to Austria with all the cost and effort involved and was now confronted by challenges, which were endangering his project.

He knew that Isabel could influence events and, as a director, he felt responsible for making her do it. However, the film director and the cinematographer were impressed by the absolute silence when the teacher began to speak. At first, they were stunned but soon they admired the quiet atmosphere in which it was possible to talk and listen to each other. They felt that as Israelis they might be from a more extroverted culture. Based on observations, they regarded Israeli pupils as more vivacious, louder, more expressive, less ordered and not really accepting formality.

It might also be that for Isabel individuality is not so important and perhaps nurtured by her role as head of a choir were the quality of the sound is based on listening to each other and joint singing. The film director, by contrast, comes from the cinema where individuality is very important.

The film director felt that he had to spur on matters and, therefore, behaved in an authoritative, or one can even say in a vulgar manner. He said to Isabel and Mary that they did not encourage their pupils to be creative but to behave like soldiers and obey orders. The reaction was silence, which the film director interpreted as a statement for 'I do not lower myself to your aggressive and offensive manner. You've said what you had to say. Thank you very much. Who gave you the right to say such things about me and how I perform my task?'

The film director struggled very much to decide whether to apologize as the cinematographer had recommended. The apology

was on the tip of his tongue, but he finally decided against it, and to wait for a more appropriate moment.

## The change

Matters changed the following day when the children started the next activity and it seemed that the teacher showed greater assertion, more interaction and intervention. It was as if the incident the previous day had fostered Isabel's reflections. She also discussed the matter with Mary, her internal critical friend who tried to support her reflections, which oscillated between emotions and more intellectual thoughts.

After another two days, the film crew succeeded in focusing on the protagonist boy and girl. However, this happened accidentally because both were present throughout that day's activities. This development points again to the unpredictability and creative potential of action research projects (McNiff, 2013).

When a dispute developed between them after lunch, the teacher attempted to intervene. The film director reacted immediately, and the crew managed to film the situation.

In this scene, Sonja claimed that Jack always pestered her while he claimed that she always annoyed him intentionally. During this alteration, the other children sided with Sonja, and the teacher tried to conciliate. The quarrel was very loud. When the film crew witnessed the aggressive tone between the girl and the boy and the teacher trying very hard to make peace, the director knew he had a film. For a film, some dramatic moments are needed. Isabel used mainly verbal, intellectual means of influence and intervention. She didn't hug Jack or Sonja, she didn't laugh or smile, and she talked with a soft voice.

After this incident, the film crew hoped that they could film scenes showing a positive change in Jack's and Sonja's relationship which finally happened at the end of the one week stay. It occurred in the context of a dance which the students performed under Isabel's supervision and during which the children had to change partners. The film crew waited and hoped to witness a situation in which

the two protagonists would stand face to face, not as an intended design, but as part of the dance. Finally, they could indeed film a situation where Sonja and Jack chose to dance together even though they could have avoided each other. The film director felt he now definitely had a story – not a story of love and hate, but a low-grade story made of small nuances, about improving a relationship with the support of the teacher. The film making has gone through two cycles – plan to film the two protagonists, film them during the dispute, observe Isabel's actions in trying to make peace and the students' reactions and plan to film them to see a positive change. It showed the development from stage A (quarrel-hate), to stage B (teacher's support) and, finally, stage C (dance - getting closer).

Stage A (quarrel- hate), was unexpected. When it happened, the cinematographer and the director immediately focused on the quarrel and the teacher's way of dealing with it. The teacher's actions could be stage B (teacher's support). But, when we reflected on the filming, the cinematographer and the director understood that the teacher's reaction was not clear, to neither the audience nor the two children. The director asked the teacher to talk again, with each one of the two children, and tell them what she expects from them. Only after those meetings, was the director satisfied with stage B. Now both filmmakers were waiting for the right situation to film stage C (dance - getting closer), or different ending (another quarrel…) that real life would bring. We focused on Jack and Sonja. At first, we filmed the two children totally ignoring each other. This was no good for the film, because the audience expect to see something happen and not what does not happen. Every time the children had to divide themselves into groups, Sonja arranged herself to be always in another group. We waited, but nothing changed. We asked the teacher to arrange an activity where both would be in one group. In this activity, the children acted as animals. Jack decided to be the lion. Sonja became the leader and in a wise but sneaky way, she organized all the animals to be against the lion. It was a game, but it reflects reality. At the end of the game, she listened to Jack. She was no longer ignoring him. That was great. The filmmakers were very happy.

Later, after looking at the film clips, we found that it would be very complex to express to the film viewers the link between the game and the real relations. It was implicit and not clear enough. We had to wait for a new situation. And the dancing was the moment. Right away, when we saw that both of them are dancing together, we knew that we have stage C, but it was very short, and we wanted it to be very clear. So, on the spot, the director ran to the woman who played the music for the dance and told her to keep on and on until the director told her to stop. After that, the cinematographer could go to different locations to film the new couple from several angles, so the audience could not miss the situation.

## Documentary ethics

Every profession, be it in the field of medicine, law or journalism, has its own code of ethics, and so do documentary film directors. Professional ethics determine the rules of what is permissible and what is forbidden in the relationships of the professionals and the people with who a film director communicates in his work.

Anyone who has attempted to direct a documentary has had to face the dilemma of commitment and loyalty between the director and the film characters. For example, when filming a documentary on illegal activities, e.g. drug use, one meets people, has coffee with them and talks candidly, followed by the filming. It is then hard to ignore personal relationships, even though the director tries to show that the characters are engaged in illegal activities. Therefore, the director must repeatedly re-examine his capacity to detach himself from the topic of the film.

"Jack the lion" was filmed with the full agreement of the teachers, children, their families and their school. During the research stage and the filming, the director and the teachers formed a relation of trust, with the director trying to extract from each teacher and child her or his own truth. Rabinger believes that documentation is based on the reliability of the participants which is its power (Rabiger, 2015). The words of the teachers and the children were

not modified or softened, and the director attempted to present them as they were said.

His decision to spur on matters and behave in a vulgar manner, and to capture Jack in his weak moments show the dilemmas between his different roles as a director (Har-Gil, 2015): a person who the crew and protagonists trust, a producer, a human being, a friend of the cinematographer.

At the end the film, the director was not sure if Jack, Sonja, Mary, and Isabel would be pleased to see how they were presented in the film. He knew this but still had to make his choices on the film.

> To be sure, some documentarists claim to be 'objective', a term that seems to renounce an interpretative role. The claim may be strategic but is surely meaningless. The documentarist, like any communicator in any medium, makes endless choices (Barnouw, 1974, p. 287).

Considering documentary filmmaking, action research allows a more conscious reflection on the decisions.

## Reflection on the processes following the completion of the film

During the week of filming, the director was working under several hats (Har-Gil, 2015) at the same time: 1) director of a film; 2) producer; 3) Israeli citizen; 4) former art teacher; and 5) friend of the cinematographer.

These different roles made the work of the film director complex. For example, when the director made some very strong and emotional comments to Isabel – as a director of a film, this was the right thing to do because it urged the objects of the film; as a producer, it was a very bad, it might lead to a big conflict with the main protagonist. She might refuse to go on being filmed; as an Israeli citizen that represent his country it showed our impoliteness; as a former art teacher, he was sure she missed her duty; as a friend of the cinematographer, who was embarrassed and felt strongly that he was wrong, the director had to listen and maybe change his way. In this case, the hat of the director "won".

 The critical friend and the film director himself decided that he would participate in one of the reflection sessions of Isabel and Mary and give feedback to the clay workshop. In this situation, he had at least two roles: 1) the director filming the process of action research, and 2) the spectator - an outsider involved in the process.

Will the film depict "Action Research"? Will it be understood? The film crew asked itself this question as soon as they finished filming, even before editing. The director holds the view that spectators will understand the advantages of action research on a methodological level. They will comprehend the various methods used: 1) the diaries, 2) the feedback, 3) the planning of the aims for every day and for the whole seminar, 4) the recording by writing comments and by video, 5) the reflections between the teacher and the critical friend, 6) and the comments of the outsider.

Spectators might also understand a certain developmental process in the reflections of the teacher, but they certainly will understand that action research means a lot of work and a lot of energy required from all those involved in the process - the teacher, the critical friends and others. The question remains whether despite the hard work, the benefits of the action research project will be recognized. Will the viewers think that they could have been more critical of the teacher than the critical friend? Did they gain enough ideas from the reflections, or were these reflections insufficient for providing new or different methods of planning?

Since the teacher researcher did not gain enough from the process during the filming stage, and partly because she was not critical enough on her own interventions, and the film crew did not see this at the filming stage as well, many of the goals of the film have to be changed. It might be better to ask the spectators, before viewing the film, what elements of Action Research they can find in the process and what elements are not satisfactory?

In retrospect, one may say that, assuming that the film should persuade viewers that the action research investigation method will provide researchers with deeper insights and meaningful self-criticism, this goal is not achieved in this film. Viewers see that

there is discussion, dialogue in several circles, but the investigating teacher does not arrive to insights from which the viewer can understand the potential of this method of investigation. At the end of the film, viewers pity Jack, the slow, rejected boy yearning for love and attention, in spite of the teachers efforts, thus exposing the limited ability of the teacher to change social reality, in spite of her efforts and good will. She is not aware of this in real time or in retrospective reflection.

The members of the film crew think that they were able to show certain changes, which, for example, occurred in the relationship between Jack and Sonja with support from the teacher. However, it is difficult to tell the viewer if the relationship has really changed due to the teacher's intervention. It might have happened without her help or maybe it is a natural occurrence between children – they fight vigorously and then become good friends. If so, what is the film about? Can we say that without the action research process the developments would have been different? This cannot be said for sure, but there is a hope that the film will leave the audience with the impression of what the potential of action research might be.

The question remains whether a film is an adequate means to illustrate an action research process. A text might better reveal the feelings of the teacher and the students. However, the film might be used best as a trigger (Tan, 2006) to open a discussion about action research. The discussion might not evolve around what exists in action research as shown in the film, but about what is missing in it. This could lead to interesting and thought provoking insights, but it also shows in what way the film failed.

Another question is how much the presence of the camera interfered with the process. The action research process without the external pressure of the camera is definitely more intimate. The children are likely to behave in a more controlled way and, as expected with the camera around, they are less natural. The teacher might be more conscious of her actions and less likely to show emotions because of the possible psychological pressure of being recorded and later watched by an audience. Consequently,

filming hurts the action research process. Additionally children's age plays an important role. Younger children (4-7 year old) are almost unaware to the presence of the camera. A class of older children was chosen for the film, hence we can assume that in some cases children were aware of the camera and behaved accordingly. Also the teachers were aware of the camera hence we can assume they would have behaved in a different way without it, as is the case with most adults, and obviously, to some extent, viewers are aware of it as well.

On the other hand, the fact that the teacher and the critical friend talked every evening at a fixed time with the attendance of the film crew during the reflective process might have made the conversations more binding and possibly obliged the teachers to reflect deeper on matters. It might have forced all the participants to think harder. As in documentary, people are forced to focus on their thoughts in a manner they would not do in everyday life where participants are asked to summarize their actions or activities.

In any case, readers are invited to form their own opinion about the film, which is available on the following website:

 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kqgFvP21R3g

## Final thoughts

We distinguish three concurrent action research processes in this paper, Firstly, there is Isabel using action research to improve her work. Secondly, there is the personal impact of the action research approach on the film director and thirdly the similarities between the action research spirals and the film making process spirals.

Like learning, action research is a cyclical and ongoing process. An action researcher incessantly observes, analyzes, hypothesizes, assesses, reflects, and adjusts (Mary, 2012). In this case, Isabel used the tools and her internal critical friend to reflect, analyse and develop ways to improve her relationship with the children and the relationships among children.

A challenge concerning all forms of action research relates to the tension between the researcher and the context (Davidson, Martinsons & Ou, 2012). The action research process described here might allow all the people involved to see more of the whole picture and provokes reflections comprehensively.

The film director managed to grasp issues that were not apparent in the first viewing and repeated viewing of the same responses contributed to a deeper understanding. He began to see things beyond words, which were not evident in the way the participants responded. His observations and analyses lead to greater understanding of his feelings during the filming process and his influence on the process. All this should lead to a better and deeper way of his film making in the future.

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# Benefits and drawbacks on literature circles in Moodle chat for the students of English as a foreign language

Vlatka Ivić and Blaženka Šoštarić

## Abstract

*The aim of this paper is to study the benefits and drawbacks of using Moodle Chat for the implementation of literature circles in the English language classrooms among university students by establishing the suitability of online chats for implementing literature circles, and to obtain student feedback and their assessment of the conducted activities. Literature circles are widely used in language teaching to promote active learning, develop communication skills and encourage critical thinking, creativity and self-motivation. Furthermore, they are highly effective in developing other soft skills such as problem solving, leadership, teamwork and empathy which are in high demand in the contemporary job market. Technology advancements and the development of new e-learning tools have opened myriads of possibilities for developing language skills in less conventional ways. Therefore, instead of the traditional literature circles conducted in class, students have been given the opportunity to conduct literature circle discussions in the Moodle Chat environment in their own arrangement, without direct teacher intervention. The added value of Moodle Chat is that the conversations are recorded and provide material for further linguistic and discourse analysis and can be adapted and used to assess the students' level of proficiency in both general and academic English. We wanted to know about the benefits and drawbacks of the literature circles in higher education for the students of English language through the action research done with our students. The respondents are first- and second-year students of English Language and Literature at the Faculty of*

*Humanities and Social Sciences in Osijek, Croatia. The combination of measurable usage data, student feedback, reflections and suggestions identified that the Moodle Chat was an effective e-learning tool for developing language skills in less conventional ways. The authors recommend, and provide suggestions on the use of Moodle Chat as a method for teachers of foreign languages as it can be highly effective in developing not only language skills, but also soft skills such as problem solving, leadership, teamwork and empathy.*

**Key words:** communication skills, literature circles, Moodle Chat, soft skills, teaching English as a foreign language, action research

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**What is known about the topic?**

Literature Circles have been a well-known method in language teaching for a long time. This method is suggested to develop critical thinking by the Project Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking.

**What does this paper add?**

This paper shows how to adapt Literature Circles for online teaching through Chat sessions in Moodle. It also shows the other benefits online use provides.

**Who will benefit from its content?**

Language teachers can benefit from this idea, especially during the COVID-19 crisis. It can also be adapted to other subjects, not only language subjects.

**What is the relevance to AL and AR scholars and practitioners?**

This paper shows the AR cycle describing step-by-step activities, and the procedure of AL done by students online. It also provides the opinion and reflections of students participating in the research, as well as researchers' reflection and conclusions after the project finished.

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# Introduction

Technology advancements in the development of new e-learning tools have opened myriads of possibilities for developing language skills in less conventional ways no longer limited by the activities done exclusively in the classroom. Teachers at all levels of educational systems are aware of the need to provide positive learning experiences and accommodate students' preferences, in order to engage them and retain their attention and focus today

(Tsang, 2011). Bognar (2009) claims that most educators will agree that our schools need change. Teachers have played a dominant role and students have been mainly inactive. This situation is not suitable for the 21st century school. The current age requires readiness to accept change, face problems and find various solutions. Although changes in schools are necessary, the same author poses the question of how to encourage them.

The key factor in introducing change into our education system is the teachers cooperating with their students. Gabryś-Barker (2006) claims that becoming expert teachers requires knowledge and practice, hands-on experience in the classroom, but only if combined with reflection and controlled and structured inquiry about one's own teaching and developing awareness of the practice. Nolen and Vander Putten (2007) suggest that a practical yet systematic research method should be used to investigate an educators' own teaching and their students' learning in and outside the classroom. Teachers' reflections on their teaching practice and students' reflections on their learning practices are crucial in improving one's own work and achievements and professional satisfaction. Whipp (2003) suggests that critical reflection in teacher education enables prospective teachers to develop the habit of continually learning from their experiences.

Bognar & Krumes (2017) state that it is possible to utilise various tools and techniques in written and spoken forms to encourage students' reflectivity, such as online discussions. Online reflective group discussion meets the students' engagement determinants for learning, as it requires active reflection and thought organisation to put into words. This reflective development is important as it provokes deeper thinking and rethinking of our own and other people's deeds and communicating it to the others in a formal way. Thus, we expect the students to develop as reflective practitioners and have the skills to interact collaboratively with others upon graduation (Tsang, 2011). These skills must be explicitly developed (Masella, 2007 in Tsang, 2011). Tsang further develops the idea saying that this is especially relevant to today's generations, who prefer collaboration and whose personal focus centres upon social

networking and digital connectivity. In developing this reflectivity using online discussions such as literature circles it is evident that students still fail to demonstrate basic academic skills, such as the ability to criticise, analyse and evaluate the information obtained (Sheahan, 2005; Prensky, 2006 in Tsang, 2011) in an appropriate way. Tsang (2011) claims that it is teachers who have the responsibility to facilitate reflective learning in students.

Therefore, instead of the traditional literature circles conducted in class, students have been given the opportunity to conduct literature circle discussions in the Moodle Chat environment in their own arrangement, without direct teacher intervention. The added value of Moodle Chat is that the conversations are recorded and provide material for further linguistic and discourse analysis and can be adapted and used to assess the students' level of proficiency in both general and academic English. Students can also use their recorded sessions to analyse and reflect on their group discussions in order to improve their subsequent group activities online.

In order to share the examples of good practice among professionals, it is especially important to encourage teachers to publish their experiences in home and foreign journals. In this way, teachers can act locally while contributing to the development of educational theory at the international level (Bognar, 2009).

Therefore, we commenced an action research on the students' experience with literature circles in Moodle Chat in the English language department at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. We set the following questions about which we were interested to learn.

Research question 1

What are the advantages of doing online literature circles over classroom environment?

Research question 2

What are the disadvantages of doing online literature circles and possible solutions for them?

Research question 3

Do online group discussions develop other important skills apart from language skills?

## Action research

In action research, practitioners strive to improve the educational practice and develop their ideas as creative potentials as well as ideas from other participants of the educational process (Bognar, 2009). Action research shifts the focus from the observer to the practitioner. Researcher practitioners engage in their practice, observe it, describe it, and explain it to other colleagues, and come up with explanations for what they do and why they do it (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). Action research was chosen to improve teacher's own practice and it also involves the subject of research as co-researchers in the intense and effective use of e-learning in teaching English as a foreign language, which coincides with the question that naturally arises in teachers: how to improve one's own practice (Whitehead, 1989). Teachers can improve their practice by systematically collecting data on the change process and analysing it to make better decisions regarding the continuation of this process (Wallace, 1998). Action research gives teachers the opportunity to monitor and publish the results of their actions, while enhancing their educational practice and enriching pedagogical theory with new creative solutions (Bognar, 2009). Kemmis and McTaggart (1988, in Gabryś-Barker, 2006) state that action research is teachers' self-initiated individual research, aiming to develop awareness of teaching and awareness of learning. Gabryś-Barker (2006) adds that the main reasons for carrying out action research projects are the promotion of teachers' development and autonomy to become a more aware, effective and successful teacher. The results of action research cannot be generalised, but they can be shared and discussed with other teachers and learners to involve them in the teaching/learning processes in order for them to become more autonomous in

implementing changes resulting from classroom enquiry (Gabryś-Barker, 2006).

This action research aims to improve the teaching practice in the Contemporary English Language courses through more intensive and better use of e-learning. It is necessary to identify the opportunities and problems that arise in practice related to e-learning, and by introducing changes in teaching, to observe new outcomes and analyse them in order to present the basic guidelines and principles that will be applicable in foreign language learning in general, all for the purpose of improving the quality of both teaching and learning English.

## Literature circles

Literature circles are usually defined as a technique that involves small, temporary discussion groups of students who have selected the same book, story, poem or article to read and discuss (Daniels, 2002; Whittaker, 2012). The members of the group are assigned specific roles to play in the discussion and they all have to come to the group sessions with notes prepared in advance. Many scholars have conducted research on literature circles and their effectiveness in increasing literacy and critical thinking skills in English language learners (Daniels, 2002; Peralta-Nash & Dutch, 2000). This technique allows for combining independent reading with cooperative learning and is a useful tool in promoting focused group discussions (Langer 2002; Daniels 2002). In literature circles, students are involved in individual work done in preparation for the discussions, group work and reflection, i.e. they serve as a perfect example of active learning. The form taken by literature circles varies according to the students' needs, their abilities, and the characteristics of individual classrooms. However, all literature circles share the following three basic elements: diversity, self-choice, and student initiative (Daniels, 2002). Therefore, it is to no surprise that literature circles have been widely used in language teaching as an effective strategy to promote active learning, develop communication skills and

encourage critical thinking, creativity and self-motivation both with high school and university level students.

Literature circles are used to foster cooperative, responsible, and enjoyable classroom climates, as students are responsible for working with each other to make decisions in accordance with their needs and interests (Burns, 2011. They are also taught to respect multiple perspectives on the topics and issues discussed, and the students are trained to become more attentive listeners (Burns, 2011 Farinacci, 1998). Within each literature circle group, students are in charge of their own learning and are assigned roles with different responsibilities, such as leading discussions, searching for new vocabulary or summarizing (Farinacci, 1998; Peralta-Nash & Dutch, 2000).

The roles used in literature circles are flexible and teachers usually adapt them to their needs, depending on the age and interests of the students. The roles given in the project *Reading and writing for critical thinking* are the following: Travel Tracer, Investigator (Researcher), Character Captain, Scribe, Discussion Director, Literary Luminary (Passage Master), Illustrator, Connector, Summariser and Vocabulary Enricher. There is an interesting idea presented by Pentón Herrera and Kidwell (2018) on adapting traditional literature circle roles to the needs of the contemporary students by incorporating technology which has become an important literacy skill students have to be educated in. Their roles include: Graphic Designer, Tweeter, Trend Spotter, Investigative Journalist, Bias Detective, Project Manager; and thus illustrate the capacity and knowledge students should be taught in order to become 'successful global citizens in today's multicultural world'.

## Learning management systems enhancing constructivist learning in higher education

Technology advancements and the development of new e-learning tools have opened possibilities for developing both 'hard' and 'soft' language skills in less conventional ways including exploring options outside those classroom technology offers. Therefore,

instead of the traditional literature circles conducted in class, students nowadays have the opportunity to conduct literature circle discussions in a virtual, on-line environment, without direct teacher intervention.

Examples of technology enhanced learning at higher education institutions are open source learning management systems with many different types of implementations. Moodle, being one of them, is a software package that enables constructivist e-learning and is very often used in higher education in Croatia and worldwide. Constructivist e-learning involves constant social interaction between those who are learning and those who are helping them. Thus, learning is not a transfer of knowledge, but rather it occurs in people's relationships and participation in practical activities (Bognar, 2016). In higher education institutions, Moodle is used by teachers mainly to distribute materials, collect homework and communicate with students, but Moodle has much more to offer instructors and students alike in the way of communication and collaboration tools such as forums, blogs, discussions or chats (https://docs.moodle.org/38/en/Using_Chat).

The advantage that Moodle Chat has over Moodle Forum is that it is a synchronous activity that requires all participants in the group to be present at the same time in order to establish communication. It is particularly beneficial for more introvert students who shy away from communicating in class in front of their peers. Even in the higher education settings, introvert language students tend to be quiet and refrain from taking part in classroom discussion, although they already have a very good command of English as a second language - they read a lot, they think a lot about the topics, they write very mature essays and they are very creative at storytelling when given enough time to prepare (Zimmerman, 2014).

When conducting literature circle chats in Moodle Chat in groups of four to five students, all of them have the opportunity to participate in significant and meaningful ways. This participation occurs even in large groups. The chat is conducted in real time and

the students can see their peers' questions, comments and reflections and can respond immediately.

Less extrovert, shy students do not have to compete for attention and can, therefore, contribute, comment and ask questions more easily. In such an environment, everyone has an equal voice and the setting is perfect for fostering various soft skills such as time management, leadership, acceptance of divergent opinions, critical reasoning and empathy.

The added value of Moodle Chat is that the conversations are recorded and provide material for further linguistic and discourse analysis and can be adapted and used to assess the students' level of proficiency in both general and academic English. The transcript of the chat session is a record of what actually happened during the discussion, which makes it an excellent resource for critical reflection that can be done after the discussions are completed by teachers, but even more by the participants themselves. Reviewing the transcript of the chat, teachers can assess the students based on their participation both quantitatively and qualitatively, as well as conduct more in-depth linguistic or discourse analyses. There are more advanced versions of Moodle that follow the latest technology trends and have interfaces that allow for posting images and emoticons which makes the tool more attractive and acceptable to the contemporary generation of students. There is also the possibility of extracting chat sessions in various formats that provides for easier data extraction and statistical analysis, if required.

## Development of soft skills for future employment

Preparing university graduates for the competitive job market requires not only developing curricula aimed at acquiring academic skills and expertise but also working on their interpersonal, i.e. soft skills. The term 'soft skills' covers a wide spectrum of skills as diverse as creativity, time management, problem solving and emotional intelligence The World Economic Forum Future of Jobs report in 2018 suggested that by 2020, complex problem-solving, critical thinking, creativity, people

management and emotional intelligence would be among the most important skills required in the workplace. (World Economic Forum, 2016).

In addition to enhancing students' communication skills and literacy in general, literature circles are also proven to be highly effective in developing soft skills such as problem solving, leadership, teamwork and empathy which are in high demand in the contemporary job market. Most employers highlight that the workers they want to hire need to be effective communicators, dependable, creative and willing to learn, and have a positive attitude. This means that only developing 'hard' academic skills, level of expertise and gaining experience is not sufficient to succeed in the growingly tougher competition for job acquisition and job sustainability (Wats & Wats, 2009).

Playing various roles in literature circles, students take part in the collective development and learning process. The discussion sessions provide the students with the opportunity to proactively seek new meanings in literary works and popular science articles, and, therefore, present a great opportunity for learning in a creative way. Many authors agree that university graduates are lacking in personal skills that should complement the disciplinary and academic theory and expertise they have acquired throughout their education. Higher education curricula should be designed in such a way as to integrate hard and soft skills in order to produce creative and critical thinkers; team players who take responsibility for their own development and are able to facilitate learning in groups and communities. The job market is increasingly demanding workers with substantial management capacities and excellent communication skills (Hagmann et al., 2003).

## Research methodology

At the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Osijek, Croatia, first- and second-year students of English Language and Literature use Moodle Chat to conduct literature-circle type discussions as one of the activities in the courses focused on developing the students' reading, writing, speaking and listening skills in both

general and academic English (Graham-Marr & Pellowe, 2016). The research has been conducted in the course Contemporary English Language. From the academic year 2014/2015 to the academic year 2019/2020, six generations of students took part in the research, 456 students in total. The chat sessions last 60 to 90 minutes. The main objective is to involve students in active learning and integrate fostering of both language and soft skills. The activity is graded and used as a part of the syllabus which makes 10% of the final grade. Nevertheless, it can also be used without grading, as a convenient way of making up for missed classes in a less formal environment than the classroom. Online literature circles proved to be an excellent method during COVID-19 world pandemics because students could collaborate in groups staying at home and keeping their physical distance.

The action research has been done according to Susman (1983) five phases of action research cycle:

1.  Identifying a problem and collecting data – we wanted our students to experience formal professional discussion online in order to improve their soft skills, English language skills and ICT skills;

2.  Stating the possible solutions and action planning – we have chosen to do literature circles online which were previously done in the classroom;

3.  Implementing the action plan – students were organised in online Moodle Chat groups with the step-by-step instructions what to do;

4.  Collecting, analysing and interpreting data – Moodle Chat group sessions have been analysed together with the students' reflections on the advantages and disadvantages students experienced during group sessions;

5.  Reflecting, assessing and evaluating the action and finally sharing the new experience – writing the paper on the experience.

To explain the whole process in more detail, the plan of action has been described. The students can be divided into groups either randomly, using Moodle group features, or the students can be allowed to form their own groups. The groups usually consist of four to five students with various literature circle roles assigned to each individual student in the group or distributed randomly (e.g. Questioner/Discussion Director, Word Wizard, Summarizer, Connector, Literary Luminary, Researcher).

In the first year, the students have to choose a short story to read in their own group, and adopt the group roles that they find the most suitable. After that first meeting online, they meet again at the time they set for their group and have a discussion. Each group has to spend at least 90 minutes in total for this discussion. Regarding the language, the students are allowed to take a more relaxed approach and use 'chat' language (in English). The only things they have to take into consideration is being polite and tolerant to each other and staying focussed on the task.

In the second year, the students are required to discuss a book. The suggested title is George Orwell's *1984*; nevertheless, the students are given the opportunity to select another book, if all group member agree, which serves the purpose of developing students' negotiation skills. The students are encouraged to use more complex linking words and phrases that allow for smooth transition of ideas.

After the completion of each of the literature circle sessions, the students are tasked to state the advantages and disadvantages they experienced during the activity. In the first year, they were asked to reflect on the things they really liked about the activity and to give suggestions on how to improve it. They could also search and make their own list of the tips on how to have a good online discussion (many universities have such instructions on their websites). In the second year, the students were required to critically reflect on both their own performance and the performance of their peers. Students were asked by the researchers to share their opinion on the following topics:

- Their participation in the chat discussion

- Benefits - important contributions they made and important ideas or explanation expressed

- Drawbacks and suggestions

## Qualitative analysis of the students' feedback on the benefits and drawbacks of online literature circles

The students are tasked to complete a questionnaire on their opinion and experience in the literature circles after their second year at the Department. Their feedback provides an invaluable resource for assessing the suitability of the activity. All the students responded that they participated 'about the right amount' in the discussion, although the statistics clearly indicate that there were students who were not as active in the discussions. On the other hand, although some students joined the discussion less frequently, their contributions were meaningful and significant and sometimes their sentences are longer and more complex than the sentences used by more active students. It is really hard, actually almost impossible, to measure the level of meaningfulness and significance of the student's individual contributions, and evaluation is mostly based on the teacher's personal impression, but there are some obvious and easily measurable data that show the fact in favour of using literature circles in teaching practice. Table 1 shows the total number of participants which makes 94.41% and is higher than the average participation in classroom activities. Besides this advantage, the average time each group spent in literature circle discussions exceeds the time required from the students (90 minutes = two lessons). Groups have spent 49.52 minutes more than required in their online discussions.

| Academic year | Total number of students | Number of LC participants | % of students participating | Number of groups | Average time spent in LC discussion per group (90 min required) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2014/2015 | 74 | 71 | 95.94% | 15 | 120.20 |
| 2015/2016 | 81 | 76 | 93.82% | 16 | 131.25 |
| 2016/2017 | 86 | 81 | 94.18% | 18 | 142.16 |
| 2017/2018 | 86 | 83 | 96.51% | 17 | 136.70 |
| 2018/2019 | 81 | 78 | 96.29% | 17 | 145.53 |
| 2019/2020 | 75 | 67 | 89.33% | 15 | 131.26 |
| **TOTAL** | **483** | **456** | **94.41%** | **98** | **139.52** |

Table 1. Number and percentage of LC participants, number of groups and time spent in LC discussion

## Benefits

The general findings on benefits that were drawn from the analysis of the students' feedback showed the following as the benefits of using Moodle Chat for literature circles:

- students choose when to complete the task,
- students improve their soft skills – time management, persuasion/negotiation skills, creativity, independence,
- communication is in English, there is no resorting to mother tongue which happens frequently in group assignments in class,
- students voluntarily stay in the chat longer than required,
- the activity can be used to make up for skipped classes.

The following are the excerpts taken from some of the feedback on what group strategies the students used well:

- Everybody did their research. We thought creatively and gave our own opinions, while being respectful to the other members of the group.

- Participants in our group were really interested and no one was left out, we all expressed our views and opinions, and nobody was ignored.

- This is really a good way of showing thoughts about the book and I think everybody liked this kind of discussion where every person had his/her own role. It is better than just discussing the book without roles.

- If there was a disagreement, we would respect other opinions.

- These kinds of group projects are always interesting. It is especially good that we could do the literature circle from the comfort of our own homes, which added to the casual manner of the assignment. This in turn helped us to relax and come up with interesting ideas and discussion topics.

- The whole conversation was in English and there were no problems with people speaking in Croatian or cursing or whatnot. We were all good listeners and when we didn't understand something we would ask the person for clarification. I also believe that we were good with expressing our own opinions and acknowledging other's.

- I think that we all participated enough. We stayed on certain topics and switched to another one after everyone said what they wanted to say. … It was very uplifting. Also, I think that we all encouraged each other because we were kind and respectful. Furthermore, we all agreed with one another so no one felt excluded or like they said something that is not valid

- Well, we were really polite towards each other. We appreciated everyone's opinion and comment and responded to everything. Nobody was feeling excluded or if their opinion wasn't important. Even when someone didn't

> agree with something, again in a polite and nice way, we showed our disagreement. No one was hurt or felt left out. We are a small group, we function great, and we care about each other because we're friends. And I think we showed that in our discussion.

It is interesting to note that many of the students who usually shy away from communicating in class, in front of their peers, were quite active in the chat environment: they enjoyed the activity and felt included. The conclusion to be drawn from their comments is that the more introvert students saw it as an opportunity to both discover and develop their strengths, finally having a chance to actively participate in class activities with meaningful contributions without being overridden by extrovert students who tend to monopolise class discussions, unless restricted by the teacher.

## Drawbacks

In their comments, the students highlighted the following as problems of using Moodle Chat for literature circles:

- Extrovert students were more critical of the virtual Moodle Chat environment used to conduct literature circles,

- The issues that were seen as most problematic include technical issues related to Moodle Chat such as slow internet connection, breaks in communication,

- Lack of face-to-face communication and no direct teacher supervision resulting in discussion digressions and the inability to stay on topic.

The following are the excerpts taken from the feedback on what group strategies the students struggled with:

- Mainly to stay on topic. On the one hand because we all had so much to say, on the other because some experienced technical difficulties.

- I don't think we had any struggles except that we had to speed it up a bit because 90 minutes wasn't enough time to type everything that we had in mind.

- My main and only suggestion is that it would be a lot better and more efficient if we could do such sessions in person instead on chat. It's more practical, useful and we would be able to say a lot more in same amount of time or even less.

- I would just like to comment that it is hard not to interrupt a person in this chat, because you cannot see the typing mark, so I wish we had some indication. The conversation would be much easier to follow. Also, maybe a bit shorter book next time?

- It would have been better if we had had access to a better chat service, as I believe this one wasn't adequate enough for a quality online chat session…

- I like the idea of a literature circle, but I don't think the online chat is a good enough solution because the discussion can't go on organically as it would in person.

- I would say that a general problem with these discussions is that sometimes you cannot fully express your opinion and attitude, so it may seem to others that you meant one thing, while you meant something else entirely.

## Suggestions

The students were also asked to suggest how they would improve the activity and what they would focus on in future literature circle discussions. As expected, the students gave contradictory suggestions (i.e. larger vs. smaller groups, with or without roles, randomly selected groups vs. groups selected by the students, etc.) which only confirm that teachers should organise a variety of activities to cater for all the needs and learning preferences in the classroom. Below is a selection of the students' responses:

- For the next literature circle discussion, it would be nice to have even larger groups to get a semblance of a heated debate with many different opinions.

- I would recommend to have smaller groups with fewer roles.

- I do not know if what I am about to suggest has already been tried sometimes before but I think it would be interesting to have the discussion without designated roles. So, to explain, I think the discussion would maybe be more relaxed and "personal" and it could feel like a real discussion and exchange of opinions, even some disagreements, who knows what could happen?

- A literature circle discussion is a great, alternate way to discuss a book other than in class. Maybe we could do the circles with our teachers as well.

- Maybe make the groups completely random, since it would be a great opportunity to hear opinions of people with whom we don't chat all that often. Perhaps the next literature circle can include movies as well as books and comparisons between the two.

- I think that our discussion was nicely done although 90 minutes passed very quickly so we did not have much time to talk about all events.

- Our goal for the next time is definitely to be more patient with each other and wait until everyone expresses their opinion about a certain theme before jumping to other.

## Reflections

Starting the project in the academic year 2014/2015 helped us unexpectedly a lot during this academic year facing the COVID-19 crisis, gathering experience before the teaching moved to online form completely. After the first try in 2014/2015, we were rather pleased with the result, since our impression was that literature

circles work much better online. Previously, we organised these circles in the classroom, during two lessons (90 minutes), students were sitting in their groups (approximately 4-5 groups) reading the short stories they have chosen out of five offered and preparing their roles. They would spend a lot of time chatting about other things. By the end of the lesson or next time, they would present their short story to the others in 10 minutes. By moving literature circles online, students have to take the task more seriously, concentrating on their roles, presenting their findings to the others, and listening to other student's presentations the whole time, and using only English language throughout the whole process. Although we do not require very formal ways of communicating in these chats, we got the impression that some students (very few) have 'too much fun' during the discussion not doing the task properly and distracting the others with their comments. The reason for this distraction could be that before this task they were chatting online only with their friends in their free time for the sake of having fun. After the experience with the first generation, we tell our students to take the task as seriously as any other task in their studies. For such online projects to succeed, we have to give a proper and detailed guidance for our students to make the requirements as clear as possible to avoid future misunderstandings and confusion. We also have to be available for them for their questions during the task (email and forum for their questions). It is also good to ask them to do research on how to do the discussion online (some renowned faculties have the guidelines for the students) before their start their own discussion. The other option for the students, if they are to do the activity more than once (having a different task later), is to evaluate their own discussion, and to state positive and negative characteristics of their previous activity.

The biggest problem for us, as teachers, proved to be evaluation afterwards. We are aware that such kind of activity cannot be evaluated objectively. There are too many things that have to be taken into consideration, some of them measurable, some of them not. The final grade ends up being a personal impression by the teacher. Not being very strict about the grades is the safest

solution, because the ultimate goal for our students is the process of experiencing the discussion online, improving their English skills and their social skills at the same time.

Another problem might be the fact that the teachers lose control of the activity after giving the pre-activity guidance for their students. Only after the whole process is over does the teacher check the outcomes. The written feedback of the teacher to their students with useful comments is very important and students appreciate it.

In the process, we have learnt a lot from our students. Depending on their personal preference regarding face-to-face communication conducted in class and virtual communication in the Moodle Chat environment, students highlighted both positive and negative aspects of the activity. As anticipated, extrovert students felt frustrated in the virtual environment and found it restricting and unnatural, and would rather conduct literature circle discussions in person. Conversely, more introvert students enjoyed the activity and felt included and appreciated. They saw it as an opportunity to both discover and develop their strengths, finally having a chance to actively participate in class activities without being overridden by extrovert students. Language instructors sometimes struggle with finding ways to meet the needs of all the students in the classroom, introvert ones in particular. The findings of this study show that Moodle Chat could be a useful tool to appreciate the needs of introvert students and help them discover their communication strengths, but also teach extrovert students to communicate in a different way and learn to be more tolerant and patient.

## Conclusion

Literature circles have been used for decades in language teaching to promote active learning, develop communication skills and encourage critical thinking, creativity and self-motivation. The purpose of this study was to establish the benefits and drawbacks of using Moodle Chat for the implementation of literature circles in English language classrooms among university students. Student feedback was the most valuable resource in determining how

appropriate a virtual environment can be in enhancing students' English language skills, as well as some specific soft skills development that would increase their future employability in the job market.

### Research question 1

What are the advantages of doing online literature circles over classroom environment?

Literature circles are a versatile tool and they can be adapted to teaching a variety of topics in the higher education environment, ranging from English for academic purposes to English for specific purposes (EAP and ESP) to reading and discussing specific topics or research articles, i.e. not necessarily literary works. The roles are flexible and can be altered to fit the requirements of different courses. The specific advantages of doing online literature circles over classroom environment are that within the given timespan, students choose the appropriate time for them when they work in their own group. They are not dependant on the timetable or the other groups. Furthermore, while working in their groups, they cannot waste time having fun, which is a common problem of the group work, because every moment is recorded, and the effort and contribution of each student is easily observed.

The added value of Moodle Chat is that the conversations are recorded and provide material for further linguistic and discourse analysis and research. The transcripts can be used to assess the students' level of proficiency in both general and academic English. Following the activity, students can write both self-assessments and reflection on their own performance, and the teachers can give them feedback on their language skills.

### Research question 2

What are the disadvantages of doing online literature circles and possible solutions for them?

The teacher's support to their students doesn't happen in real time, but it is asynchronous since students work in groups at different times unlike the classroom environment. This fact emphasises the

responsibility for detailed and thorough preparation of the task from the teacher's side during the pre-activity period in order to avoid or decrease the misunderstandings and mistakes. Being available for the student's questions in while-active period via emails or forums or other ways of communication can be a valuable support. The crucial action in the post-activity period is proper feedback, in a form of a grade, but even more in the form of praise and helpful suggestions. Giving the feedback on such a complex activity is a demanding task for the teachers, but supporting the students in their professional and social development is an outcome worth trying.

### Research question 3

Do online group discussions develop other important skills apart from language skills?

As mentioned before, technology advancements and the development of new e-learning tools have opened many opportunities for developing language skills in less conventional ways. In addition to developing language skills, this study suggests that using Moodle Chat for literature circles can be highly effective in developing soft skills such as problem solving, leadership, teamwork and empathy.

In keeping up with all the curriculum demands, language teachers and instructors face many challenges in the ever-changing teaching and learning environment of the 21st century. One of those challenges is keeping students actively involved, motivated and interested in class activities aimed at enhancing their language skills, and incorporating activities that would also contribute to developing their soft skills. This is where literature circles have proved to be highly effective as they promote critical thinking in inclusive classrooms giving both extrovert and introvert students the opportunity to learn from each other and become better prepared for the job market in the future.

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