

# Participatory Action Research and Information Literacy: Revising an Old New Hope for Research and Practice

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**Abstract.** This paper is a starting of a research which points toward constructing the basis for a research agenda integrating Participatory Action Research (PAR) into Information Literacy (IL) research and practice. In order to achieve this goal: a) we enumerate some pros and cons of using such methodology on IL with the pertinent literature and our own practice as IL researchers; b) we have developed a questionnaire to gather some insights from the research community in this matter; and c) we will start to seek an understanding of the possible contributions that a PAR-IL research agenda can bring to the field. The integration of PAR into IL research and practice is discussed from the three possible methodological stances: quantitative, qualitative, and a mixed methods perspective. Furthermore, we enumerate some of the pros, cons, hesitations and eagerness that researchers might have toward the idea of using PAR.

**Keywords:** participatory action research, information literacy, methodology.

## 1 Introduction

This paper documents the starting point of a research study where we intend to offer some directions towards constructing the basis for a research agenda integrating Participatory Action Research (PAR) into Information Literacy (IL) research and practice. In order to achieve this goal: a) we enumerate some pros and cons of using such methodological tradition with IL, including some pertinent literature and our own practice as IL researchers; b) we have developed a questionnaire to gather some insights from the research community in this matter; and c) we will start to seek an understanding of the possible contributions that a more structured and stronger PAR-IL research agenda can bring to the IL field. As stated above, we are going to be discussing the integration of PAR into IL research and practice from the three possible methodological stances: quantitative, qualitative, and a mixed methods perspective. Furthermore, it is our intention to enumerate the pros, cons, hesitations and eagerness that researchers from each methodological tradition might have toward the idea of using PAR. PAR is an approach that has been left out and sometimes

dismissed with some contempt by the education and research community [1], [2], among other stakeholders [3], especially when it is compared to positivist approaches [4]. Nevertheless, PAR deserves to be revisited and further analyze its possible applications into the area of IL. However, and regardless of the methodological and philosophical stance, we argue that its use is quite conceivable and there are good arguments for revisiting it and bringing it forward as one particularly useful voice for IL research and practice. Hence, an analysis of its possible applications into the area of IL research and practice is needed.

## 2 Participatory Action Research

Action research originated around the 1930s and 1940s, and actually, most authors tend to attribute the origin of this research tradition to the works of Kurt Lewin [5], [6], who developed a comprehensive action research theory in the 1940s [7]. In general, recurrent themes for action researchers are related to issues of power and/or discrimination against minority groups. Lewin's studies present some relevant notions, such as: knowledge generation from problem solving, group dynamics, intergroup relations, and the improvement of people's conditions for examining their realities. There have been many research traditions that have derived from action research and while they are all participatory methodologies, some researchers tend to understand them as synonyms, while others strongly advocate for the use of their preferred 'branch'. Some of such associated traditions are action research [8], action science [9], feminist PAR [10], PAR [11], practitioner research [12], self-study [13], teacher research [14], among others. Even though we have preferred to use PAR, we believe that if we limit our research to the uses of a specific branch, most of their differences sometimes will be subtle or overlooked, and thus we would be unfairly leaving out the other branches, which are also participatory traditions and that may have been used within the IL field. Furthermore, such exclusion, ironically, would be against the philosophy of participatory approaches. A good example to support this argument is the following definition, where the word participatory is highly stressed, but the concept is intended to correspond to action research: "action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview which we believe is emerging at this historical moment. It seeks 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" [15]. Freire's works are arguably among the classic examples of this approach [16] and also some kind of a starting point for bridging PAR with IL. However, his approach dealt more specifically with read-write literacies and emancipatory educational models, by emphasizing the active participation of students and collapsing the teacher-student dichotomy. Furthermore, PAR has been more relevant in countries such as in the UK, where some of the concerns are to develop strong ways to ensure validity and trustworthiness in PAR research [6].

## 2.1 PAR and IL: a Good Match?

PAR draws further attention, as opposed to 'plain action research', to the reactive effects of the researcher's presence within a participatory community. Furthermore, PAR actively aims to facilitate change and study, analyze and improve individual or groups' practices to achieve a state of betterment. Moreover, PAR stresses the commitment of all participants to the goal of a given study, as they embark on a collaborative endeavor, meaning that the researcher works with the participants from his or her own knowledge and then mediates common understandings by building upon the knowledge, practices and realities of each of the persons involved in the research. The direct implications or results of the research would be achieved, whenever participants improve upon their practices. Furthermore, PAR researchers may reflect on their own practices and thus they could achieve a state of betterment as well. PAR goals have been emancipatory and aimed towards the improvement of the practices and situations of the people involved. On the other hand, we have IL, which strives to develop more informed individuals, independent information users, and critical thinkers in order to achieve many different purposes, such as: problem solving, decision making, emancipation, for the exercise of active citizenship, overcoming oppression, bridging divides, achieving critical stances, and for lifelong learning. All these purposes have been largely studied since Zurkowski coined the concept in the 1970s. However, even when the 'good use' of information for the improvement of the human being is at the heart of IL and a participatory stance seems like a perfect match for IL and its various purposes, we believe that the bridging of IL with PAR has only started to be (re) discovered, and an analysis of this connection in the ways we intend may lead an improved research agenda for the IL area. So we ask ourselves, is it time to review some of these and bring them back to the forefront in order to see if an IL research and practice agenda, which integrates PAR, can translate to an enhancement of its results in the coming years? Conversely, how many of us IL researchers are using this approach? Is it an old hope or a new one? Is this IL-PAR connection obvious, or are practitioners too busy to realize that this is a good match? Participatory approaches are research strategies that have been used in IL research. Several researchers have used PAR, often driven by critical theory, for developing information literacy programs or activities in higher education [18], [19], [20], [21], within schools [22], for the community [23], as a framework for evaluating IL instruction [24], among others. Moreover, in this age of social media (a.k.a. new or participatory media), participatory approaches are logical choices when dealing with the integration or mediation of these technologies for their appropriation [25].

## 2.2 Pros and Cons of PAR

As the humanities and social sciences have tried to evolve, these methodologies have also been vastly improved in the last 70 years. Moreover, these kinds of methodologies are very closely related to a human perspective [26], what is defined in the literature as 'research with people' instead of a positivist 'research on people' [27]. PAR deals with the rich subjectivity of the human being and it is arguably what it does best. However, some positivist or conductist traditionalists have sometimes

dismissed PAR as purely subjective and not a serious research tradition [28][29]. They highlight the arguments against PAR in similar ways to qualitative methodologies, such as stating that action researchers do not have mathematical and statistics skills, and that is why they take such an approach. Furthermore, there are the issues of validity, trustworthiness and the number of participants in a participatory study, which cannot be simply evaluated with the same lenses and values of quantitative research. Even so, it seems that an approach such as PAR would be favorable if it tries to bring some objectivity into that subjectivity and if we, the researchers, are able to control most of the variables in order to offer more trustworthy and reliable results. As with any other sound methodologies, if used correctly, PAR has the necessary elements: it is valid if it is systematic, establishes its parameters carefully, and follows its objective closely. Some solutions to address trustworthiness in PAR are that the researcher has to be even more transparent about the whole research process [6], [31], [32]. At the same time, its trustworthiness lies in the fact that it should also conform to long-standing traditional values, such as keeping in mind that it should be replicable and it should coincide with the literature as well. PAR, as any other good research, has to maintain logic regarding its overall structure and its train of thought and analysis throughout all its stages. Moreover, it should seek the ultimate goal of finding 'the truth' [33], balancing the objective/subjective dichotomy. Furthermore, the researcher has to detail the profile of the participants and demonstrate how a state of betterment was achieved considering participants' practices or situations, which are among the main benefits of PAR [34]. These methodological approaches demand, apart from transparency, a deep ethical commitment from the researcher, because in the end, ethics is one of the most important issues regarding research trustworthiness, as numbers might be falsified as easily as qualitative data and its derived claims.

### 3 Methodology

For this research we obviously intend to use a qualitative and PAR approach, with which we invite all IL practitioners and academics to answer a questionnaire we have developed as our only data collection method. Our guiding research question is: in what ways can PAR contribute to the development of a research and practice IL agenda? Secondary research questions are: a) In what ways have IL practitioners profited from using participatory methodologies? b) What are the main contributions of PAR in IL research and practice?, and c) To which degree have IL practitioners used and accepted PAR for their activities?

To present this paper and thus this questionnaire at the European Conference on Information Literacy (ECIL) is a unique opportunity for seeking feedback from all interested stakeholders and to invite them answer this questionnaire. Furthermore, we will invite a larger amount of practitioners by sending the invitation through mailing lists and social media sites devoted to IL. The questions contained in the questionnaire are formulated to answer our research questions. They are as follows:

1. If you have dealt with participatory methodologies (such as Participatory Action Research - PAR, used henceforth) in your IL practice or research, please provide a short account of your experience and the lessons learned.
2. In what ways do you think PAR can contribute to advances in the research and practice agenda on IL?
3. Would you say that PAR represents an old-new-hope that is worthy to revise and retake or that it is out of touch with the times?
4. What are the important elements for advancing an IL-PAR agenda for research and practice?
5. In what ways do you think this perspective would be favorable?
6. How would it contribute to development? (e.g. individuals, policies, countries)
7. In what ways would it contribute to the library profession?

## 4 Conclusion

This short article is just one small step toward the revision of the use of PAR in IL research and practice. Some of the background to this research has been briefly developed and an invitation to provide feedback and answers to a questionnaire to further it was provided. We believe that all systematic research, which has been properly carried out and takes into account the perspective of research participants is valid and can advance our understanding and contribute to theory and practice, including PAR, phenomenography, case study research, among others. The kind of approach we take is quite significant, because in our research group we use three possible methodological stances: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. It is our interest to explore, seek to understand, and establish the possible contributions that a PAR-IL research agenda can bring to the LIS profession, taking as a base that any systematic study helps the advance of a discipline or field of study such as IL. Furthermore, any study to be conducted should triangulate results, indicators, and experiences. Hence, a basis for decision-making, knowledge development, theories, and concepts, can be offered from a research/empirical perspective.

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