



## **ARNA KNOWLEDGE MOBILIZATION: TOWARDS DEMOCRATIZING KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

**By Lonnie Rowell, Chair, ARNA Knowledge Mobilization Group**

In the back of the minds of ARNA's founders, awareness began taking shape during the preparations for the inaugural ARNA conference in May 2013 that a huge knowledge mobilization challenge loomed for the action research community in the Americas and beyond. All we had to do was to consider the scale of our small but determined inaugural gathering at historic Fort Mason in San Francisco in comparison to the great goliath of AERA, which met the week prior to our conference and had 100 times more attendees, to know that ours would be, appropriately in reference to the city where we gathered, an uphill battle. The resources, the media interest, the attention given by funders and policymakers, the huge exhibit space filled with book hawkers and book contract seekers, the globally diverse attendees clamoring to find a spot in packed conference hotel ballrooms to hear a scholar-celebrity: in a nutshell, the AERA gathering each year is a mind-boggling production. Although action research is a part of the production, it most often operates in the margins. It continues to be a commonplace experience at AERA to hear comments such as, "well, action research is not really research after all," or "the findings are too localized to have any validity," or "as an educator, if you are not engaged in evidence-based practice you are not practicing ethically." For those immersed in continuing efforts to advocate for practitioner research and to explain the need for recognition of the validity of both rigorous positivist-oriented research



AND, as Boaventura de Sousa Santos puts it, “other forms of knowledge,” many moments of discouragement and fatigue lurk in the shadows of our determination.

Against this background, during the initial phase of ARNA’s development the founders did not include in the mission or operations either an explicit application of recognized strategies and practices associated with knowledge mobilization (KMb) or a critical reflection on those strategies and practices. As indicated in the Introduction statement included on the Knowledge Mobilization homepage of [arnawebsite.org](http://arnawebsite.org), the reasons for this omission were understandable. We dove into the work of creating ARNA by focusing on creating a social space within which action researchers could assemble to share perspectives, conduct reconnaissance on the current state of action research networking around the Americas, and to strategize on future directions in support of building community across localized efforts and strengthening capacity to sustain momentum among action researchers.

As we began to move forward we could see more clearly at each step both the great potential we were tapping into to and the contours of the strongly contested ground upon which we were walking. On the one hand, efforts to maintain a knowledge monopoly based on a narrow conceptualization of scientific thinking, what Portuguese sociologist De Sousa Santos calls a “hegemonic epistemology”<sup>1</sup> continue to be a dominant force. Those holding to the hegemonic position take their dominance for granted.<sup>2</sup> Of course their perspective dominates, the thinking seems to go, because it is the only way to see things rationally.



I recall referring a committed positivist colleague to the argument put forward by Biesta (2007)<sup>3</sup> that the evidence-based perspective, in the way it is advanced by most of its advocates, simply cannot work in education. She dismissed the argument without discussion and instead posted articles in the department dropbox that reinforced her view that anything short of full-on evidence-based practice was “unethical.” So much for respectful and critical dialogue in the academy! Yet, tension between those clinging to a knowledge monopoly perspective and those drawn to participatory approaches to knowledge production is clearly evident and growing more pointed. In pockets of participatory research found throughout the Americas, from the remote Northwest Territories south to the great Amazon Basin, to the Aconcagua in Argentina – the highest mountain in the western hemisphere, to the many parallel ranges and peaks extending from the Andes in Venezuela all the way to Tierra del Fuego off the southern most point of South America, the call for recognition that the Western perspective on scientific knowledge is one kind of knowledge and should not be granted “absolute priority” can be heard.

In this view, the priority for mobilizing knowledge should proceed based on a clear recognition of the diversity of “knowledges,” including popular knowledge, urban knowledge, peasant knowledge, indigenous knowledge, and women’s knowledge, among others<sup>4</sup> Yet, clearly, this recognition cannot be simply proclaimed; it has to be lived and this is no easy undertaking. ARNA leadership chose to keep in the foreground the opportunities associated with bringing people together out of interest in and support of action research and to let stand in the background the tougher issue of the politics of knowledge production and knowledge dissemination.



Now, as ARNA continues into its 5<sup>th</sup> year, a reconsideration of the relationship with KMb is beginning to take shape, led by the Knowledge Mobilization Working Group. We anticipate that this reconsideration will be a central part of the Working Group's efforts over the coming years. With a growing membership base in North America and South America and with the development of much deeper ties with the South American traditions of participatory research (in particular, through our work on preparations for the ARNA 2017 Conference being held in Cartagena, Colombia in June), ARNA is better equipped to give careful consideration to the critical background issues that surround efforts to promote and sustain action research, practitioner research, and the variety of participatory approaches to social changes. In a sense, from 2013-2015 ARNA leaders put their heads down and charged forward; now it is time to look up, to reconnoiter, and to carefully plan for moving ahead again.

**Accomplishments and moving forward.** With the background and limitations noted above, ARNA knowledge mobilization efforts in 2015-2016 focused on three initiatives: 1) organizing the *Palgrave International Handbook of Action Research* (published in January 2017); 2) maintaining momentum in ARNA and ARNA-related publications; 3) taking first steps towards reconceptualizing the connections between KMb and action research.

Regarding the Handbook, the four editors (Lonnie Rowell, Catherine Bruce, Joseph Shosh, and Margaret Riel) were all members of the originating group that created ARNA beginning in the spring of 2012. The Handbook project became a way for us to expand our individual networking as members of the global action research



community and to deepen our understandings of the histories, varied contexts and critical issues being faced by action researchers across the globe. The project also became a way for us to represent ARNA in a broader context and to learn from the leaders of more established action research and participatory research networks around the world. In other words, as we worked on the Handbook ARNA was never far from our thoughts.

Following a rigorous review process, we selected 41 manuscripts by 83 authors and added an additional eight chapters authored and co-authored by the four of us. We also co-authored an introduction to the Handbook and worked individually and in pairs to write brief introductions to each of the manuscript's six parts. Although the Handbook was a fairly monumental undertaking, the editors knew going into the project that our proven abilities to work well together, as evidenced by the intense year-and-a-half we had shared in organizing ARNA, would propel us forward and help smooth out the rough spots we would encounter, and that did prove to be the case. By the time we convened an Editors' Retreat at Joe Shosh's home in Pennsylvania in May 2015 and stepped back to consider the wealth of knowledge contained in the submitted manuscripts, we felt confident that the forthcoming Handbook would make an important contribution to the literature regarding the current global state of action research and would constitute a unique examination of themes and issues relevant to its future. The handbook became, for us, the first part of the foundation for a reconsideration of what knowledge mobilization looks like in relation to action research.



Regarding maintaining momentum in ARNA and ARNA-related publications in addition to the Handbook project, Joe Shosh and I proposed a Special Issue on Action Research Networks for the international journal *Educational Action Research*. Our proposal was accepted and the Special Issue was published in March 2016 as Volume 24, Number 1. The nine articles in the Special Issue, including an article by Joe Shosh and CARN's Mary McAteer examining the CARN/ARNA Study Day held in conjunction with the 2014 ARNA Conference at Moravian College, addressed important topics related to action research networking and brought together in one volume brief histories of six networks operating in different contexts in various parts of the world. As Joe and I stated in our Editorial for the Special Issue, we believed that the volume might “contribute significantly to the discussion and developments now taking place globally regarding the role of networks in action research and the potential of networks to impact the formulation of regional and global strategies for challenging the current hegemonic view of educational research” (p. 1)<sup>5</sup>

In addition, ARNA published its second Conference Proceedings, the Proceedings of its 2015 Conference in Toronto, Canada (<https://sites.google.com/site/arnaproceedings/home/2015>). Under the guidance of Lead Editor Elena Polush, the Editorial Team utilized an inclusive approach to sharing content from the conference. Our Conference Proceedings are published annually on the ARNA website and have proven to be a useful open access resource for action researchers around the world as well as here in the Americas. The mix of Spanish and English papers reflects ARNA's commitment to multi-vocality in all of our work, and the effort to include reports of practitioner research along with the



more formal contributions of university researchers indicates the starting line of ARNA's work in knowledge democracy.

The 2015 Proceedings include Budd Hall's keynote address on ecology of knowledge, paper and symposium presentations, workshop session summaries, and a summary of a virtual Town Hall session held via Skype links with participants at the conference and in India, Ireland, the UK, South Africa, and the USA. Also included in the Proceedings are Poster Session materials, and Addendums documenting ARNA interest group meetings held during the conference. Taken together, the Proceedings provide a wide-angle snapshot of the sessions and dialogues that took place in Toronto and serve as an indicator of the range of issues being addressed by ARNA members.

Lastly, ARNA's current approach to knowledge mobilization continues to have an experimental feel. The ARNA website continues to be a crucial component of ARNA's presence in the Americas and beyond (<http://www.arnawebsite.org/home>) and is now in its second major iteration. In addition, ARNA's partnership with Social Publishers Foundation (SPF) (<https://www.socialpublishersfoundation.org/>) has continued, and through this partnership ARNA supports both the development of a knowledge base for completed practitioner research and the use of crowdfunding to generate financial support for emerging practitioner research projects. The *Proceedings*, now under the leadership of Kurt Clausen and Rodney Beaulieu, continue to be a vehicle for experimenting with formats, inclusivity, and voice in relation to publishing materials from the annual conference.



**Moving Forward.** The foundation presented above for ARNA reconsideration of the relation with KMb has been constructed to date through the efforts of a number of ARNA members. What we share is a recognition that if action research is to have an impact on relevant public policies and professional and community practices at levels that can “stand up to” a hegemonic perspective on knowledge and its production, then we need to articulate the balance point between conventional uses of the term knowledge mobilization and sustained challenges to the conventional notion posed by the emergence of knowledge democracy as an alternative to the underlying foundation of the traditional knowledge enterprise<sup>6</sup>. This is the work that lies ahead.

As indicated previously, in a conventional sense knowledge mobilization is most often discussed as the use of evidence and expertise to align research, policy and practice and improve outcomes for children, youth and families. Examples of knowledge mobilization efforts include:

- Publications such as journal articles, books and reports
- Events such as workshops and conferences
- Teaching curricula development or improvement
- Knowledge transfer, synthesis, exchange and co-creation

In this context, ARNA can certainly claim that it is a part of knowledge mobilization. ARNA’s efforts, although still taking place in a much smaller social and policy space than that occupied by major organizations such as American Educational Research Association (AERA), do include publications, events, and knowledge transfer, exchange and co-creation. Yet there is a more formal dimension to how KMb was



introduced and has evolved, and in that context ARNA struggles with the marginalization of its knowledge products just as do action researchers and practitioner-researchers in general.

When “evidence and expertise” are put forward as being crucial to aligning research, policy and practice, in other words, the reference is most likely not to the forms of evidence and expertise associated with action research.<sup>7</sup> However, this assessment has to take into consideration differences across the Americas, with such consideration being a central value in ARNA. In this context, for example, we certainly will want to increase our understanding of the Canadian experience with KMb. In Canada the social science and humanities fields use the term “knowledge mobilization” fairly extensively. The term appears to have gained wider use after publication of an evaluation report of the Community-University Research Alliance (CURA) program of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada ([SSHRC](#)) in 2004. Based on this report, SSHRC created a division of Knowledge Products and Mobilization to enhance and accelerate the movement of research findings into policy and program development.<sup>8</sup> This history is noteworthy given the more widespread acceptance of practitioner research in Canada than is evident in the US.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the Canadian experience provides a significant opportunity to examine what takes place at the intersection of advocacy for KMb and acceptance of the substantive contributions of practitioner-researchers.

In addition, given ARNA’s intention to boundary-cross between the Global North and the Global South, we also have an opportunity to better understand the intersections of participatory research traditions, which are very deeply rooted



throughout South America and continue to draw on the work and spirit of Paulo Freire and Orlando Fals-Borda, among others, and the emergence of action research and practitioner research in North America. In this sense, ARNA is an amazing laboratory for continuous learning regarding key questions associated with the production, ownership, and dissemination of knowledge as well as with the various ways in which knowledge is privileged or marginalized in relation to policy-making.

Furthermore, although the battle over the legitimacy of knowledge claims emerging in the context of participatory approaches to social sciences has been taken up many times over the past four decades and continues today, developing global discourses on knowledge democracy point towards significant new considerations that all groups involved with knowledge production and dissemination, including ARNA, should discuss and debate.<sup>10</sup> Overall, it is possible we are closer to constructing a framework for global knowledge democracy than any of us would have imagined even five years ago. Given recent global developments suggesting the possibility of new convergences in thought and action regarding knowledge production and dissemination (e.g. considerations of a network-of-networks within the global action research community, the emergence of the Urban Commons and Peer2Peer initiatives, and the continued development of the World Social Forum [<https://fsm2016.org/en/>]), ARNA decided to convene the first Global Assembly for Knowledge Democracy in conjunction with our 2017 Conference in Cartagena, Colombia.

In advance of this historic event, a global assembly planning group has been working on creating interactive experiences leading up to the assembly (see



<https://knowledgedemocracy.org/get-involved/> for details regarding the participatory workshop portion of the Global Assembly).

The planning group has also been drafting statements to serve as prompts for additional conversations among action researchers working in diverse regions of the world. A website has been established as the home base for information sharing about all aspects of the Global Assembly (<https://knowledgedemocracy.org/>). In addition, a June 16 Design Team established by the Planning Group is launching a platform on loomio to maximize involvement with the Global Assembly and facilitate sharing of ideas about knowledge democracy and social progress towards a sustainable and more equitable world. For more information on participating, please contact one of the following individuals:

- Jose Ramos: [jose@actionforesight.net](mailto:jose@actionforesight.net)
- Wray Irwin: [wray.irwin@cantab.net](mailto:wray.irwin@cantab.net)
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Beyond these efforts, ARNA's Knowledge Mobilization Group will continue to work on critically examining the relationship of Kmb, Knowledge Democracy, and action research in the Americas. We hope that more ARNA members will participate in the discussions that will emerge in the aftermath of the 1<sup>st</sup> Global Assembly for Knowledge Democracy. We anticipate working with the data from the assembly and reporting results at ARNA's 2018 Conference in San Diego. We will base our considerations of the ARNA perspective on Kmb on the three commonly recognized components<sup>11</sup> of knowledge mobilization:



1. Raising awareness and prompting change
2. Bringing people together
3. Putting knowledge into action

Yet, we will take a broader and more critical view of these components by addressing questions associated with a democratizing orientation towards knowledge and its uses, for example:

- Raising awareness of what? Prompting changes to benefit whom?
- Bringing which people together and for what?
- Putting knowledge into action for whose benefit and in what context?

**A Final Word.** I would like to thank the members of the 2015-2016 Knowledge Mobilization Working Group for their contributions to ARNA's knowledge mobilization efforts. It was my distinct pleasure to chair the group. Those participating included:

Donna Azodi, Lamar University, Beaumont, Texas

Kurt Clausen, Nipissing University, North Bay, Ontario, Canada

Scott Merkel, School Counselor, Battlefield High School, Haymarket, Virginia

Elena Polush, Lead Editor, ARNA Proceedings

Joseph Shosh, Chair, ARNA Coordinating Group and Executive Committee

Brittany (Britt) Wilczewski, English teacher, Warren Harding High School,  
Bridgeport, Connecticut



Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> A profound critique of this monopoly is found in Boaventura de Sousa Santos' (2014) book *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide*.

<sup>2</sup> However, in the aftermath of the ascendance of Trumpism in the U.S., the hard sciences community is now feeling the heat more intensely than perhaps at any time in the last 50 years. As far back as 2012, an article in the respected *Scientific American* warned that "antiscience beliefs jeopardize American democracy (<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/antiscience-beliefs-jeopardize-us-democracy/>). The situation is now so intense that T-shirts proclaim "Science is not a Liberal Conspiracy" and an upcoming March for Science is being organized in more than 300 cities and countries around the world

(<http://marchforsciencesd.com/about>). As a measure of the intensity, a very close friend recently informed me that she would not participate in the march because she was "tired of" the arrogance of scientists in relation to knowledge democracy. This from a recently retired professor who spent 20+ years as a researcher and editor for top research journals.

<sup>3</sup> Biesta, G. (2007). Why "what works" won't work: Evidence-based practice and the democratic deficit in educational research. *Educational Theory*, 57(1), 1-22.

<sup>4</sup> The introduction in *Epistemologies of the South* provides an in-depth discussion of this point

<sup>5</sup> Rowell, L. L., & Shosh, J. M. (2016). Editorial. *Educational Action Research*, 24(1), pp. 1-3.

<sup>6</sup> The term "knowledge democracy" seems to have first emerged in the 1990s in relation to evolving learning and dialogue among various leaders associated with participatory approaches to knowledge production, including action research and participatory research. The term was included in the title of a chapter by John Gaventa in the 1991 book *Action and Knowledge* edited by Orlando Fals Borda and Mohammad Anisur Rahman and also appeared in Volume 1, Number 1 of the journal *Action Research* in 2003. A chapter in the forthcoming *Palgrave International Handbook of Action Research* examines the concept in depth (Rowell & Hong, Chapter 4).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example: Beaulieu, R. J. (2013). Action research: Trends and variations. *Canadian Journal of Action Research*, 14(3), pp. 29-39. For an earlier discussion see Gaventa, J. (1991). Toward a knowledge democracy: Viewpoints on participatory research in North America. In O. Fals Borda & M. Rahman (Eds.), *Action and*



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*knowledge: Breaking the monopoly with participatory action-research* (pp. 121-131).  
New York: Apex Press.

<sup>8</sup> Source: [http://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/funding-financement/policies-politiques/knowledge\\_mobilisation-mobilisation\\_des\\_connaissances-eng.aspx#a1](http://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/funding-financement/policies-politiques/knowledge_mobilisation-mobilisation_des_connaissances-eng.aspx#a1)

<sup>9</sup> Two chapters in the *Palgrave International Handbook of Action Research* address historical development of action research in North America: Kurt Clausen contributed a chapter on Action Research in the Canadian Context (Chap. 7) and Allan Feldman contributed An Emergent History of Educational Action Research in the English Speaking World (Chap. 8)

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Santos, B. D. (Ed.) (2007). *Another knowledge is possible: Beyond northern epistemologies*. London: Verso.

<sup>11</sup> source: <http://www.kmbtoolkit.ca/what-is-kmb>