Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):
10.1016/j.futures.2016.10.005

Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research
PDF-document

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Carpe the Academy: Dismantling higher education and prefiguring critical utopias through Action Research

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Highlights

- The neoliberal realist position on 'the future' perpetuated by contemporary higher education is deeply problematic
- Constrained visions of *the future* serve to constrain present educational offerings; a self-reinforcing dynamic admitting little disruption
- Action Research offers radical methodologies for prizing open democratic spaces—within, alongside, and beyond the academy—in which it becomes possible to think more expansively and critically about both presents and futures
- Through its critical utopian and prefigurative impulses, action research functions as a present- and future-expanding form of knowledge creation, and becomes a means for resisting and challenging the capture of the university by neoliberal logics

Abstract

This paper engages with the challenge of re-imagining higher education. We start from the

position that the ascent of the increasingly corporatized university is deeply problematic

precisely because of the neoliberal realist position on 'the future' that it assumes and

perpetuates: the view that there is no alternative to neoliberal capitalist market principles, that present and future realities can diverge only to the extent permitted by existing market forces and rationales (Amsler, 2011). In this context, 'education' takes the form of preparing and socializing the next generation of workers: a future focus severely limited in the possibilities it considers. Thus we are faced with a mutually-constitutive relationship where constrained visions of *future needs and demands* serve to constrain *present educational offerings*; a dynamic which becomes self-reinforcing and which admits little disruption. In this paper, we draw on the concrete body of practice known as action research to consider how we might prize open spaces for thinking much more expansively about what 'the future' might entail, and what forms of education and organization are necessary in the present to keep open, rather than shut down, diverse possibilities and democratic debate around this. We focus on critical utopian action research and systemic action research as illustrative of key qualities of prefigurative and critical utopian engagement with educational presents and futures. We conclude that the capture of the university by neoliberal logics can be resisted and challenged through radical methodologies, like action research, which explicitly set out to be ongoingly anti-hegemonic, critical, self-reflexive, pluralistic, and non-recuperative (Firth, 2013; Garforth, 2009).

Keywords

Action research, Critical Utopianism, Higher education futures, Neoliberal university, Prefigurative politics, Organizing resistance.

Introduction

The word "dismantle" comes from the Old French *manteler*, or fortify, to describe a process of destroying fortifications. But the original meaning is to uncloak, from the Latin *mantellum* for cloak. As action researchers and educators located within the academy, we are committed to nothing short of dismantling the university, in both senses of the word. To expose the systems which continue to privilege some learners over others, some forms of knowledge over others, and some financial interests over others. And at the same time to challenge the structures— organizational, economic, social, cultural, and physical—that keep the communities in which these institutions exist at bay and allow universities to continue to hoard intellectual and financial resources which by rights should be public property.

Criticism of the university's aloof positioning as a so-called 'ivory tower' has long been a theme in popular and critical discourse, but the current rhetoric across many university administrations alludes to a more publically engaged stance. Often this is an illusion, and one in which even well-intentioned participants (ourselves included) can become complicit. We liken this to the ha-ha—a structure peculiar to the great country estates of Britain and France which appear from within to provide an unbroken expanse of perfectly manicured lawn extending to the woods and fields beyond. But look back at the house from outside and you see a tall stone wall or alternatively a ditch preventing the attractive but destructive deer from getting anywhere near the expensive shrubbery. This is the modern university campus—surrounded

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with invisible walls and barriers to prevent unwanted entry while giving the impression of free access and welcome to all. This can take the form of physical barriers like restricted access to campus buildings and facilities, financial barriers to potential students such as high tuition fees and class schedules not designed to accommodate the needs of working students, administrative and policy barriers like research funding structures that provide huge overhead costs to universities but see any payment to local participants as dangerous forms of coercion, or structures of faculty hiring and promotion that put a premium on money raised or on journal rankings that have little to do with contributing to the public good.

Consider the following scene, which took place recently at the University of Cincinnati. The senior administrator chairing this particular meeting looked around the table at a group of faculty drawn primarily from the arts, humanities, and education. He had dubbed the group Pathway B, the more clearly to distinguish us from our more lucrative colleagues in Pathway A. With what was intended as a look of benevolent concern, he spoke to the group, making a point of meeting each person's eyes as he spoke. "Each of you has intellectual property", he intoned. Then after a long pause to indicate the import of his next statement: "And I'm here to help you commercialize on that intellectual property." With a bit more honesty than diplomacy (a consistent character flaw), I, Mary, responded, "I don't want to commercialize on my intellectual property - I want to give it away." His reply was quick and to the point: "Not at my university."

The position taken by this administrator is symptomatic of higher education systems that are increasingly corporatized rather than democratized. Our call in this paper is for those of us who

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resent such a trend to actively resist it, to re-claim and '*carpe* the academy': following the Latin

meaning of the word, to seize, enjoy, and make use of it as a collective public good.

This is a demanding and precarious project, but one that we see as preferable to allowing the

capture of the university by neoliberal logics to continue unencumbered. The push to

commercialize knowledge, to engage in a never-ending competition for rankings of faculty

productivity, to standardize and measure isolated bits of information and call that learning, to

sell off research to the highest corporate bidder (Church, 2008; Lewis, 2008), to saddle students

with exorbitant amounts of loan debt (Johannsen, 2012; Ross, 2012; Weil, 2013), and to

increasingly rely on contingent labor to fill faculty roles, while paying university administrators

(not to mention athletic coaches in the American context) ever higher salaries (Academe, 2016;

Bishop, 2011; Sauter, Stebbins, Frohlich & Comen, 2015) are all leading us away from the kinds

of critical thinking, creativity, open exchange of ideas, and compassion necessary if we are to

provide a meaningful education to our students and together with them take an active role in

addressing the problems facing the world.

Many others have identified as problematic the encroachment of neoliberal agendas and

imperatives on higher education (see Amsler, 2011, 2014, 2015; Canaan and Shumar, 2008;

Greenwood, 2007, 2012; Motta, 2013; Motta & Cole, 2014; Wildman, 1998). By neoliberalism,

we refer to

> the doctrine and campaign for internationalization of market economy, for intensive
>
> society-wide privatization as well as extensive globalized market deregulation… [which]

include[s] stunning increases in poverty and inequality worldwide… as well as considerable authoritarianism in defense of market prerequisites by national and international actors. (Collins, 2008, xiv)

Our experience is of universities in the United States and United Kingdom, and yet the geopolitical scope of the issues addressed here is much broader, as universities across the developed world are subsumed into what from a neoliberal viewpoint is framed positively (or at least neutrally) as a 'global knowledge economy' (Shore, 2010), and as the global commodification of higher education serves to entrench international inequality to the detriment of developing countries (Naidoo, 2008) and to further devalue, colonize, and coopt indigenous epistemologies and practices (Brayboy, Castagno, & Maughan, 2008; de Oliveira Andreotti, 2016).

Informed as we both are by critical, liberationist, social-democratic, and other broadly leftist political ideologies, we problematize the ascent of the increasingly corporatized university in large part because of the neoliberal realist position on the future that it perpetuates: a totalitarian view which claims that there is no alternative to neoliberal capitalist market principles and that present and future realities can diverge only to the extent permitted by existing market forces and rationales (Amsler, 2011). It is true that the alternatives seemingly open to us, even in our privileged positions within universities, are all too few: this is precisely the point. For all the internal and public-facing rhetoric about innovation, universities across North America, Western Europe, and beyond increasingly find themselves peddling severely unimaginative versions of 'the future', in which market imperatives continue to reign,

substantially unchallenged, and in which the wares and fares of higher education are evermore funneled towards promoting neoliberal agendas and private economic wealth generation above all else. In this context, education takes the form of preparing and socializing the next generation of workers: a future focus severely limited in the possibilities it considers. Thus we are faced with a mutually-constitutive relationship where limited visions of future needs and demands serve to constrain present educational offerings: a self-reinforcing dynamic admitting little disruption.

This is part and parcel of a deeper pedagogical problem, namely, that the encroachment of neoliberalism in all areas of life has weakened how and what people learn, and the skills and sensibilities they develop (Amsler, 2015). Collectively, we are less equipped than we could be to respond to complex social and political challenges from positions of openness, possibility, recognition of difference, and participation within processes of becoming. Our presents are impoverished as a result, and so too are our futures. As academics, one of the key ways in which we can resist the capture of the university by neoliberal logics is to develop forms of knowledge production and organizing that are purposefully present- and future-opening, and necessarily also radically democratic (Amsler, 2013). With Firth (2013), we argue for

> utopian epistemologies, methods, and praxis that do not reduce or recuperate transformative, transgressive otherness… a methodology that does not assume or impose values and desires but rather explores and valorizes processes of desiring-production (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004, p. 35) whilst owning the impossibility of taking a value-free approach to … research. (p. 256)

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In this paper, we propose action research as a radical methodology for prizing open and organizing democratic spaces—within, alongside, and beyond the academy—in which it becomes possible to think more expansively and critically about both presents and futures. Our argument is that action research processes offer us a means for keeping open, rather than shutting down, diverse and transgressive possibilities and debate around the nature of the educational offerings, pedagogical practices, and scholarly commitments we collectively desire for higher education. Action research can help us respond to Barnett's (2013) call for us to see beyond "the corporate university, the entrepreneurial university, the marketized and the bureaucratic universities" (p. 21), and to work together to generate what he refers to as "feasible utopias" of the university.

Our argument proceeds as follow. We begin by outlining the implications of the dominant neoliberal paradigm for how we conceptualize and respond to notions of the future within higher education. We propose action research as a productive means of engaging with the challenge of re-imagining higher education, positioning this as a critical utopian and prefigurative project which also involves enlightened recognition of the entanglement between presents and futures. In framing the interventions we believe are required in this way, we reflect on what the traditions of critical utopianism and prefigurative politics can offer us. In the latter part of the paper, we introduce two action research approaches, critical utopian action research and systemic action research. We present these as two examples (amongst many) of present- and future-expanding forms of knowledge production that could be mobilized by groups within and alongside the academy to challenge the neoliberal capture of the university and educative practice more generally.

An important caveat: bringing these traditions to bear on ongoing efforts to disrupt and transform the academy are neither a silver bullet nor unproblematic, not least to the people involved. We do not wish to overemphasize the radical potential of academic networks and initiatives which are almost necessarily limited by their very existence within, or at the edges of, prevailing systems. We align ourselves with present debates about the tensions involved in working for radical change within, against, and beyond the neoliberal university, and agree that these can be experienced as contradictory, self-limiting, and colonizing (Canaan, 2002; Darder, 2009; Gill, 2009; Motta, 2013). And yet, with Amsler (2015), we are convinced that "radical democracy is difficult but possible even in situations of political foreclosure" and that "embracing it as a critical and creative learning process greatly increases our chances of making it work" (p. 12). This is where we believe action research has a critical role to play.

Problematising dominant neoliberal realist positions within higher education

At present, dominant ways of thinking about 'the future' within our sector are entrenched within a neoliberal worldview that foregrounds formal education's role in supporting economic wealth generation and the ongoing concentration of power in the hands of the elite (Amsler, 2011, 2014; Greenwood, 2012; Slaughter & Rhodes, 2004; Washburn, 2005). One manifestation of this is the way in which the value of education is framed in terms of future returns that are predominantly economic, instrumentalist, technocratic, and individualist in nature. Degree programs are increasingly 'sold' to prospective students and their parents

(higher education's 'consumers') on the basis of graduates' future employability and earning power. Of course, in the past this was not necessary because higher education was geared towards those who already had a sound economic future by virtue of inherited wealth and privilege. We are categorically not arguing for a return to those days. We sympathize with parents' and students' need to feel assured of future livelihoods in contexts that are increasingly hostile to young people starting out in the world (not least given ever-higher tuition fees and student debt). And yet we also lament the seeming constriction of the perceived value and role of higher education.

There are many reasons why neoliberalism is deeply problematic, not least of which is the exponential expansion in "inequalities in wealth, power and possibility" (Amsler, 2011, p. 48) to which it gives rise, despite promises to the contrary made by the power elite whose interests are bolstered by deregulated markets. Although dominant neoliberal discourses frame the value of higher education in terms of its contribution to national productivity and economic growth, and primarily worthy of public and private investment on these grounds, the truth is that nationally (both in the US and UK) and globally, inequalities are growing, not retracting. Criticism continues to grow of what is increasingly perceived as an "Economy for the 1%" (Oxfam, 2016). Indeed, the encroachment of neoliberalist imperatives on all aspects of life severely hinders our ability to contribute to more equitable futures, which we see as the unrealized promise and ethical obligation of education (Dorling, 2011; Fielding & Moss, 2011). Greenwood (2007) has argued forcefully for the need to challenge the neoliberal administrative and policy practices which impede higher education from more fully working with wider and ever-more diverse communities to address pressing social, economic, and environmental

problems. As he notes, "the internal incoherence of the neo-liberal program of higher education creates self-contradicting reforms that are causing ongoing crises in the educational systems of most industrialized countries" (p. 116). The application of 'new public management' systems and (pseudo-)market logics to supposedly hold higher education accountable, most often by the promulgation of quantitative measures and forms of assessment, continues to have a counter-productive impact on the ability of universities to function for the public good. This was highlighted over a decade ago by Rhind's study on the impact of these mechanisms on social science research in Great Britain (Commission on Higher Education, 2004), which showed that "they decrease collaborative research, increase short-term research projects that promise speedy publication, and focus inward on disciplinary audiences and away from more public venues for the dissemination of social science research" (Greenwood, 2007, p. 118).

A key problem, we argue, is the neoliberal realist position on the future assumed within broader neoliberal, capitalist systems. Ontologically, such a position assumes that there is no viable or desirable alternative to neoliberal capitalist market principles, thereby setting a very narrow band within which present and future realities can diverge. The future is to all intents and purposes a continuation of the present (Firth & Robinson, 2009): threats and opportunities are understood in relation to the status quo as, on balance, a good thing. To the extent that the future holds possibilities to accelerate the expansion of the neoliberal cornerstones of free market, economic growth, privatization of the means (and returns) of economic wealth generation, and intensification of corporate power, the future is bright. To the extent that these things are radically challenged or unsettled, either ideologically or practically, the future

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is grim: a communist-like dystopia in which freedom and individuality are curtailed, living standards take a nosedive, and all are substantially impoverished.

Either way, what the future is—the possibilities, resonances, and potentialities it is perceived to hold, for better or for worse—is made sense of using predominantly the same neoliberal imperatives that structure our present. For example, all manner of innovation is ostensibly encouraged—so long as the outcomes are seen as consistent or co-existent with, and certainly not as threatening to, neoliberal agendas and existing distributions of power. For new degree programmes to progress beyond pipe dreams, business cases must be proved, in which market demand, efficiency savings, and expected financial returns, rather than societal need or redistribution of the possible, are deciding factors. Managerialist and market logics increasingly shape what is expected of the educator role (De Angelis & Harvie, 2009). Dominant discourses compel us to accept these present realities and follow through on their future implications while constraining possibilities for critique and dissent in the present, in what Amsler (2014) refers to as "one particular manifestation of a wider culture of 'contracting possibilities'" (p. 276).

How has this contracting of possibilities become internalized within large segments of higher education? Reviewing the then emerging literature on higher education in the 21st century, Skolnik (1998) identifies a persistent concern with the threats posed by globalization to higher education institutional and employee survival. The implication is that these perceived threats "will soften people up for change" (Skolnik, 1998, p. 638). The more we are persuaded that the sector's future is bleak and that our very existence is threatened, the more likely we are to

accept increased austerity, performance management, and productivity pressures as necessary

evils. Of particular interest is the trouble taken to present such processes of contraction as

driven by impersonal forces; as the neutral result of free-market transactions representing the

subjective preferences of millions of consumers, end users, and stakeholders (Skolnik, 1998).

This perceived impersonality and abstraction adds another layer of seeming inevitability, which

Skolnik calls into question: "[O]ne can not help but wish for a clearer picture of who the key

instigators, decision-makers, and opinion leaders are, and of how they are influencing the

process" (p. 638). In such a context, and absent opportunities for deep structural critique and

dissent, change is experienced "as a symptom of… powerlessness rather than as the product

of…agency" (Kompridis, 2006, p. 267, cited in Amsler, 2014, p. 276). In other words, those of us

forming part of higher education are more likely to see present circumstances, and the

(re)actions they call forth from us, as impelled by external structures and demands, and outside

our sphere of influence.

The elephant in the room is the mutually-constitutive relationship between impoverished

imaginaries about what the future holds and what demands this will place on us, and ever-

narrower educational offerings in the present. The less we expect of the future, the less we

demand of our educational offerings in the present. The less the future seems radically open,

the ever-more standardized, homogenized, and hegemonic our educational and organizational

presents become. With Amsler (2014), we agree that it is important that we "challenge this

condition of 'disimagination' by bracketing these hegemonic imaginaries of education and

creating conceptual and discursive space for the disclosure of alternatives" (p. 276). This, we

argue, is the potential offered by action research, which we believe speaks to the need

articulated by Firth (2013) for "a research praxis that critically recognizes the utopian and pedagogical nature of the research process itself and its products or outputs" (p. 257) and that "valorizes the research process itself as a site of utopian desire that mutually transforms researcher and participant" (p. 268).

Action research as prefigurative and critical utopian practice

Broadly speaking action research is a term used to describe a family of research methodologies which seek to

> …bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities… and to contribute… to a more equitable and sustainable relationship with the wider ecology of the planet of which we are an intrinsic part. (Reason and Bradbury, 2001, p. 1-2)

Drawing upon a range of theoretical, epistemological, and political foundations (Gayá, Reason, & Bradbury, 2008) and spanning multiple academic disciplines, geopolitical contexts, and arenas of practice, one way of describing what brings all these approaches to action research together is a shared values stance. This has been defined as, "a respect for people and for the knowledge and experience they bring to the research process, a belief in the ability of democratic processes to achieve positive social change, and a commitment to action" (Brydon-

Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003, p. 15). These principles challenge significant aspects of

conventional post-Cartesian science, which generally value objectivist, positivist descriptions of

the world, and in which dualisms abound: "knowledge is presumed to be pitted against

practice, mind separated from heart, reflection from action, expert from lay person, self from

other, etc." (Bradbury, 2015, p. 3). Although recently there has seen an upsurge in

experimentation with knowledge democratization and co-production within and beyond the

academy (see for example Facer & Enright, 2016), the fact remains that "in many knowledge

systems, co-operating with marginalized and non-elite subjects is regarded as a liability to

professional reputation" (Amsler, 2014, p. 279). Dualistic divisions of labour—with the expert

academic seen as the font of universal theoretical knowledge, and practical, experiential, or

embodied knowledge considered the lower-status product of practitioner communities—serve

to cloud our recognition of the entanglement between knowledge-production and

present/future possibilities. As Firth (2013) argues, "devaluing local, particular, and embodied

knowledge…leads to the invisibilization of prefigurative and immanent utopian knowledges" (p.

260).

We see the unlearning of worn, taken-for-granted norms and habits of conventional social

science as necessarily going hand in hand with the dismantling of the modern, neoliberal

university. But as anyone experienced in social activism and resistance will know, the status

quo is frustratingly resilient, and challenging existing power structures extremely difficult. We

do not suggest that action research is a panacea, by itself capable of accomplishing such an

extraordinary feat. Instead, we argue that action research may be understood as eminently

present- and thus future-expanding by virtue of its functioning as prefigurative, critical utopian practice.

Originally defined as the desire to embody "within the ongoing political practice of a movement… those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal" (Boggs, 1977, p. 100), prefigurative practice seeks to enact in the here and now the world(s) we desire. In accounts of the politics of social change, this has been theorized as a shift from a "politics of demand" linked to traditional approaches of protest, opposition, and civil disobedience to a "politics of the act" (Day, 2004). A politics of the act requires

> giving up the expectation of a nondominating response from structures of domination; it means surprising both oneself—and the structure—by inventing a response that precludes the necessity of demand and thereby breaks out of the loop of the endless perpetuation of desire for emancipation. (Day, 2004, p. 734)

Following Day (2011), Amsler (2014) refers to this as a "politics of possibility", prefigurative in that "it aspires to create new worlds that embody and enact not-yet futures by using the resources of the existing world, paying particular attention to the micro-politics of space, time, language, the body and the emotions through which the power of these resources operates (Gibson-Graham, 2006)" (p. 280). Thus, prefigurative practice is immanent, rather than transcendental, and in keeping with contemporary utopianism, its utopian impulse is present-focused, rather than primarily aspirational—it is concerned with the enacting of hope and

desire in the present moment, rather than with the establishment of ideal future blueprints (Firth & Robinson, 2012). Prefigurative practice emerges from within the field of lived, embodied experiences, from alternative knowledges, politics, practices, and forms of organizing made manifest in the here and now. Rather than focus on abstract or absent futures, prefigurative politics responds to and folds back into present space, exhibiting an approach to social change "based on the ability to transform individual consciousness through immanent practice and to transform society by means of example" (Firth, 2013, p. 264). A distinct aspect of prefigurative practice is that it challenges the temporal disconnect between present struggle and future goals: "instead, the struggle and the goal, the real and the ideal become one in the present" (Maechelbergh, 2011, p.4).

Action research is nothing if not prefigurative. Central to action research practice is the ongoing, day-by-day commitment and hard work required to craft relationships, spaces, and processes that make manifest the qualities and characteristics of the kind of social science and radical democracy to which we aspire (Arieli, Friedman & Agbaria, 2009; Bradbury & Torbert, 2016; Brydon-Miller, 2009; Brydon-Miller, Rector Aranda, & Stevens, 2015; Gayá & Reason, 2009; Greenwood and Schafft, 2003; Guhathakurta, 2008; Hilsen, 2006; Tofteng & Husted, 2006). Action researchers do not just advocate for a different type of social science. They do not see the transformation of social science and the democratization of knowledge-production as primarily aspirational projects, realizable only in an ideal future.

Action researchers purposefully stand and, moreover, *act* in opposition to the exclusionary and recuperative assumptions, values, and practices of the academy alongside which it exists.

Adopting action research orientations and practices allows us not only to *espouse*, but more importantly to *enact* in the imperfect yet always becoming present, a direct challenge to the privileging of "performativity over humble co-operation, abstraction over praxis, individual knowing over collective learning, and monological solution-giving over dialogical inquiry (Motta 2011a)" (Amsler, 2014, p. 279). In this way, we breathe life into what post-left anarchist Alfredo Bonanno refers to as a "propulsive utopia", one which "exists in the field of becoming and agency" and in which the utopian idea is experienced as an "affective reality" (Firth & Robinson, 2012, p. 248). The notion that utopian practices can be *propulsive* rather than merely prefigurative (of an ideal future) gives us pause to consider the energetic and transformative thrust, the explosion of possibility, that emerges from actualizing the utopian affects of hope and desire in the present moment. Action research shares at least some convictions with post-left anarchist theory, amongst which is the belief that other worlds *are* possible, *now*.

This is what radical methodologies such as action research offer those of us intent on dismantling and reclaiming the university: "lines of flight" from capitalist modernity rooted in the immanent present (Firth & Robinson, 2012). Many approaches to action research might be brought to bear on this project. We offer two examples: the first, critical utopian action research (Bladt & Nielsen, 2013; Nielsen & Nielsen, 2006; Tofteng & Husted, 2014), to which we now turn, illustrates the critical, prefigurative, and propulsive utopian elements of action research.

Critical utopian action research

Founded in the work of Kurt Aagaard Nielsen and Birger Nielsen among others (Nielsen & Svensson, 2006), critical utopian action research (CUAR) invites participants to collaboratively investigate a common concern through the research process. Informed by Kurt Lewin (1946) as well as German sociologist Oskar Negt (1984), CUAR is aligned with social-democratic and critical theory ideologies, and works towards the establishment of a "free space" within which the inquiry can take place, that is, "an arena that should enable participants to take part openly and in public and seek to challenge and criticize existing power structures" (Bladt & Nielsen, 2013, p. 376). These authors are not so naïve as to believe that issues of power and hierarchy can be set aside (they cite Foucault widely as well as Lewin), but the process design and facilitation are designed to confront and mitigate against differentials in power, and to expand the range of voices and subjectivities brought into such conversations. This process has been put to use in settings as diverse as Danish bread production (Nielsen, 2005) industrial work sites (Olsén, Nielsen, & Nielsen, 1993), nursing homes (Andersen & Bilfeldt, 2016), and even a prison (Bladt & Nielsen, 2013).

CUAR can draw upon multiple methods, but the most common is the Future Creating Workshop (FCW), generally attributed to the work of Robert Jungk as a response to what he considered a cult of expert knowledge, suggesting instead "an orientation towards favoring everyday knowledge and a less authoritarian and instrumental world" (Tofteng & Husted, 2014, p. 232). The first phase of the FCW process engages participants in a process of critiquing the current situation. After laying out the factors understood to contribute to the problem as

comprehensively as possible, the process shifts to the utopian phase in which participants are invited to imagine "as good as it gets" scenarios and to offer them to the group in as much detail as possible. A contemporary utopian perspective is adopted, in which participants are encouraged to explore multiple possibilities in an attitude of open-ended inquiry and experimentation. Finally, the group is asked to participate in a realization phase in which the constraints and problems that have been identified in the first stage and the "lines of flight" borne from the utopian phase are considered together in developing proposals that are simultaneously aspirational *and* actionable. Participants are invited to consider which, if any, they wish to contribute their energies towards evolving and actualizing. In the Danish context, this work is often conducted over a series of full-day sessions and the realization phase can be given over to smaller working groups charged with developing strategies, tactics, and timelines for implementation.

As an exemplar of action research, the CUAR tradition helps to deepen our understanding of the mutual constitution of higher education and both presents and futures. The status quo is explicitly problematized. This requires a realistic assessment of the ways in which participants' individual and collective sense of agency are limited. Critical understanding of "what is" is as important as unleashing the imagination so as to bring radical alternatives within the realm of the possible. It is in this expansion of the imagination and opening up of "feasible utopias" (Barnett, 2013) that CUAR excels. This is not a straightforward matter: as we have argued thus far, our existence within hegemonic structures of power does not prepare us to imagine utopias, nor yet to prefigure alternatives (Amsler, 2015).

Moreover, the success of action research usually depends on a self-identified need for change on the part of the participants involved, as was the case in the aforementioned Danish examples. This is both a key challenge and opportunity when seeking to establish such spaces within higher education settings. Our own forays into connecting with like-minded colleagues and allies indicates that there is significant appetite for change and support for the work of re-imagining higher education worldwide (some examples of this follow). And yet the level of honesty and critique on which action research depends does not always materialize at the institutional level. One challenge to transforming higher education is to claim a space for this kind of open dialogue and to develop strategies for inviting broad participation in these discussions—including that of senior administrators whose roles require them to be more closely aligned with dominant imperatives, and also that of the policy-makers and opinion-leaders who can have such momentous impact on the conditions of higher education, and whose ideological commitments might in fact be neoliberal. Achieving political good-will and voluntary, meaningful participation within CUAR processes across a wide range of often contradictory interests is anything but a simple feat, and may, in fact, be beyond the realm of possibility given existing realities.

This is why it is crucially important to understand action research's function as a critical utopian, prefigurative orientation; as capable of mobilizing the kinds of "politics of the act" increasingly favoured by broader pro-democracy social movements as more participatory, productive, and empowering than traditional "politics of demand". From a post-left anarchist perspective, a "politics of the act" is considered less easy to discount, ignore, or control through institutional channels (Nadia, date unknown; Sharpe, 2008). It is seen as a more festive,

imaginative, visionary, and creative style of activism (incorporating music, dance, play, and other performative elements), where "instead of griping about what they're against, [activists] use their protests to demonstrate what they're for" (Duncombe, 2002, p.3). This, we argue, is one of the core potential contributions of action research to higher education. Action research enacts a "politics of possibility" that experiments with different notions of agency, power, and knowledge-production, and with models of social change that explicitly links the lived present with the utopian affects of hope and desire.

Expanding the range of the possible

Many of us have been relatively successful in creating spaces within the larger context of universities in which we are able to attempt this "politics of possibility" by practicing action research and other radical methodologies for knowledge-production. But we often do so by "flying under the radar"—keeping our heads down, performing the duties of a "real" university professor, while somehow finding time and resources to engage with community partners and nurture students committed to making a change. We have both worked with our colleagues, students, and community partners to create and support action research within our own institutions. The Action Research Center at the University of Cincinnati was founded in 2005 with a mission "to promote social justice and strengthen communities, locally and globally, by advancing research, education, and action through participatory and reflective practices." ARCIO, the University of Bristol's

centre for Action Research and Critical Inquiry in Organisations was founded in 2010,

and represents a commitment to researching in participative and capacity-building ways

in organizations and communities, and to develop emancipatory forms of organizing

focused on issues of gender, social justice, democracy, inclusivity, political activism, and

sustainability.   But these efforts have taken place within what Victor Friedman would

call an academic enclave—a semi-protected space in which different ways of working

are made possible. Drawing upon the work of Kurt Lewin and Pierre Bourdieu,

Friedman uses the concepts of field theory in defining enclaves, as constituting

"'alternative' spaces within a field with rules of the game that are different, and often

challenge, those dictated by a larger field of which they are a part" (2011, p. 253). There

are two options for such institutional spaces: On the one hand they may attempt to

maintain their separateness, by creating a strong boundary and strongly regulating and

restricting the relationship with the larger field. On the other hand, they may attempt

to influence the larger field by creating a field in which things can be done differently,

thus expanding the range of the possible, and challenging the established rules of the

game. (Friedman, 2011, p.253)

The outcome in the first case may help to ensure survival but at the cost of making the space

largely irrelevant to the larger institution. The second option, the attempt to reach beyond the

enclave in order to achieve organizational transformation or "a major reconfiguration of a field

and of the rules of the game" (p. 253), comes at greater risk as this can also lead to institutional

push back and even to the shutting down of the spaces by forces threatened by the possibility

of such change.

Indeed, in advocating for action research as a means for challenging the hegemony of neoliberal education systems, it is important to acknowledge that treading such a path is likely to involve very real, costly tensions and difficulties for paid, career academics—despite, and even because of, their privilege as insiders. As has been previously noted, attempting to work in non-hierarchical relationships and negotiate shared values, agendas, and objectives with social movement activists and other practitioners and community members is not properly encouraged, supported, or rewarded within academia—especially when one of the explicit aims of working in this way is to reconfigure existing structures of power and privilege. In fact, one of the many ways in which dominant systems and institutions deal with such enclaves is to coopt or colonize them. Firth (2013) points to the tendency within universities to "individualize collective praxis and recuperate their radical otherness for broader, hegemonic (or counter-hegemonic) aims" (p. 257). For a good case in point, consider how the narrative of sustainable development has become mainstream in higher education institutions (see Bessant et al, 2015).

Over the years, we have seen many action research related projects and centers created with great energy and enthusiasm flourish for a time and then wither. Reflecting on such a trend, Greenwood (2012) observes that action researchers intent on challenging the neoliberal university need to develop "more skill in the analysis of university organizational structures and the goals of academic managers" (p. 121). Greenwood's recommendation mirrors a critique that can be levelled at prefigurative politics more broadly: to the extent that such approaches privilege participative-democratic processes and self-expressive social forms at the expense of serious political strategizing and the mobilisation of power, leadership and organization, their impact is less significant than desired (Smucker, 2014). From this perspective, prefigurative

politics and its more traditional counterpart, strategic politics—the concern of which is to build

the formal organizations and political capability to achieve major structural changes in the

political, economic, and social orders—are necessary complementarities, and not substitutes

for each other. In order to really intervene, challenge, and transform hegemonic structures we

must not shy or turn away from the "building and wielding [of] power, leadership, and

organization" (Smucker, 2014).

The challenge for action research and other methodological or pedagogical offerings seeking to

prefigure radical alternatives is that of critically considering and assertively experimenting with

what productive power, organization, and leadership might look like in pursuit of radical higher

education reform. How might action research theory and practice help us to work with the

tensions raised by attempts to prefigure radical participative-democratic utopias with the

necessity to engage seriously and strategically with hegemonic power structures here and now?

How might we hold a sense of radical democracy and mutual power both as aspirational ideals

and as anticipatory guides to practice? Systemic action research helps us to begin to address

these questions through its explicit focus on social change as a systemic dynamic and endeavor.

Taking on the task of rebuilding and contributing to systemic change

As Burns (2014) notes, "if action research is to be an effective political tool then it has to move

beyond the single local group, team or organisation to work across organisations, networks and

partnerships, on multiple sites and at multiple levels" (p. 15). Systemic action research (Burns,

2014) provides us with a vision and means for working at this larger scale, which we believe

may help advance the project of dismantling and reclaiming higher education. By creating a

space for dialogue among those of us who share these concerns, we can provide mutual

support, share resources, and act as critical friends to one another in our efforts to create

change. Burns outlines four important characteristics of successful systemic action research

projects: They focus on actions which change the overall system dynamic; they are built on

multiple inquiries which are networked both horizontally and vertically; the membership in

these process is dynamic and follows the emergence of key issues; and finally, they

acknowledge the importance of resonance or, as Burns (2014) puts it, "where the energy for

change lies within a system" (p. 13).

Expanding on local efforts designed around the principles of critical utopian action research and

other research strategies, the first step in the creation of a large-scale systemic action research

project would be that of fostering inter-connections and networks across innovative efforts to

reframe higher education. This seems a tall order, but in fact, our experience suggests that

there are efforts underway around the world where a willingness to connect with others is seen

as part of the task of fundamentally reshaping higher education.

Although not specifically Action Research, the Connected Communities programme funded by

the Art and Humanities Research Council in the United Kingdom (see Facer & Enright, 2016)

includes a number of action research projects and overall reflects many of these aspects of

critical utopianism and prefiguration we see as central to our own interest in using action

research to transform higher education. Many of the community-university partnerships that

are at the core of this funding scheme make particular use of arts-based methods to create

space for imagination and creativity in addressing a range of local issues and initiatives, and

explicit and sustained efforts have been made to share learning across the various projects.

The Action Research Action Learning (ARAL) conferences hosted by De LaSalle University—

Manila provide another example of forward thinking efforts to promote large scale change in

higher education (Brydon-Miller, Prudente & Aguja, 2016). The first of these conferences, held

in 2015, featured the Minister of Education of the Philippines, Brother Armin Luistro, who

spoke of the importance of university faculty and students engaging in addressing critical

educational issues facing the country. The 2016 conference included addresses from colleagues

from other South East Asian nations including Myanmar, Malaysia, and Indonesia, with the goal

of extending participation to all ASEAN nations in the coming years. And there are now plans

being developed to establish a doctoral program in Educational Action Research in partnership

with [university name withheld].

Another effort to transform higher education is being developed by members of the Swedish

Participatory Action Research Committee (SPARC). An important goal for SPARC is to establish

a national platform for *Bildung*, education and research that includes a doctoral education

program with the label "*democratic knowledge and change processes*". The program will be

established as a network of universities and folk high schools acting collaboratively. Some

courses have already been developed and carried through in cooperation with a number of

universities. These courses have been open for doctoral students as well as for interested

persons coming from the non-academic member organizations. The ambition is that

representatives of both the academic members of SPARC and the societal parties or

organizations should continue to develop the program in dialogue. A double aim of the SPARC

courses is training professional researchers and also involving people who can themselves

participate in this kind of research and at the same time engage their organization (Härnsten &

Holmstrand, personal communication).

A very recent and exciting initiative is the creation of a network of doctoral students, early

career academics, and practitioners called Action Research International Emerging Leaders

(ARIEL). This is a conscious attempt on the part of a new generation of action researchers to

challenge existing structures by creating vibrant international networks and to mobilize social

media and other means of building relationships and creating opportunities for partnership

with an explicit focus on extending the realm of the possible, now and into the future.

It is telling to note that the two most long-lived and arguably most successful centers for action

research exist outside the confines of universities. The Highlander Research and Education

Center in the Appalachian Mountain region of the US, was founded in 1932 based on the model

of the Danish Folkhighschool Movement. It focused first on labor organizing, later as a key site

of the Civil Rights Movement in the US, and more recently as a space for training local and

international activists and others around issues of sustainability, environmental justice, and

democratic social change. The Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), based in Delhi,

India but active across the region, and really around the world, has worked for more than 30

years to address issues of gender inequality, social exclusion, and economic injustice. Action

researchers working within the academy would do well to consider the lessons that might be

learned from these two organizations and others like them about the advantages and

perspectives available outside the academy.

In fact, these organizations and initiatives do not exist in isolation from one another, but

instead already form a strong interconnected set of personal and organizational relationships

upon which a more explicit systemic action research process might be engaged. And yet

another caveat is important here. One of many helpful comments we received from the

reviewers of this article was the suggestion that we might be drawing on an over-optimistic

understanding of networks as necessarily emancipatory. This, and the recommended reading,

gave us pause for thought. Ball and Junemann (2012), for example, point to the ways in which

moves towards network governance in educational reform may mark the beginning of the end

of state education, particularly when these networks involve non-state, non-public sector

actors and organizations, often held together by shared values and discourses centered on the

virtues of enterprise and meritocracy, and on "the generic efficacy of 'market solutions' to

social problems—that is, enterprise in various forms" (p.131). In a similar vein, Ward (2012)

defines neo-liberalism as governance through networks, through which hegemonic discourses

are replicated and entrenched in wide-ranging social and political action. While the networks

we have in mind would by necessity be anti- and counter-neoliberal, the aforementioned

critiques raise important considerations, reminding us of the myriad ways in which we are

privileged by and complicit in the very dynamics we desire to transform.

This discussion brings us face to face with the normative dimensions of what we are arguing, reminding us of the importance of fostering ongoing critical reflexivity especially on our most deeply held commitments and ideals. With Amsler (2014) we agree that:

> [W]e must take responsibility for the specific normative values and objectives of all our projects; remain vigilant about how power works through ostensibly liberatory practices such as dialogue, witnessing and co-operation; and be critically aware of the possibility that such practices can easily be deployed for conservative and repressive ends. (p. 281)

For these reasons, we suggest that it would be most generative to frame systemic action research (and action research more generally) not primarily as a social-democratic, counter-hegemonic set of practices, but as an approach to collaborative activity that is explicitly critical utopian, drawing from this latter tradition a set of orientations that are ongoingly anti-hegemonic, necessarily critical, self-reflexive, pluralistic, and non-recuperative (Firth, 2013; Garforth, 2009). At its best, action research manifests the latter qualities, though like all would-be radical alternatives, it is not immune to cooptation or colonization, and we do not always live up to the high standards we set for ourselves. Nevertheless, it is through aspiring towards and enacting these qualities in the here and now that action research becomes a means of resisting and challenging the capture of the university by neoliberal logics.

In this paper we have attempted to connect more explicitly with the prefigurative and propulsive utopian impulse inherent to much action research. In so doing we have sought to highlight the "practice of simultaneous and ongoing critique and creation" (Firth, 2013, p. 258)

underpinning both contemporary utopianism and action research. Firth (2013) reminds us that "critical utopias are critical not only of what exists but are explicitly self-critical and proceed through immanent critique" (p. 258). This is an ongoing challenge for and aspiration of good action research, and is one of the core quality criteria used in the review process for papers submitted to the journal *Action Research*, of which both the authors were long-time Associate Editors (see Gilhooly and Lee, 2016; Holtby, Klein, Cook & Travers, 2015; Kroeger, Beirne & Kraus, 2015; Lucio-Villegas, 2016 for recent good examples of this).

Why bother? A reconstruction coda

In a recent presentation one of us was describing Burns' metaphor for systemic action research as being like pushing a rock up a hill, impossible to do alone, but possible with the concerted efforts of many people working together. One of the participants was obviously puzzled by this and asked why not just step out of the way? Let the rock roll back down the hill. Leave the academy to its own sorry future. Put your energies somewhere else, somewhere where they will be welcomed as innovative and appreciated as important contributions. Why be Sisyphus if Zeus hasn't condemned you? Why? Because despite all of its problems, higher education is still an important site for dialogue, innovation, exploration, and engagement. And it is a site of contention for determining whether or not the future will be one that continues to be constrained by neo-liberal perspectives on what constitutes progress or instead is a space for imagining a multitude of visions of creative and compassionate ways forward. Existential

threats aside, if our aim is to transform the academy, those of us who identify as action researchers must move outside of our enclaves, using the theory and practice of action research to address the pressing problems facing higher education not just for the sake of action research, nor only to bring about positive change within our own organizations and universities more generally—although this is of critical importance as well—but because higher education has a critical role to play in addressing the problems facing the world today and can only do so through the kind of fundamental change towards radical democracy and creative expansion of imaginaries that action research can help to create.

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Further reading

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