Creating an online community of action researchers

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Foreword

The voices calling on education as a reaction and a possible remedy to the world's most pressing problems multiply. Sustainable environment and sustainable economy, living together in democracy based on respect for human rights and dignity; global citizenship, respect for diversity, countering hate speech and violent extremism, preventing discrimination, violence and violent radicalisation … the list is long and the calls for an educational reaction come from all sides. Very recently, in spring 2016, the Ministers of Education of the 47 Council of Europe Member States adopted a framework for the development of competences for democracy in education. UNESCO published a teachers' guide to the prevention of violent extremism in summer 2016, and in early 2016 the EU voted a resolution on promoting socio-economic development and inclusiveness in the EU through education. These are just some of the many calls for increased action in education to ensure that we will be able to meet those challenges we are already facing and those we will face in the near future.

And they are right to call for education. Medium- and long-term solutions to these issues can only be found in and through education, be it formal education in school and higher education settings, be it in non-formal education or through informal education.

However, for the desirable change to happen we cannot resign ourselves to making statements and developing policy orientations and guidelines while in the process making abstraction of the practitioners, of those who will make the change happen eventually … or not happen, as is often the case.

While vision is important, so is action. "Vision without action is a daydream, action without vision is a nightmare" as the famous Japanese proverb says. And I would add that to be successful the action needs to be imbued by the values the vision transports. Our action needs to model the values and principles of democracy, participation, co-operation, respect, diversity, etc.

For action to happen those who will carry out the action need to be on board, we need "shared ownership" as the current saying goes. Sharing ownership cannot be imposed and decided from above, it necessarily passes through the phase of participation in the decision making and in the elaboration of the responses that need to be implemented.

When the desired change does not take place, or when change goes into an unde-sired direction, we can of course blame practitioners and their resistance to change. However, this would be like saying that "if only we had the right participants/teach-ers/school heads/children/ …" then everything would be ok. We need to accept that we have the people we have and we need to work together with these to make the desirable and desired change happen. Perhaps this implies not only to include practitioners in the design and elaboration of the direction of change and its practi-calities but to actually put them at the centre of the process and in the driving seat.

This book is about how to support practitioners in this process. It is the outcome of a process of learning together initiated and carried out and coordinated within the Community of Practice of the Pestalozzi Programme – the Council of Europe training programme for education professionals – by members of this community who shared the wish to develop and to develop together and who were ready to pool their resources and embark on a learning journey that lasted over a year and consisted of intensive work in their professional context and within the online group.

It is a book about putting values first and then check if and how we reflect these values in our actions. It is a book about learning and as such a very welcome and crucial contribution to the debate which too often is only concerned with teaching (Didactica v. Matetica, the art of teaching v. the art of learning, Comenius).

And it is also about risk -taking since true learning is also always a danger to our self-esteem because it includes the probability of having to accept that we were wrong before and this is not always easy to accept. Thomas Szasz, an American psychiatrist, says that this is the reason why learning becomes difficult for adults while it is easy for children. A thought to be kept in mind when reflecting about lifelong learning.

The book also shows very clearly that true learning is a social process and does not happen in isolation this is why communities of practice are so important to successful learning. And last but not least the action research accounts and the reflected learn-ing processes in this publication show how learning oriented to change does not happen through the implementation of ready-made solutions designed somewhere by some expert. Instead, creative solutions devised by practitioners seem to be the most appropriate and effective solutions for the specific contexts in which the practitioners act.

Last but not least this book is also about reinforcing the hope that changes which may seem too little to count actually make a big difference.

Josef Huber

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Part One

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Branko Bognar and Pascale Mompoint-Gaillard

Introduction

In recent decades, the increasing interest in action research has resulted in a plethora of resources in this field. There are many action research resources, which make it easy to learn how to go about it. However, examples of efforts to help people become action researchers are scarce. It is presumed that anyone can become an action researcher by reading books and then conducting his or her own action research project. Our experience shows that this is not likely to happen.

Although action research represents research design, intended for practitioners, it is not as simple as it seems. There are several levels to the process, and novices in particular may find it challenging. To conduct action research it is necessary to be a philosopher, a researcher, a change agent and even, to a certain degree, a psycho-therapist. All of this is easier to achieve within a learning community, with the help of more experienced action researchers.

The education professionals who participated in this project have almost all pre-viously been involved in professional development projects within the Pestalozzi Programme. This is the context in which they have been engaged over a period of time, including experiential learning, co-operative learning, immersion in reflective practice, and critical feedback loops with peers and coaches. In this context, this action research project was envisioned as taking a step forward to develop further the comprehensive structure of the Pestalozzi Programme, the approach of which is rooted firmly in the realm of social constructivism and social constructionism: work-ing together to create new practices; creating through social interactions; situated learning in context; and enriching individual learning through the negotiation of meaning and interaction in a group.

This book represents an example of such a project in which several practitioners from different parts of Europe, gathered in the Pestalozzi Community of Practice, set out to learn how to become action researchers. In contrast to numerous books about action research in which the authors attempt to explain how to conduct action research, this book is action research about becoming an action researcher. An additional feature is the collaboration and learning of participants on an international level through online social platforms and affordable web applications.

It is our wish to continue to improve our approaches to supporting teachers as agents of change for social good, based on a sound and explicit value system. This project in action research and this publication aim at helping the Pestalozzi Programme's growth in this respect.

Philosophical and value backgrounds

Although in scientific publications, particularly those drawing on a positivistic paradigm,[1] philosophical and value backgrounds are sometimes neglected or concealed, they are always present, at least implicitly. In action research values play an important role since they serve as starting points for carrying out change as well as establishing criteria for their assessment. Halstead defines values as:

> principles, fundamental convictions, ideals, standards or life stances which act as general guides to behaviour or as points of reference in decision-making or the evaluation of beliefs or action and which are closely connected to personal integrity and personal identity. (Halstead 1996: 4)

Each of the authors who participated in the writing of this book has included in it a part of their own personal identity and value system. For all of us, freedom was the most prominent value. This is based on the assumption "that man, as man, is free: that it is the freedom of Spirit which constitutes its essence" (Hegel 1892/2001: 32). This means that modern democratic societies were and still are being built and that we are also eager to contribute to the development of democracy in our countries, in Europe and in the world. We consider that freedom cannot be reduced to:

> its formal, subjective sense, abstracted from its essential objects and aims; thus a constraint put upon impulse, desire, passion – pertaining to the particular individual as such – a limitation of caprice and self-will is regarded as a fettering of Freedom. We should on the contrary look upon such limitation as the indispensable proviso of emancipation. (Hegel 1892/2001: 56)

Freedom, as opposed to some natural state in which a human being acts compulsively and thoughtlessly, is constituted of the purposeful and responsible social action of educated and creative people who, in the process of their emancipation, strive to liberate themselves from personal limitations that restrain their development and attempt to free themselves from ideological constraints and obedience to authorities. This represents a negative aspect of freedom, while positive freedom may imply the development and creative expression of personal capabilities and the establishment of a communication community where we can find interlocutors and participants in the process of communicating our values and creating a shared vision. In other words, in positive freedom "the individual exists as an independent self and yet is not isolated but united with the world, with other men, and nature" (Fromm 1950: 222) in an active and creative way.

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1. In the positivistic paradigm "the investigator and the investigated 'object' are assumed to be independent entities, and the investigator to be capable of studying the object without influencing it or being influenced by it. When influence in either direction (threats to validity) is recognized, or even suspected, various strategies are followed to reduce or eliminate it. Inquiry takes place as through a one-way mirror. Values and biases are prevented from influencing outcomes, so long as the prescribed procedures are rigorously followed" (Lincoln and Guba 1994: 110).

Creativity represents a crucial aspect of positive freedom and it contributes to the quality of life of creative individuals and the whole of society. At the same time, it is a precondition of our survival and overall cultural and social development. Although essential for human beings, it is not easy to define creativity. It is very often connected with something new, and different in relation to what already exists. However, to be different does not mean being relevant and effective in creating ideas, performances and products. Cropley notes that "creativity is nowadays widely defined as the production of relevant and effective novelty" (2011: 359). However, it would be mistaken to consider that predefined criteria for assessing the relevance of creativity exist. Those criteria are always redefined through a dialogue between those who participate in the creative process and then through communication with a wider professional community and the public.

Sometimes, creative ideas need some time and favourable social conditions to become widely recognised and accepted. Some ideas may not have wider social merit. Therefore, Boden distinguishes historical creativity and psychological creativity (H-creativity and P-creativity):

> P-creativity involves coming up with a surprising, valuable idea that's new to the person who comes up with it. It doesn't matter how many people have had that idea before. But if a new idea is H-creative, that means that (so far as we know) no one else has had it before: it has arisen for the first time in human history. (Boden 2004: 2)

Historical creativity is rarely achieved. Psychological creativity occurs more often which means that all people can be creative, although not in the same way and at the same level. We consider that each human has a creative capacity that needs to be actualised. If they are prevented from attaining this capacity or give up, it could reflect on their general systemic health (Maslow 1971).

Creativity has its downside. In a situation in which the alienating power of capital rules the world, creativity could be used for the control and limitation of freedom, and even, in the case of technology, for the mass destruction of people. "Value-neutral" scientific research could play a particularly important role, since scientists do not as a rule critically reflect on the possible impacts of their work on wider social processes that may be undemocratically oriented. Kurt Lewin was aware of this threat:

> It seems to be crucial for the progress of social science that the practitioner will understand that through social sciences and only through them he can hope to gain the power necessary to do a good job. Unfortunately there is nothing in social laws and social research which will force the practitioner toward the good. Science gives more freedom and power to both the doctor and the murdered, to democracy and fascism. The social scientist should recognize his responsibility also in respect to this. (Lewin 1946: 44)

To avoid the negative consequences of scientific research it is important to reject:

> the notion of the "objectivity" of the researcher in favour of a very active and proactive notion of critical self-reflection – individual and collective self-reflection that actively interrogates the conduct and consequences of participants' practices, their understandings of their practices, and the conditions under which they practice, in order to discover whether their practices are, in fact, irrational, unsustainable or unjust. (Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon 2014: 6)

Creativity has a positive meaning only if it is connected with freedom and critical reflection. Brookfield points out that in order for reflection to be critical it should have two distinctive purposes: identification and understanding of power relationships in the wider social context and the specific conditions of our practice, and recognition

of hegemonic assumptions "that we think are in our own best interest but that have actually been designed by more powerful others to work against us in the long term" (Brookfield 1995: 15). By the critical questioning of our social situation we are able to conduct activities that lead to significant changes in our practice.

It is not necessary that each improvement produce significant change particularly if practitioners employ existing solutions. However, Kangrga considers that the modern concept of practice implies a discontinuity with natural social being, thus with practice as an ordinary, well-established way of work. This is made possible only by the creative surpassing of existing borders, following daring visions:

> that yet is not, but could and should be. And that what still is not, does not appear from a dimension of mere closed present, but it is very future in present. Otherwise, a practice as change of the world would be impossible. (Kangrga 1989a: 92)

The modern concept of practice may be defined as a creative activity, that is history[2] which:

> is nothing else then process of human becoming human and his/her world [becoming] own world by means of his/her own activity as self-activity or freedom. (Kangrga 1989b: 61)

In that sense practice, or creativity, cannot be reduced to work which is always connected with necessity, or the need for survival. Practice released from any physical need ceases to be mere activity oriented to material production, but "poetry, music, sculpting, painting etc., as well as theory, are also a highest form of practice" (Kangrga 1984: 90). In such a definition of practice, science also becomes a constitutive part of human creative activity. The modern concept of practice, as defined by Kangrga, implies an integration of theory and practice. Carr and Kemmis considers:

> this requires an integration of theory and practice as reflective and practical moments in a dialectical process of reflection, enlightenment and political struggle carried out by groups for the purpose of their own emancipation. (1986: 144)

This leads to a redefinition of theory that traditionally implies "a set of interrelated constructs and propositions that presents an explanation of phenomena and makes predictions about relationships among variables relevant to the phenomena" (Ary et al. 2010: 14). Such an understanding of theory is particularly common to a positivistic approach to science. However, theory does not need to be oriented merely towards explaining how reality works, but could also focus on how to change it. In that sense, theory could represent a set of coherent understandings that helps us create our world(s) in meaningful ways. This kind of theory cannot be tested by comparing it with an existing situation; it can be tested only by changing the reality, by creating the world in accordance with our aims. Changing practice means changing the theory and vice versa.

As a constitutive part of the creative process, theory has a critical dimension. Therefore, it is not "a set of explanatory understandings that help us make sense of some aspect of the world" (Brookfield 2005: 3). Rather, it points to the possibility of changing an actual situation; as such, it represents a radical critique. Such a critique beyond the level of a negative-pessimistic relation to reality "can contribute to building a

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2. Hegel was the originator of idea that "The History of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom" (1892/2001: 34); a progress that human beings freely make according to their understanding of the requirements of the time, "their needs, their passions, their characters and talents" (1892/2001: 34).

different society organised according to democratic values of fairness, justice, and compassion" (2005: 7-8) Thereby, "a theory can offer us a form of radical hope that helps us stand against the danger of energy-sapping, radical pessimism" (2005: 8).

It is possible to conclude that the human world is always open to changes. By changing our world we change ourselves as human beings. This means that our nature is "the system of human activities" (Cassirer 1944: 68), or culture that is always redesigned by new generations of people. In this process of creating our world we permanently learn how to become human beings.

Figure 1: Different theoretical approaches to learning oriented to change

Humanistic theories of learning	– has a quality of personal involvement – is self-initiated – is pervasive (it makes a difference in the behaviour, the attitudes, perhaps even the personality of the learner). – is evaluated by the learner – has meaning as its essence (Rogers 1969)
Transformative learning	– ta disorienting dilemma – self-examination – a critical assessment of assumptions – recognition of a connection between one's discontent and the process of transformation – exploration of options for new roles, relationships and action – planning a course of action – acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan – provisional trying of new roles – building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships – a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective (Mezirow and Taylor 2009: 19)
Action learning	– building action learning around a problem the resolution of which is of high importance to an individual, team and/or organisation – as a core entity, the action learning group – starting with questions (what one does not know) rather than focusing on the right answers (what one does know) – action, without with there is no real learning – learning, which is as important as the action – the Facilitator, who is very important in helping participants reflect both on what they are learning and on how they are solving problems (Marquardt 2003)
Reflective practice	The practitioner conducts an experiment in reframing the **unique problematic situation**. In this experiment the practitioner "makes his hypothesis come true. He acts as though his hypothesis were in the imperative mood" (Schön 1983: 149). "The practitioner has an interest in transforming the situation from what it is to something he likes better. He also has an interest in understanding the situation, but it is in the service of his interest in change" (Schön 1990: 72).

Learning could be defined as "an enduring change in behaviour, or in the capacity to behave in a given fashion, which results from practice or other forms of experience" (Schunk 2012: 3). Although change has a crucial place in the definition of learning, its understanding depends on a theory of learning. An attitude to change makes for a shift from shaping the learner's behaviour (behaviourism) or knowledge (cognitivism) to changing our thoughts (constructivism) and the world (activism). We consider that learning which occurs from active participation in creating the world (activism) is tightly connected with the values we previously mentioned: freedom and creativity. An activist approach to learning includes key ideas from different theories of learning (Figure 1). The main features of this type of learning are described below.

Learning occurs in a learning community/ community of practice

Traditional school systems often create a fabricated conception of learning as a lonely process which occurs in the heads of individual students immersed in school books, listening to their teachers' lectures. McDermott considers that:

> learning is not in heads, but in the relations between people. Learning is in the conditions that bring people together and organize a point of contact that allows for particular pieces of information to take on relevance; without the points of contact, without the system of relevancies, there is no learning, and there is little memory. Learning does not belong to individual persons, but to the various conversations of which they are a part. (McDermott 1999: 16)

Significant learning does not occur only in conversations learners are a part of, but in shared activities, which they conduct with the aim of achieving significant changes in the field of their interest and in the frame of learning communities they belong to. A community of practice can be defined as a voluntarily united group of persons who communicate their values over a long period of time (several months to several years), create a common vision, work together in order to improve their practice and personal learning, and reflect critically on their actions and their conditions. A community of practice aims to support practitioners in their efforts to improve their professional practice and to create conditions for the free exchange of ideas and feelings.

Communities of practice have the following components that distinguish them from traditional organisations and learning situations:

► different levels of expertise that are simultaneously present in the community of practice;

► fluid peripheral-to-centre movement that symbolises the progression from a novice to an expert;

► completely authentic tasks and communication. (Johnson 2001)

Learning starts with existential issues that are unique and important for the specific social context in which people live and act

Activities are launched primarily to fulfil the intentions of practitioners to live their values. It is particularly significant when those values are neglected, or negated in a given situation. Whitehead points out that practitioners could notice in their practice:

> two mutually exclusive opposites, the experience of holding educational values and the experience of their negation … When you view yourself on video you can see and experience your "I" containing content in itself. By this I mean that you see yourself as a living contradiction, holding educational values whilst at the same time negating them. (Whitehead 1989)

Detecting living contradictions or problems in a practice could be one reason to initiate a process of change and, thereby, a process of learning. But we do not need to start our project from the negative aspects of our practice. It is possible to choose something we do well but still want to improve upon. This approach is close to the approach of continuous improvement ("kaizen"):

> This philosophy assumes that our everyday life should focus on constant improvement efforts … Improvements made through kaizen are generally small and subtle; however, their results over time can be large and long lasting … The success of kaizen comes from its people and their actions, not from new pieces of equipment and machinery. (Ortiz 2006: 7)

Whichever way we choose, it is important to focus on significant issues that won't reduce us to dealing with superficial improvements of existing situations. We learn the best when we are oriented towards creating something important in our lives.

Learning and action are mutually connected

Learning is always connected with our own activity, but the activity we have in mind is based "on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others – to gain greater control over our lives as socially responsible, clear-thinking decision makers" (Mezirow 2000: 8). In action learning (Revans 2011), learning is built around real problems that require fresh, creative solutions, and implies taking action in a group that is "composed of four to eight individuals who examine an organizational problem that has no easily identifiable solution. Ideally, the makeup of the group is diverse, so as to maximize various perspectives and obtain fresh viewpoints" (Marquardt 2003: 6).

Learning oriented to change does not mean implementation of ready-made solutions. Instead, creative solutions devised by practitioners could be most appropriate for the specific contexts in which they act. Finding creative ideas is not always easy. It requires releasing and developing creative characteristics, which Treffinger et al. (2002) divided into four categories: generating ideas; openness and courage to explore ideas; digging deeper into ideas; and listening to one's "inner voice".

Johnson (2010) posed the question of how to push ourselves to create good ideas, suggesting that "[t]o make your mind more innovative, you have to place it inside environments that share that same network signature: networks of ideas or people that mimic the neural networks of a mind exploring the boundaries of the adjacent

possible" (2010: 47). Therefore, if we want to devise something new, it is not enough to sit and think in isolation about the problem, it is important to make connections with people who may have different professional backgrounds. However, they have to be willing to communicate with us about ideas of shared interest.

Becoming critically reflective

This is crucial for activist theories of learning. Critical reflection is oriented towards questioning the social circumstances in which changes occur as a result of personal action, through double-loop learning. The world we live in is created by human activity, but it is not finished and perfect; it is open to new creativity. Critical reflection allows us to understand the complexity of social conditions and to recognise and distinguish those that could be beneficial from those that could limit our creative attempts. Therefore, critical reflection does not relate only to noticing negative aspects, but implies a deeper understanding of potentials as well as threats in social circumstances. Without critical reflection, theory would be reduced to hollow descriptions of a current state, and action would become thoughtless activism (Freire 2000: 30). Brookfield (1995) considers that critical reflection can help in different ways:

- ▶ it helps us take informed actions: "An informed action is one that has a good chance of achieving the consequences intended" (1995: 22);
- ▶ it helps us develop a rationale for practice: "We know why we believe that we believe" (1995: 23) and we know why we do what we do, why we think what we think;
- ▶ it helps us avoid self-laceration. We learn to stop blaming ourselves for the things we are not responsible for since we are aware of the cultural and political limits of our current situations;
- ▶ taking a more realistic stance according to our ability to change a situation makes us emotionally stable;
- ▶ it enlivens our practice: "By openly questioning our own ideas and assumptions – even as we explain why we believe in them so passionately – we create an emotional climate in which accepting change and risking failure are valued" (1995: 25).

Argyris, Putnam and McLain Smith distinguished two kinds of theories of action: "Espoused theories are those that an individual claims to follow. Theories-in-use are those that can be inferred from action" (1985: 81-82). Most of us can hardly distinguish between espoused theory and theory-in-use. Pointing out this discrepancy, after all, could lead to unpleasantness. If we are oriented to defining and achieving individual goals without discussion or coming to agreement with other participants, if we intend to maximise winning and minimise losing, if we minimise generating or expressing negative feelings or feelings at all (being rational) (Schön 1990), then:

- ▶ there is a gap between what we think we believe, and the values implied by our behaviour;
- ▶ we are blind to this gap;
- ▶ though others may perceive it, they are reluctant to admit that they have, let alone bring it to our attention;

▶ if they do, we are likely to react most defensively. (Dick and Dalmau 2000)

Instead of persisting with such a model of learning, we could accept the values of Model II (double-loop learning), which:

▶ maximises valid information;

▶ makes a free and informed choice;

▶ is internally committed to decisions made. (Argyris and Schön 1975)

In single-loop learning only strategies of action are changed, while governing values are not questioned (Figure 2). In Model II, activities as well as values are questioned and changed. Such learning should replace a competitive culture in which low levels of trust and lack of risk readiness is common, with co-operative relations that:

> involve sharing power with anyone who has competence and who is relevant to deciding or implementing the action. The definition of the task and the control over the environment are now shared with all the relevant actors
> …
> Under these conditions individuals will not tend to compete to make decisions for others, to one-up others, or to outshine others for the purposes of self-gratification. Individuals in a Model II world seek to find the most competent people for the decision to be made. They seek to build viable decision-making networks in which the major function of the group is to maximise the contributions of each member so that when a synthesis is developed, the widest possible exploration of views has occurred. (Argyris and Schön 1978: 138)

Figure 2: Single and double-loop learning (Anderson 1994)
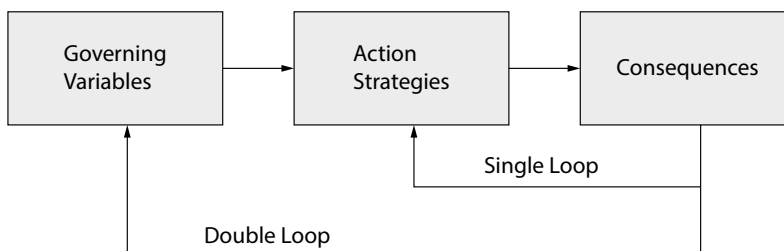
Activist learning often results in significant changes in a practice and significant learning. However, change is always a "problematic" process since it implies doing something new or different. This requires additional efforts to find new solutions that do not necessarily guarantee success. On the contrary, whatever we do for the first time results in various shortages in performance that could be improved. But this often requires time. To overcome this situation it is important to face problems. For those who are ready to grapple with problems it is helpful to be aware of the process of change, which is not linear, but curved (Parker and Lewis 1981). With the help of experienced people, it is possible to reduce the negative impact of this process. However, it is not possible or even desirable to avoid all problems since it could hinder our learning, which implies coping with serious and meaningful problems. By coping with existential problems and creating something meaningful it is possible to experience significant learning that makes:

> a difference – in the individual's behaviour, in the course of action he chooses in the future, in his attitudes and in his personality. It is pervasive learning which is not just an accretion of knowledge, but which interpenetrates with every portion of his existence. (Rogers 1959: 232)

At the end of this introductory discussion, it is important to mention our considera-tion for the internal cohesion of our value background. Our values as aims "for the sake of which we struggle to give our lives their particular form" (Whitehead 1985: 99) should be mutually coherent within a particular value system since only in this way can they contribute to the harmonious creation of life (Vuk-Pavlović 2007). It would be wrong to expect that this accordance could happen only through action. It is important to consider the coherence of our values from the very beginning, and thus the philosophical backgrounds that we intend to fulfil in our practice.

Action research context, launch and challenges

The Council of Europe today stands for frameworks for policy and practice throughout Europe, ensuring respect for its fundamental values: human rights, democracy and the rule of law, within different arenas, such as the political, social and educational arenas. Under the umbrella of the Council of Europe, the Pestalozzi Programme was developed as a training and capacity-building programme for education profession-als. Its aim is to carry the message of the Council of Europe and its values into the practice of education (formal, non-formal and informal) and to support member states in moving from education policy to education practice in line with these values.

The Pestalozzi Programme's main aim is to promote change in the practices of teachers and educators in the formal and non-formal sectors, and to widen the focus and vision of schools and higher education institutions as regards the purposes of education. Education systems tend to focus on the maintenance of a broad knowledge base and the preparation of young people for the labour market, but neglect investment in the personal development of the individual and in preparing young people to become active citizens in our societies. The development of reflective practices among teachers and educators is thus crucial to making change possible.

Using a range of approaches, the Pestalozzi Programme conducts dozens of training events, involving around 1 000 educators in its projects each year. It targets education practitioners because they are the ones who make a difference in day-to-day practice in the classrooms and all other spaces of learning. In each member country, the ministries of education provide a contact person, a National Liaison Officer (NLO), whose role is to liaise between the programme and the national teacher training organisations and networks. NLOs advertise the programme and nominate participants for training events. They also propose local Pestalozzi workshops, which gather local and international participants, and organise national dissemination events. Teachers and educators who participate in training are invited to continue to be part of an online social network, referred to as the Pestalozzi Community of Practice.

The Pestalozzi Programme:

> acknowledges the vital and crucial role of education professionals in this process of change and builds on the convergence of competences: specialist and subject-specific competences need to be complemented by transversal knowledge, skills and attitudes if we want them to bear fruit for politically, socially, economically and environmentally sustainable, democratic societies in the Europe of today, and above all, tomorrow. (Huber and Mompoint-Gaillard 2011: 11)

The virtual Pestalozzi Programme Community of Practice is a private social network, hosted on www.ning.com, that one can join by invitation only: when participants (e.g. teachers, teacher educators, school heads, ministry of education staff and NLOs, higher education staff and faculty members, staff of non-governmental organisations) enrol for a Pestalozzi training, they are invited to join. Currently, there are 1 700 members.

What allows us to call the Pestalozzi Programme Community of Practice, or virtual community of practice, a community? It is a particular type of community in that it is "distributed": members work in different settings in different countries, making this a pan-European community of practice. Fellow members have different roles and status within the community. All members, at some point, have been participants in face-to-face Pestalozzi Programme training events. As a first step, they are invited to join the online platform and prepare for the course they have enrolled in. During their seminars, workshops or courses, they co-operate for their mutual professional development in the online space. Upon completion of the course, they are encouraged to continue to collaborate in follow-up activities in the short term and to continue developing on a longer-term basis, from a lifelong learning perspective. Members share, through the daily workings of the platform, stories of what happens in their seminars or classrooms when they try out new methods, thus "transforming the training into informed and competent actions through their practice" (Mompoint-Gaillard and Rajić 2014: 460). In the process of sharing their stories, the participants, the members of the community, start developing a common body of knowledge and "lore".

By sharing stories of their workplaces, members negotiate meanings about what their "joint enterprise" (Lave and Wenger 1991) is. A common "language" develops that involves a shared "lexicon" that, beyond jargon, constitutes a "repertoire" (Wenger 1998). This helps the evolution and the negotiation of meaning across languages and understandings, and co-develops answers and workable solutions to issues of educational practice with practitioners and other partners. Thus "[p]ractice is about meaning as an experience of everyday life" (Wenger 1998: 52). One participant described her experience of participation in the Pestalozzi Programme Community of Practice in the following way:

> I would describe it as a very strong and rich experience that empowers the linguistic and cultural competencies. It provides opportunities to learn from different people, and is based on the same principles which I personally support and try to live and work by in my daily life. (Z., teacher and PhD student from Croatia, personal communication, September 2013)

The pan-European Pestalozzi Programme Community of Practice occupies and is also shaped by the online environment it uses: we observe a double phenomenon in which the community members' actions shape the online space, but community interaction is also shaped by the design of the online platform. The platform includes both the main activities that are designed, and the spaces that need to be created so that these activities can take place. There is therefore a double movement of needs and spaces: community members have to work within the parameters of the design imposed by the technical features of the platform; at the same time, the design of the space (platform) is oriented by the actions of the members, as translated into technological features. Further online tools are integrated into the work as needed

– Google Docs, Dropbox, Padlet, Pinterest, Facebook, YouTube, etc. – and are commonly used by members to share their experiences, reflections and work products.

Metaphorically speaking, the platform is organised as a "building", along with the usual functionalities of a social media platform, such as a profile page, private messaging, chat and blogs. The community benefits from specialised subgroups linked to the projects of the Pestalozzi Programme: each group has a "room". Some rooms are accessible to all members and some are "reserved" for participants in a particular activity. Each participant in an activity of the Pestalozzi Programme is invited to become a member of a private group space (their "room") to pursue activities with others involved in the same activity, but is also invited to join the open rooms with all members of the community. Thus the Pestalozzi community is composed of several smaller communities of practice, and an open space for all members constituting the overall community of practice. In the "private", self-moderated rooms, members deal with a specific set of concepts and guided action in order to successfully conclude ongoing projects, whereas "open" rooms operate for the benefit of the community at large on issues pertaining to professional development.

The activities covered in this action research project are realised within such "private rooms". Within these smaller communities of practice, members are engaged in longer-term programmes such as the modules for teacher trainers and the summer schools that provide 6 to 18 months of training and online coaching on particular themes (e.g. intercultural education, education for democratic citizenship, sexuality education and media literacy). They produce materials for trainers and teachers, and plan training events or lesson plans in their own workplaces between sessions.

Pursuing the metaphor of the "building", the open rooms are accessible to every member:

- ▶ coffee shop: for informal discussions and exchanges beyond the purely professional, including announcements and updating members on recent developments;
- ▶ professional development: for moderated discussion on topics of professional interest;
- ▶ cascading: for a structured exchange of information and mutual support regarding the dissemination of the Pestalozzi Programme and cascading at local, regional and national levels.

Participation in the Pestalozzi Programme Community of Practice is invitational. Invitations are made by the Secretariat except in the case of local groups for which either a moderator or another active member of the virtual community of practice is designated as group administrator. Each person responsible for a group of members supports their activities and actions. When signing in for the first time each member is asked to provide information which will be displayed on their page ("My Page"), and which is also the basis for the member search function. This will include information about a member's professional background, involvement in the Pestalozzi Programme, languages spoken and areas of interest (Mompoint-Gaillard and Rajić 2014).

Another metaphor for the Pestalozzi Community of Practice could be that of an "alumni hangout". Because this community of practice is invitational, all its members have

"graduated" from one or several Pestalozzi training programmes. They are trained experts, knowledgeable and competent in their own field but also competent in transversal issues such as pedagogy, co-operative principles, innovation and risk taking to become agents of change in educational settings. Pestalozzi activities focus on the learner's intellectual as well as emotional potential, along with the potential for action, with an emphasis on inclusion and empathic development:

> In fact, in Strasbourg, I underwent a deconstruction of my personal and professional experience that I had. I strongly hope that I get to rebuild through inter-module activities and cooperation with you. (M.P., personal communication, 16 October 2011)

Most themes and approaches of the programme provide the environment for a general reflection on what values, beliefs, attitudes and actions we hold and what results these produce in our social reality. This is one aspect that characterises the community: the atmosphere tends to be supportive and understanding and the platform is a safe place for learning, experimenting and reflecting. Clashes are rare. This doesn't mean that communicating in the online space is free of challenges. But the safe learning environment that the Pestalozzi community constitutes accounts for the development of an atmosphere of trust that can then support various projects, facilitating risk taking, peer support and reflective practices. The atmosphere of trust that developed in this action research group, along with the very attentive and convivial feedback the participants got from the moderator, is one result of the design of the Pestalozzi community.

The main objective of this project was to create a distributed online community of practitioners eager to improve their practice and become action researchers. By changing their practice, the project participants had the opportunity to learn and discuss within the framework of a distributed learning community:

> Typically, distributed communities cross-multiple types of boundaries. Geographically distributed communities link people across time zones, countries, and organizational units. Like local communities, they share ideas and insights, help each other, document procedures, and influence operating teams and business units. (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder 2002: 116)

The main aim of the community of practice was to allow its members to interact on their shared interests and the social practices they participate in. The success of such communities of practice depends on "the voluntary engagement of their members and on the emergence of internal leadership" (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder 2002: 12). This was the reason that we relied on invitational leadership (Purkey and Siegel 2002; Stoll and Fink 1996). An invitational leader addresses personal messages in order "to participate in the construction of something of mutual benefit" (Purkey and Siegel 2002: 6). In our case the invitational leader's mandate was to create a climate of trust and a culture of change (Fullan 1997).

Usually, Pestalozzi educational activities involve face-to-face meetings. That this pilot project would be conducted solely on the online platform was a fairly big challenge. It is often the case that in everyday online discussions it is difficult to convey nuances and go deeper into an analysis of practices. It requires much professionalism, competence and commitment on the part of the moderator. It involves, for example, recognising the phases of a conversation. This allows the participants to become familiar with each other before going on to in-depth interactions. This is why the moderators of the community of practice are also referred to as "stewards". The choice of this term

is the result of a reflection with moderators who wished to stress a certain stance in their practice as moderators: the term "steward" was chosen to convey values such as care for the community and support and to identify their role with the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care.

The designed environment of an online or social media platform may hinder in-depth conversations, most probably when certain conditions are not met. We have come to understand how challenging it is to create the conditions for critical friendship based on critical thinking:

> Active engagement in critical thinking is at the core of any learning community, online or offline. While the voice and tone of your entry as moderator can provide an appealing, elegant, or illustrative surrounding for your communication, the *critical-thinking strategy* you select to frame your entry impacts the dialogue most directly.

> All moderators contend with two recurring issues: Dialogues that lose focus or are conceptually murky; and dialogues that "wallow in the shallows," missing areas in which the potential for deeper insight abounds. (Collison et al. 2000: 127)

This challenge corroborates some of what is happening on the Pestalozzi online platform in general. I (Pascale),[3] as moderator, had to consider each dialogue, and each incident, in light of the context of the dialogue. Daily, as moderators, we faced a difficulty in balancing the different phases of a discussion and encouraging participants to engage deeper in reflection through, for example, Socratic approaches. As a moderator put it when he analysed an incident in which my efforts to deepen a discussion failed:

> In your reflection on the incident when your comment stopped the discussion – I think that that is a perfect example of our school systems, which is manifesting itself even in the online space. As long as something looks nice and interesting, then all is fine. The moment you push for a deeper meaning or understanding, then people shy away. (C. Cassar, personal communication, 3 December 2013)

In 2012, in the course of developing new ways of working collaboratively, I created activities on the platform in which members were invited to moderate discussion threads with the support of the stewards of the community, who offer help and guidelines to achieve common goals. Through organised activities on the forum, we have achieved, as peers, a deeper level of understanding of teacher practice. In these spaces, we as participants are invited to change ourselves and create something new or different together. This has helped us develop the necessary positive conditions for active engagement in critical thinking.

During our co-operation, Branko Bognar provided a perspective that linked these necessary conditions to the aspect of creativity that is discussed in the introduction of this book:

> I consider that for long-term communication participants have to have clear vision of something they would like to create, and that is possible only if they are ready to learn and change themselves … You tried to discuss the important, critical issue, but it probably was not the aim of other participants, particularly teacher E. who just liked to present something she devised and get positive feedback. It seems that you spoiled the party although you did not want that … Yes, this could be difficult, but maybe it is a normal sequence of events in cooperation which is reduced to exchanging experiences and not creating something new …

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3. This section is narrated from the point of view of Pascale Mompoint-Gaillard.

However, I consider that challenging questions and incentives are good tests for any project or relationship. If our intentions overcome merely talking the talk and we would like to walk the walk then it is good practice to start with challenging and provocative questions or suggestions. In such way we preserve ourselves from unproductive, wasting-time activities and relationships. (B. Bognar, personal communication, 7 December 2013)

Figure 3: Action Research Room
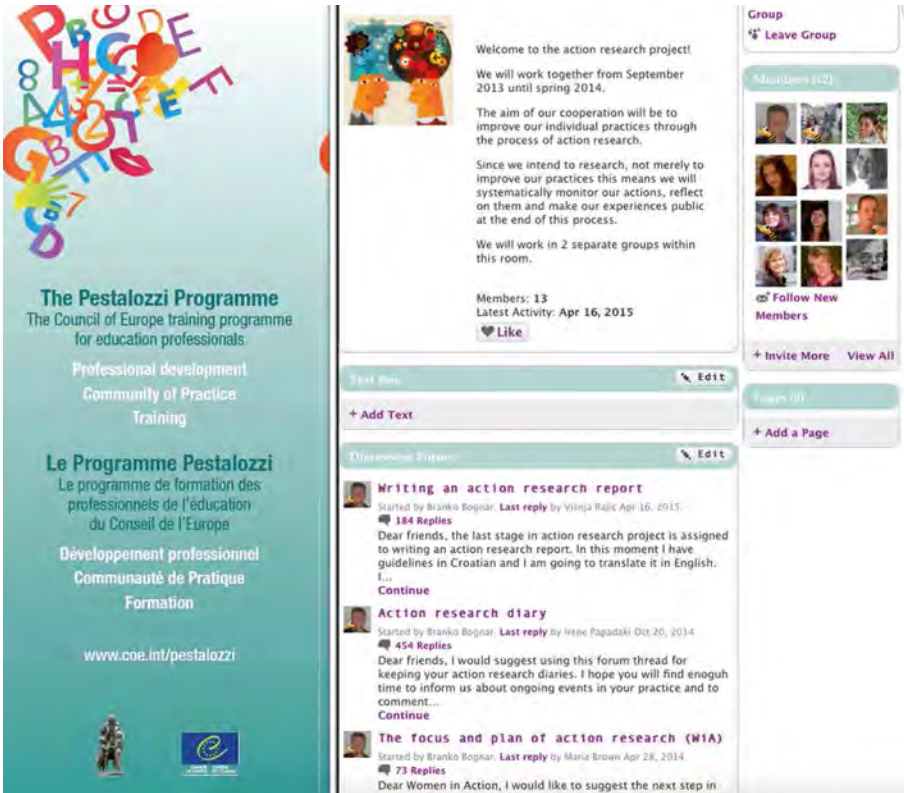
In this project, we were determined to provide the necessary conditions to create a community of practice of action researchers, with the aim of creating, changing and improving our practice. Participants were partly recruited from a Pestalozzi module for teacher educators, namely the "Social media for democratic participation" modules series. I presented the concept of action research during one of the sessions of the modules and participants who were interested were invited to an informal lunch to explain why they were interested, ask questions, and decide if the project suited them and their goals. Four participants signed up. I also invited colleagues from the Pestalozzi network – some of whom I had worked with in the past, and other members who in the past had been involved in, or had expressed their interest in, action research. Branko invited two of his colleagues, and I enlisted stewards of the Community of Practice as my "critical friends". Finally, the group was constituted. I then opened a discussion thread in the "Professional Development" room of the online platform. The Action Research Room had a space for comments (a wall) and

a forum with discussion threads (Figure 3). Documents, images, photos and videos were easily shareable.

Table 1: Draft plan for forming groups in the Pestalozzi action research project[4]

Group A	Group B
Višnja Rajić, Croatia (Croatian, English) **Work**: Higher education **Experiences**: Action research, teacher professional development **Action research focus**: Improving teaching practice in the course "Evaluation in primary education"	**N. N.**, United Kingdom (English) **Work**: Higher education **Experiences**: Action research, teacher professional development
Sanja Simel, Croatia (Croatian, English) **Work**: Higher education **Experiences**: Critical friendship **Action research focus**: Positive pedagogy in higher education	**Pascale Mompoint-Gaillard**, France (French, English) **Work**: Intercultural democratic education, non-formal education **Experiences**: Facilitating educational modules in Pestalozzi projects, e-learning **Action research focus**: Improving as a lead steward: facilitating educational activities with the stewards of the Pestalozzi Community of Practice
Anastasija Akulenko, Belarus (Russian, English) **Work**: Higher education **Experiences**: Qualitative methodology **Action research focus**: How to improve teaching practice in the course "Methodology" for second-year psychology students	**Claudia Lenz**, Norway (Norwegian, English, German) **Work**: Intercultural democratic education, non-formal education **Experiences**: Intercultural education, qualitative research **Action research focus**: The prevention of anti-Semitism and racism through strengthening democratic readiness in schools
Teresa Vladyko, Belarus (Russian, English) **Work**: Secondary education **Experiences**: Teacher professional development **Action research focus**: Teachers' professional development	**Thomas Krammer**, Austria (German, English) **Work**: Secondary education **Experiences**: Teaching economics and law **Action research focus**: Improving teaching practice by using modern technologies and social media in education

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4. Anastasija Akulenko, Maria Brown, Teresa Vladyko, Thomas Krammer and N. N. dropped out in the early stages of the project.

Group A	Group B
Irene Papadaki, Greece (Greek, English)	**V. I.**, Croatia (Croatian, English)
Work: Secondary education	**Work**: Higher education
Experiences: Teacher professional development	**Experiences**: English language teaching
Action research focus: Cultivating positive attitudes towards teachers and enhancing their self-respect and their creativity	
Maria Brown, Malta (Maltese, English)	**L. M.**, Germany (Russian, German, English)
Work: Secondary education	**Work**: Higher education
Experience: Academic writing and research, teacher professional development.	**Experiences**: Russian language teaching
Action research focus: Adult learning	
Branko Bognar, Croatia (Croatian, English)	
Work: Higher education; **Experiences:** Action research, e-learning	
Action research focus: Helping practitioners at the international level to become action researchers	

Participants were given a questionnaire that explored their motivation to be part of the project, their previous experience in the realisation of action research, critical friendship, e-learning and the use of the Internet and multimedia. Then, keeping each member's interests, context and language in mind, the group was divided in two:

> Dear friends, after fulfilling and submitting questionnaires it seems that our action research team will consist of 12 members. I still consider that this is a pretty big group for a permanent communication at the forum; therefore, I suggest dividing it in two roughly equal subgroups. I studied all information you posted at the forum and made the provisional proposal for assembling those subgroups. Group B consists of practitioners who are going to deal with IT in learning (Pascale, Thomas, V. and N. – I suppose). Pascale and Claudia work in non-formal education that could be also good starting point for their cooperation. I suggested L. to be a member of the Group B since she is foreign language teacher as well as V. and she speaks German as well as Thomas. However, maybe L. would feel better in Group A since she intends to work with higher education students as well as Višnja, Sanja and Anastasija. She also speaks Russian as well as Teresa and Anastasija. L., could you please choose the team you would like to belong to? In the Group A Teresa and Irene are interested in teacher professional development. Sanja and Irene have similar AR [action research] focus. Sanja and Višnja could well cooperate since they are from Croatia and they work in similar educational contexts.

> Please, let me know what you think about the suggested plan. Namely, this is not mandatory, but just a provisional proposal which could be adjusted after a discussion at this forum. (B. Bognar, personal communication, 10 June 2013)

After discussions about Branko's suggestions within the Action Research Room and a Skype meeting we agreed on establishing two action research teams (Table 1).

Branko started several discussion threads for the purpose of this project (presented chronologically below):

- ▶ naming Group A (participants: Anastasija, Irene, Maria, Sanja, Teresa, Višnja);
- ▶ naming Group B (participants: Claudia, N., L., Pascale, Thomas and V.);
- ▶ educational contexts and values (Group A);
- ▶ educational contexts and values (Group B);
- ▶ the focus and plan of action research (Group A);
- ▶ the focus and plan of action research (Group B);
- ▶ action research diary;
- ▶ writing an action research report;

All communications were conducted within these threads, participants posting their diaries and then their reports.

Methodology and action research plan

Action research aims to enable practitioners to take greater responsibility not only in realisation through practice, but also in monitoring, based on systematically collected data. However, it is important to point out that taking action and monitoring results does not imply just dealing with important issues that can contribute to achieving substantial changes in a practice. Substantial changes occur when participants take responsibility not only for the realisation of actions and the evaluation of outcomes, but also for devising their plan.

In this project, we have tried to encourage participants to determine the goals of their action research themselves, using autonomously selected values. In accordance with the goals set and the specifics of their professional context, practitioners were expected to create activities to enhance their practice. In so doing, they were not offered ready-made solutions but had to rely mostly on their own ideas, many of which demonstrated psychological creativity. Participants were however introduced to a variety of approaches to action research, and they were allowed to choose what best suited their values.

I (Branko)[5] took on the role of invitational leader, which was threefold:

- ▶ facilitating the communication of participants within the learning community;
- ▶ guiding the realisation of the agreed stages of the project;
- ▶ helping participants in the process of conducting action research.[6]

This assistance included:

- ▶ consulting participants regarding technical problems and issues that cropped up in the course of their action research projects;

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5. Since Branko, as invitational leader, was involved in all project activities and communication with all participants, the rest of the text is written from his point of view.
6. Participants in the Pestalozzi action research project had their own projects going on in their workplaces/schools.

- ▶ encouraging them to actively participate in the online platform in conducting research journals;
- ▶ self-critical analysis of their project activities on the basis of gathered data;
- ▶ encouraging participants to engage in friendly discussions with other members of the learning community;
- ▶ reading literature and writing and publishing action research accounts, etc.

The process of establishing our learning community corresponded with the process of conducting action research and it included communication about professional contexts, governing values, planning and conducting changes, and building critical friendships. Expected outcomes included significant changes, learning and writing reports with an aim to publish project results.

A particularly important aspect of our project was critical friendship. Our intention was to establish an online learning community of critical friends who mutually develop "reflective and learning capacity … in a supportive, cooperative manner" (Kember et al. 1997: 464). Such relationships require trust based on mutual understanding and help in conducting action research projects. Therefore, "a critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work" (Costa and Kallick 1993: 50).

In action research, critical reflection may be obtained on several levels: personal, institutional, intracultural and intercultural. On a personal level, we can try to reflect on our practice through writing a diary, analysing gathered data, etc. Institutional reflectivity means including critical friends who "know the researcher context well"; these critical friends "can help the researcher deal with the micro politics of work" (Lomax, Woodward and Parker 1996: 154). On an intracultural level, we are talking about an engagement with critical friends further afield, mostly within the national context (and speaking the same language) but living far from each other. In our case, participants were distant from each other's context, and worked in eight different countries and education systems. Our project worked at an intercultural level, since it occurred through engagement with critical friends from diverse national educational contexts and for whom English was a second or third language. The language used was English in most cases, with some subgroups occasionally conversing in Croatian or Russian.

We launched our co-operation under the presumption that action research is a systematic monitoring and publishing of action results, aimed at the improvement of one's practice (McNiff and Whitehead 2006). During the action research process researchers theorise, plan, monitor and critically reflect on the results of change (Cunningham 1993). The result of this action is reflected in changes of one's practice, but also in a theoretical understanding of the researched problems. Unlike some other approaches designed to achieve change (e.g. reflective practice), action research involves public debates and the publication of one's results (McNiff and Whitehead 2006). Action researchers primarily explore

their own practice, and other persons involved in these studies are considered co-researchers:

> This means that all those involved in the research are both co-researchers, who generate ideas about its focus, design and manage it, and draw conclusions from it; and also co-subjects, participating with awareness in the activity that is being researched. (Reason 1994: 41-2)

Action research presumes a philosophical consideration of educational values, creativity and a vision of new opportunities and challenges. These include active participation in the realisation of productive ideas, data gathering connected with processes of change, a self-critical consideration of results, and finding ways through which experiences arising from action research could become part of a culture of social communities (Figure 4). This understanding of the action research process helped us in devising and conducting the project as well as in writing this report.

Figure 4: Elements of our understanding of the action research process
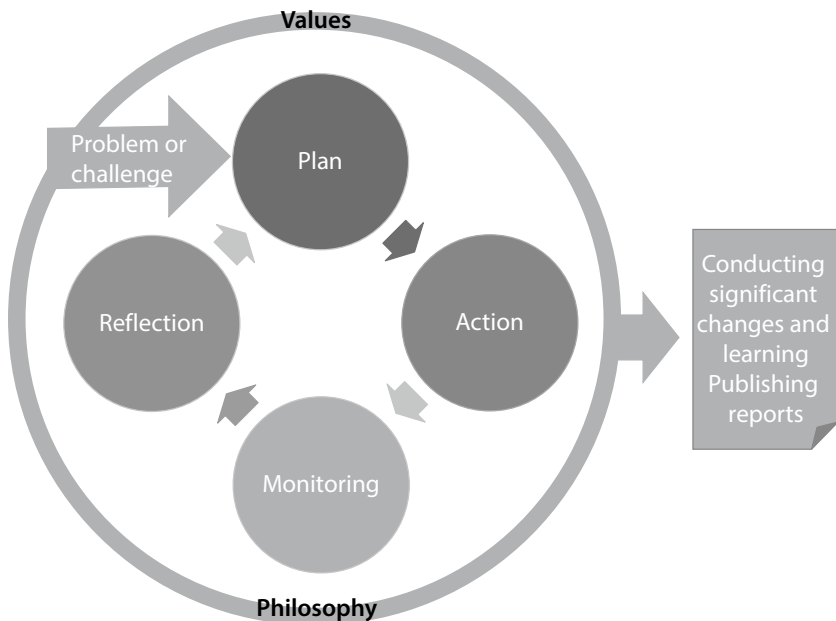
To become an action researcher, one has to possess the willingness to learn continually, plan changes, act creatively, self-critically question the results based on the data collected systematically, accept the risks involved, and focus on the needs of project participants. In addition, action researchers are expected to communicate with their critical friends, namely the members of the learning community, and to analyse and present the results of changes, that is publish them in the form of a report. It is important that practitioners improve their practice through action research, but also through theoretical understanding, which they base their professional activities on.

The project aimed primarily to establish an online community of practice, develop critical friendships, and conduct action research projects. For each aim, corresponding criteria were determined (Table 2).

Table 2: Action research aims and criteria

Aims	Criteria
Establishing an online community of practice	• Participants voluntarily joined the project • They actively participated in planned activities • They interacted with each other and not only with the facilitator • Learning was collaborative • Learning occurred through action and reflection • Learning was significant
Obtaining critical friendship at the intercultural level	• Participants were aware of the positive and negative influence of the wider social context in which they conducted their projects • They offered self-critical remarks about their own activities • Critical friendship was mostly a positive experience • Relationships were built on trust
Conducting action research projects	• Participants expressed a deeper understanding of their professional contexts and values • They made realistic action research plans which were oriented towards obtaining significant changes in their practice • While taking action, participants systematically gathered data and presented them on the forum • Significant changes were achieved • Action researchers wrote, validated and published their reports

We also specified matching activities to be conducted from September 2013 to Spring 2014 (Table 3).

Table 3: Time schedule of project activities

Activities	Date
Informing, assembling and familiarising team members	May, June
Initial education about action research	September
Describing and explaining professional contexts and values	September
Planning	October
Conducting planned activities	November, December, January
Reporting	February
Validation	March
Editing	April
Publishing	May

Most of the activities were accomplished through the forums on the Pestalozzi Programme online platform, the Action Research Room, but we also communicated via Skype conference calls, some of which have been recorded and used as a source of data. As a data source, we used research diaries written by the participants during the project as well as action research reports that several participants submitted.

In this book, we have included the "exact language used by participants to communicate the flavour and meaning of 'native' program language" (Patton 2002: 289). We also conducted questionnaires, at the launch of the process (Appendix) and for the evaluation of the project. Additionally, we tried to find out more about the activities, motivation, co-operation, support, learning and planning of the project participants. At the end of the project, we conducted an open standardised interview with several participants, asking them about the important activities and changes that they accomplished during the project, their learning, and the problems they detected. We discussed the reports on the action research project with those participants who decided to write one, and these served as data as well.

Action research process

At the beginning of September, we decided that I (Branko) would invite team members to engage in an "online icebreaker", during which they have to find a name for their team. For the first team Sanja Simel suggested the acronym WiA, which stood for Women in Action. Her team members Anastasija, Irene, Maria, Teresa and Višnja agreed.

In the second group Pascale, Thomas and Claudia discussed their choices:

> Pascale: I would like the name to reflect some of the values I hope our cooperation will embody: respect, authenticity, consciousness/mindfulness, empathy/kindness, sincerity, open-mindedness, love.
>
> R - A- C- E - S - O - L. Maybe this gives us a word or expression? I have one in mind ... but first, I would like to hear your ideas!
>
> Thomas: "CARE Love"?
>
> Pascale: Aha, I like that Thomas! There is also ORACLES ...) they don't convey the same idea.
>
> Claudia: I am not in the creative mood when it comes to a name for our group but ORACLES gives some very nice connotations to me. (Participants of the ORACLES group, personal communications, 12 to 16 September 2013)

Pascale concluded:

> So it is ORACLES then? Glad you like the name. Definitions of oracle include: held to respond when consulted, source of wise counsel, able to indicate future action ... That's quite suitable for us. (P. Mompoint-Gaillard, personal communication, 19 September 2013)

This activity could seem irrelevant, but was important for several reasons.

First, naming groups makes getting along and communication easier for their members. Although the teams had similar tasks, participants were able to locate the corresponding threads they were to communicate in relatively easily. Also for me, as the facilitator, it was easier to address particular teams instead of using the names of all the participants.

Second, it should contribute to a coming together, "giving a sense of identity and responsibility", and encourage collaboration (Pritchard and Woollard 2010: 64)

among team members. Namely, during selection of team names, participants should discuss what connects them and build it into the name of their team. It was particularly significant that the team ORACLES was named after the initial letters of values emphasised by Pascale. Such a process can contribute to a discussion about values important for action research, as well as for cultivating communities of practice:

> value is key to community life, because participation in most communities is voluntary … In fact, a key element of designing for value is to encourage community members to be explicit about the value of the community throughout its lifetime. Initially, the purpose of such discussion is more to raise awareness than collect data, since the impact of the community typically takes some time to be felt. (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder 2002: 59-60).

Finally, this activity partly indicated who, of the registered participants, had definitely decided to be a part of the project. The decision to initially include more participants than what was considered optimal appeared to be a wise one since it was expected that some individuals would drop out in subsequent activities.

Technically speaking, we had few problems. We easily discovered appropriate free web-based applications which allowed us to communicate, present and share documents. Although this technology did not always function flawlessly, it helped us attain our main objective – establishing a community of practice across eight countries.

We set an appointment for our first group video call through Skype:

> I would like to invite you to join me in Skype conference call on Monday (16 September) at 19:00 (Maria, Sanja, Višnja) and 20:00 (Anastasija, Irene and Teresa). Actually, this is the same time but we live in different time zones. Please let me know if this time is appropriate for you. (B. Bognar, personal communication, 11 September 2013)

Paying for a Skype Premium account in order to organise our group Skype meetings was our only expense during the implementation of this project.[7] It is possible to conclude that organising e-communities of practice does not require too many financial resources, but rather it requires good organisational and communication skills on the part of facilitators and motivated participants.

The organisation of synchronous meetings for participants living in different time zones appeared to be tricky. For this reason we started to use another free web application for polling (http://doodle.com), so each participant could register availability in accordance with her/his time zone. We also used Prezi (http://prezi.com/), a cloud-based, multi-platform application that allows users to create visually attractive and dynamic presentations, so as to provide the most important information about our action research.

Because we were intent on creating an e-learning community, and a safe learning space, it was particularly important that the reactions of participants be mostly positive:

> Teresa: Yesterday's conference was great!

> Just one little picture for smile (a moment of history)

> Sanja: Nice picture! I am also looking forward to our action, because – we are women in action!!

> Višnja: It was great seeing you all. I am looking forward to our cooperation and our action research.

---

7.   This service is free now.

Claudia: Thank you for the Skype meeting on Wednesday – it is very nice to know your "living" faces now and to know about your initial ideas and plans. This kind of direct interaction (despite the weak connection in the end) made this whole process more real for me.

V.I.: The Skype meeting with Branko, L. and Claudia was very pleasant and thought-provoking.

(Participants of Skype group calls, personal communications, September 2013)

Figure 5: Teresa's "selfie", taken during team WiA's first Skype call
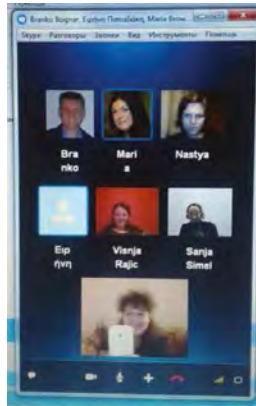
However, we noted some problems. It was clear the private and professional obligations of project participants made it difficult to communicate in this way. Therefore, we had an agreement to organise group Skype calls every other week, with timely information about appointments that were agreed on at the end of each conference call.

Introduction to action research

In September, I provided a short introduction about action research over Skype. Before those meetings participants wrote down their questions about action research on the Pestalozzi web forum. Through the Skype "share screen" option, I offered a Prezi presentation (http://goo.gl/Qs3zNA), and we also discussed important issues regarding this topic. Here I will summarise the presentation about action research that I made to project participants.

The term "action research" is often connected with psychologist Kurt Lewin (Carr and Kemmis 1986; Cunningham 1993; Mills 2000), who started his professional career in Germany, but had to emigrate to the USA in 1933 because of his Jewish origins. More recent literature (Neilsen 2006) cites John Collier as another originator of action research. Collier was a social reformer and Native American advocate responsible for leading the Bureau of Indian Affairs from 1933 to 1945. Lewin and Collier came up with the idea of action research almost at the same time, partly independently, and partly through the collaboration and friendship that they developed by the end of Lewin's life.

As an active promoter of Native American rights, Collier emphasised the necessity of allowing the native population to maintain and develop their culture. He suggested that this could be achieved through action research that "should be evoked by needs of action, should be integrative of many disciplines, should involve the administrator and layman, and should feed itself into action" (Collier 1947: 284). From the beginning he was aware that this kind of research is more demanding than conventional research:

> It requires of him [the researcher] a more advanced and many-sided training, and in addition, a kind of mind and personality which can sustain, in suspension, complex wholes and which can entertain – and be drawn and impelled by – human values and policy purposes while yet holding them disinterestedly far away. (Collier 1947: 284-5)

Lewin's scientific work and particularly his idea of action research developed under the strong influence of his personal experience of discrimination, terror and later genocide during the Holocaust (Lewin 1986: 41). Lewin, like Collier, considered that it is not enough for the academic community to explain social problems and provide general guidelines. It should actively engage in changing social forces that cause problems. According to Lewin, "comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, and research leading to social action" is a type of action research, and "[r]esearch that produces nothing but books will not suffice" (Lewin 1947: 150). Therefore, Lewin was interested in affirming action research, which could help those working for social change, and also provide a systematic evaluation of their actions, passing through spiral steps that include planning, action and reflection.

Lewin reached the idea of action research gradually. First, he engaged in solving problems in industry, at the Harwood Manufacturing Corporation in rural Virginia. Marrow notes:

> The factory management faced many critical problems in trying to train three hundred inexperienced apprentices – people from the Virginia mountains – to meet the high standards of the production of the industrialized areas of the North". (Marrow 1969: 141)

Lewin, with his collaborators, succeeded in improving production results by "discovering the effect of giving employees greater control over their output and an opportunity to participate in setting their own goals" (1969: 143).

Later, he obtained financial support to launch the Research Center for Group Dynamics, which was established at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge. This allowed him to deal with problems connected with the social position of minorities. Although the majority of the research he conducted could be considered experimental rather than action research, an unexpected event that occurred during an experiment conducted in June 1946 was decisive for the development of action research. Along with Ronald Lippitt, Leland Bradford and Kenneth Benne, Lewin had designed a two-week programme with the aim to help a group of 41 participants, mostly professional educators or social agency workers, to overcome various forms of bias.

Participants were divided in three subgroups. Each group had facilitators and observers who recorded all interactions among participants. Group facilitators strived to demonstrate the advantages of equal and open communication through discussions and role plays. After completing the workshop activities, members of the research

team gathered in the evening to comment on their observations and to evaluate the effectiveness of their research procedures. Activities for the participants had not been organised. Several of them were bored so they asked the researchers to allow them to attend their meeting. As Lippitt describes it:

> Sometime during the evening, an observer made some remarks about the behavior of one of the three persons who were sitting in – a woman trainee. She broke in to disagree with the observation and described it from her point of view. For a while there was quite an active dialogue between the research observer, the trainer, and the trainee about the interpretation of the event, with Kurt an active prober, obviously enjoying this different source of data that had to be coped with and integrated.

> At the end of the evening, the trainees asked if they could come back for the next meeting at which their behavior would be evaluated. Kurt, feeling that it had been a valuable contribution rather than an intrusion, enthusiastically agreed to their return. The next night at least half of the fifty or sixty participants were there as the result of the grapevine reporting of the activity by the three delegates. (Marrow 1969: 212)

Later, Lewin and his co-workers devised research to inquire about the impact of the daytime and evening sessions. Interviews and questionnaires showed that those who participated in educational activities, therapy and then had the opportunity to discuss the results of their learning became more sensitive and successful in diagnosing conflicts and misunderstandings in contrast to those who just participated in workshops (Waring 1991).

Lewin, encouraged by the positive results of this research, noted the possibilities for the broader application of this educational approach. He asked himself how he could overcome situations in which practitioners are not able to determine if they are improving in their job. He concluded that they lack feedback about the direction they are moving in and at what speed:

> In a field that lacks objective standards of achievement, no learning can take place. If we cannot judge whether an action has led forward or backward, if we have no criteria for evaluating the relation between effort and achievement, there is nothing to prevent us from making the wrong conclusions and to encourage the wrong work habits. Realistic fact-finding and evaluation is a prerequisite for any learning. (Lewin 1947: 150)

Lewin realised that action research could allow the establishment of "fact-finding procedures, social eyes and ears, right into social action bodies" (Lewin 1946: 38).

After Collier and Lewin published their ideas about action research, other authors tried to present it as a mainly methodological issue (Lippitt 1950) while the major role of democratic values was tacitly neglected. It is possible to explain this deviation from the original idea of action research through the unfavourable social circumstances brought about by the political and military tensions between the Eastern and Western blocs following the Second World War, which contributed to the politics of McCarthyism in the United States. Orientations towards democratic values, particularly critical attitudes towards social issues, can provoke undesirable consequences for scientists. In such circumstances many researchers tried to stay away from any critical rhetoric and social activism, keeping to methodological concerns (Kemmis 1993; Noffke 1994).

Even in such circumstances, action research was utilised in education. Stephen Corey was notable in this respect. Along with his co-workers at Teachers College,

Columbia University (New York), Corey initiated action research projects aimed at encouraging teachers to improve their practice. He pointed out that traditional research studies could help practitioners in achieving changes and their professional learning. However, these changes in practice:

> are more likely to occur if they are a consequence of inquiry in which the teacher has been involved and are based upon evidence he has helped to procure and interpret in his attempts to solve an instructional problem important to him … What is being emphasized, however, is that learning that changes behaviour substantially is most likely to result when a person himself tries to improve a situation that makes a difference to him. (Corey 1949: 9)

McNiff (2013) points out that after the initial enthusiasm for Corey's ideas:

> interest declined and action research began to lose momentum, being replaced by a post-Sputnik Research, Development and Diffusion model, a model much favoured in 1960s USA and Britain, which emphasised the separation of research and practice. (2013: 57-8)

Hollingsworth and Sockett (1994) consider that the action research movement stalled since the quality of their results was evaluated on the basis of conventional research criteria. Infrequent action research attempts soon ceased and only the idea of co-operation between teachers and researchers was retained.

At the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, in the United Kingdom, Lawrence Stenhouse ritualised the idea of "teacher-researcher". He tried to demystify and democratise research in education which, as it existed at that time, had not been able to initiate significant development of an understanding and improvement of educational practice. Stenhouse considered "it is not enough that teachers' work should be studied: they need to study themselves" (1975: 143). To achieve this, it is necessary that teachers take a more active research role, in other words self-critically inquire about their practice. He believed that classroom research could make improvements of practice possible, and that an accumulation of teachers' case studies could contribute to developing a general theory.

According to Stenhouse, the main obstacles in the realisation of this idea are teachers' illusions and habits, which have to be overcome. This could be done by inviting observers (e.g. other teachers or outsiders) to the classroom. Teachers can also analyse video or audio records and photos as a basis for triangulation (Stenhouse 1988).

Stenhouse suggested co-operation between professional research teams and teachers as the best way to conduct classroom research. As an example, he mentioned the Ford Teaching Project, organised and led by John Elliott and Clem Adelman:

> It ran as an action research project from Easter 1973 to Summer 1974, involving a central team based at the Centre for Applied Research in Education at the University of East Anglia and a group of forty East Anglican primary, middle and secondary school teachers committed to an attempt to implement Inquiry/Discovery methods in the classroom. (Maw 1976)

The aim of this project was to help teachers to improve their practice by using action research. Elliott and Adelman believed that teachers should take responsibility for action as well as for reflection. Hopkins (2008) considers that Stenhouse's theory and practice of curriculum and teaching, and the popularity and publicity enjoyed by the Ford Teaching Project, had considerable impact on the teacher research movement that eventually mushroomed.

Figure 6 (see below) is an illustration of the increasing interest in action research provided by the results of a search using Google Scholar – a freely accessible web search engine that specialises in scholarly literature. This can be corroborated with the results of Charles and Ward's paper:

> A search of the Web of Science provides a simple illustration of the exponential growth of the Action Research literature. Searching for "Action Research" produces a list of 106 publications for the period 1970-79, 148 for 1980-89, 691 for 1990-99 and 1137 for the 7-year period 2000-2006. (2007: 2)

Increased interest in action research contributes to its diversity which in turn, to a certain degree, makes its categorisation difficult. Habermas makes a distinction between knowledge and human interests:

> The approach of the empirical-analytic sciences incorporates a technical cognitive interest; that of the historical-hermeneutic sciences incorporates a practical one; and the approach of critically oriented sciences incorporates the emancipatory cognitive interest that, as we saw, was at the root of traditional theories. (Habermas 1992: 260)

Figure 6: Number of articles located by Google Scholar containing the key words "action research"
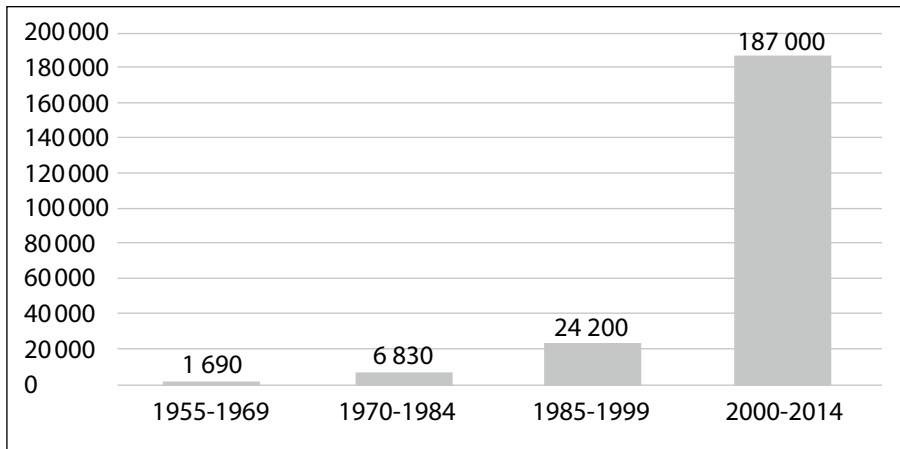
On the basis of those three interests Carr and Kemmis (1986) classified action research into technical, practical and emancipatory types. Zuber-Skerritt represented the main features of each type of action research in the following table:

Table 4: Types of action research and their main characteristics (Zuber-Skerritt 1996: 2-3)

Type of action research	Aims	Facilitator's role	Relationship between facilitator and participants
Technical	Effectiveness/efficiency of educational practice Professional development	Outside "expert"	Co-option (of practitioners who depend on facilitator)

Practical	As above	Socratic role, encouraging participation and self-reflection	Co-operation (process consultancy)
	Practitioners' understanding		
	Transformation of their consciousness		
Emancipatory	As above	Process moderator (responsibility shared equally by participants)	Collaboration
	Participants' emancipa-tion from the dictates of tradition, self-deception, coercion		
	Their critique of bureaucratic systematisation		
	Transformation of the organisation and of the educational system		

Technical action research occurs when someone in a hierarchically organised edu-cation system motivates teachers to apply ready-made changes to their practice. Here, teachers do not determine aims, and do not even decide on the activities to be undertaken. They simply participate in the realisation of what other people have devised and are merely involved in monitoring results. Although such research could contribute to changing practice, they put the practitioner in the position of a clerk who just implements someone else's ideas in her/his own practice.

In practical action research practitioners are able to find the most appropriate ways to achieve educational aims. In doing so they develop their professional artistry. They strive to act more reflectively in taking account of those involved and affected by their practice. The changes that are realised in this type of research are primarily related to the improvement of the professional skills of practitioners, as well as meet-ing the needs of users, rather than the transformation of the institutional context in which they are realised.

In emancipatory action research[8] practitioners collaboratively make decisions concerning significant changes in their professional context:

> What is to be transformed in critical participatory action research is not only activities and their immediate outcomes (as in technical action research) or the persons and (self-) understandings of the practitioners and others involved in and affected by a practice (as is the case in practical action research) but the social formation in which the practice occurs – the discourses that orient and inform it, the things that are done (doings), and the patterns of social relationships between those involved and affected (relatings). Thinking of these social formations as practice architectures allows us to think of them as made by people, and thus as open to be re-made by people. (Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon 2014: 16-17)

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8. For this type of action research terms like "critical participatory action research" (Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon 2014), "political action research" (Tripp 2005) and "critical action research" (Kincheloe 1997) are used in the literature.

Adhering to the co-operative character of emancipatory action research, participants establish a self-reflective community in which everyone is equal. Action researchers in this form of research autonomously take over the responsibility for creating the world they live in, understanding that it can only be done by them. In doing so they are aware that they have limited time at their disposal. They inherit everything that their predecessors have left behind, but not with the aim to perpetuate this heritage. Rather, they seek to develop and transform it in a new and qualitatively different world. Therefore, the creativity of previous generations is not an end but actually a starting point and a means for new creativity that finds its purpose and criteria in autonomously determined values. Acting in accordance with autonomously postulated values, action researchers self-critically inquire about the results obtained as well as the values they are based on. To do so, it is important to collect and analyse data systematically and adjust or change activities according to the findings, while understanding the values that give purpose to the activities.

Action research cannot really be categorised at the outset since it can change in the course of its being conducted. Tripp points out that technical, practical and emancipatory approaches represent different modes rather than different kinds of action research projects. Practitioners could start their action research project in one mode, and end it in another:

> For example, a teacher might begin in a technical mode, implementing a published project that their Principal thinks is a better way in which to teach spelling. In doing so, the teacher comes up against the constraint of time and decides to get more help in the classroom. To do that they have to act politically, and having achieved that they return to the technical business of making the project work in their classroom. When planning their next lesson, they suddenly have a great idea of their own, and in designing, trying and evaluating it, they find they are engaged in a practical mode of action research. And in that cycle they feel it would be good to include the learners in designing and implementing the changes, so it becomes participatory and more democratic, and hence socially critical. So a project is not usually one particular mode, but different cycles will tend to have different modes. (Tripp 2005: 456)

Although I prefer the critical-emancipatory mode, I was aware that it is not easy to conduct if practitioners haven't previously developed professional autonomy, that is if they are not emancipated persons. Certainly, the fact that the participants came from the Pestalozzi community, and therefore had been previously engaged in autonomous learning, participatory activities and emancipatory practices, made a critical-emancipatory mode more feasible. However, this choice is determined to a considerable extent by the practitioner's position in the professional context as well as by competencies which (s)he has developed during her/his educational and professional practice. This is connected to a question that Sanja posed:

> What can we do if we don't have the support for conducting action research at our workplace? (S. Simel, personal communication, 13 September 2013)

Indeed, it is possible that unfavourable social and institutional circumstances inhibit practitioners in achieving significant changes, and in conducting action research. It is hard to imagine a group of emancipated action researchers under a totalitarian regime. However, in democracies the issue lies not so much in social and institutional preconditions, it is much more connected with someone's willingness to take responsibility for initiating a process of change, and therefore to be ready to start with herself/himself. As Wiesel suggests:

But where was I to start? The world is so vast. I shall start with the country I know best, my own. But my country is so very large. I had better start with my town. But my town, too, is large. I had best start with my street. No: my home. No: my family. Never mind, I shall start with myself. (Wiesel 1982: 135)

I explained to participants my understanding of the basic features of action research based on the modern concept of practice, the essence of which is creativity; it is a values-based, collaborative and participatory, self-critical process of conducting and researching significant changes in professional or/and private contexts. I also explained the main steps in action research in reply to one of Anastasija's questions.

The first explanation of action research steps originates from Lewin (Figure 7), who stated that action research starts with a relatively vague "idea" which has to be elaborated to make up a "general plan" which is to precede action: "(i) The objective has to be clarified; (ii) The path to the goal and the available means have to be determined; (iii) A strategy of action has to be developed" (Lewin 1947: 147). The process of planning requires carrying out preliminary research of a current situation, which could help detect problems and determine aims. This plan should be flexible to be effective. Lewin felt that only the first step should be clearly determined, while the others should depend on results achieved in the previous steps. Therefore, each action researcher identifies results and makes decisions about the next step in accordance with them. The process could be compared to driving – the driver observes road conditions and on the basis of her/his observations continuously modifies the vehicle's movement. Making decisions and acting based on realistic fact-finding and evaluation is a prerequisite for successfully dealing with social problems and learning (Lewin 1946).

Figure 7: Phases of action research process (Lewin 1947: 149)
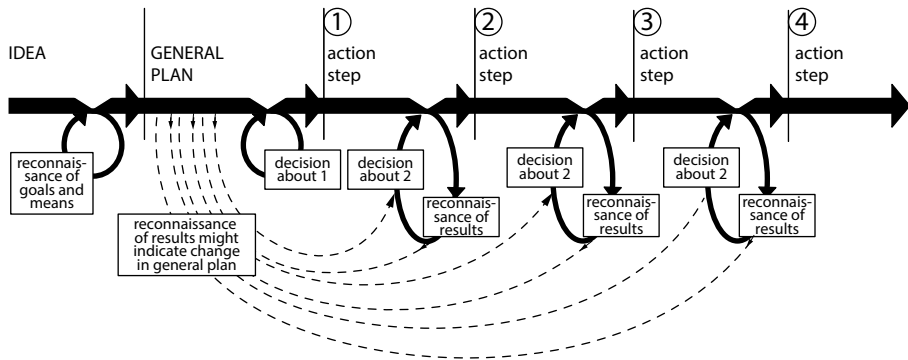
After action research began to be used more intensively in the 1970s and 1980s, Lewin's idea about the stages of action research was accepted and presented mainly in the form of a spiral modification of steps involving planning, acting, observing, reflecting, re-planning, etc. (Hopkins 1985). However, it was soon realised that strictly following action research phases could have a negative impact on the practitioner's creativity. Namely, in real-life situations, it is very often necessary to change our direction of action in order to adequately respond to the challenges we face in our practice. In this way, it is possible to start from one problem and end dealing with another problem that appears to be more important for our practice. For this reason McNiff (2013) suggested a new visual metaphor – an iterative spiral of spirals.

Such an understanding of action research is in accordance with our approach, which is based on creativity as the main trait of the modern concept of practice. Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon (2014) also feel that the action research process in reality is "more fluid, open and responsive":

> For critical participatory action research, the criterion of success is not whether participants have followed the steps faithfully, but whether they have a strong and authentic sense of development and evolution in their *practices*, their *understandings* of their practices, and the *situations* in which they practice. (Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon 2014: 18-19)

One may conclude that contemporary approaches to action research avoid rigidly prescribing certain phases, in order to allow for the creativity of practitioners. This does not mean that action researchers should not devise action research models, which could (visually) present their project plans. However, those models should not serve, even in the practice of individual researchers, as universal patterns. They should serve to help the organisation and implementation of particular action research projects. For each case, it is advisable to devise a model that best suits the specific conditions. In so doing, it is possible and appropriate to take previous experiences into account, but not to the extent of using the same model over and over.

Sanja, one of the participants, asked about the criteria for assessing the quality of action research, and how it is connected with the changes aimed at through the action research: "What happens if we do not succeed to make changes we wanted?" (S. Simel, personal communication, 13 September 2013). It is true that in general, action research is about conducting significant changes in practice. However, it rarely happens that all planned changes are achieved, especially in short-term projects conducted by novice action researchers. In short, the quality of action research can be assessed by assessing the quality of the practice and the quality of the action research report. In determining the quality of informed actions, creativity and critical reflection play an important role.

Very often, practitioners conduct particular measures, which are the result of habits or the imitation of the practices of others rather than well-informed action. This can lead to certain results, but the first serious critical examination reveals all its flaws. Brookfield (2006: 25) considers that informed actions should meet three conditions.

- ▶ "First, it can be explained and justified to ourselves and others." So it is not enough that practitioners are able to perform certain activities. They have to state the reasons why they do what they do, and explain the theoretical assumptions they base their actions on.
- ▶ "Second, it is researched." Although we start action research with the intention to research the process of achieving planned improvements, this does not mean that everything we intend to do is new and has not been researched. Very often, planned changes have already been inquired about by researchers.
- ▶ If we are informed enough about the results of previous research studies our action has "a good chance of achieving the consequences it intends, precisely because it has been researched."

If action research were to be reduced only to informed action, then it would constitute technical or practical research that aims to check existing solutions or improve participants' understanding of their own practice. Action research is emancipatory

when it aims at significant changes that participants have devised by themselves. This presumes a creative engagement of practitioners, the most valuable part of any action research. In addition, it often happens that creatively devised activities prove to be the most suitable for the specific conditions and problems action researchers face.

"Critical reflection" implies a systematic endeavour on the part of researchers to question the results and conditions of their actions. Instead of adopting a defensive attitude, wherein a practitioner presents her/his practice as perfect, it is important to raise awareness that one can and should always strive to become better. Critical reflection means not resting on one's laurels, but being ready to improve, and also creating the conditions for new approaches when there is a need for them.

A fully-fledged action researcher must also be able to write an action research report. There is no general agreement on how it should be done. Again, universal formats are not advisable. As any professional situation is specific and requires the under-standing and creativity of practitioners who intend to improve it, writing a report is also a creative process in which practitioners should show what they have achieved and what they learned in the process of improving their practice.

Anastasija was interested in finding out about how to engage her students as co-researchers. I consider as completely right her presupposition that engaging in reflective educational practice can be the main goal of action research. Namely, action research is not research on, but with, people who "engage together to explore some significant aspect of their lives, to understand it better and to transform their action so as to meet their purposes more fully" (Reason 1994: 1). Students could participate in teachers' action research projects as critical friends (Bognar and Bungić 2014). It is possible that they will take on a more active role and become fully-fledged action researchers (Bognar and Zovko 2008).

It is significant that Anastasija asked about ready-made techniques. This shows that novice action researchers sometimes expect guidelines on how to improve their practice and how to conduct research (e.g. Teresa asked about questionnaires which she and other members of her group could use to appraise the initial situation). It is always possible and advisable to provide suggestions and examples, particu-larly of published action research reports, so practitioners can begin the process of change and learning. Nevertheless, it is important to be aware that offering suggestions that are too specific may lead to a technical type of action research, which was not my intention. For this reason, I suggested to the practitioners in this project that they should read the literature, and I sent them examples of published action research accounts. At the same time, I tried to encourage them to devise their own ideas on how to achieve and document significant changes in their professional contexts.

Finally, Maria brought up an ethical issue regarding her research:

> In order to carry out research in schools in Malta I need to get ethics clearance from the education division. Is it the same in your countries? (M. Brown, personal communication, 17 September 2013)

Attention was drawn to ethical issues in science after it was established that science is not neutral in its values; it is used not only for the development of humanity but also to increase control over individuals, and even countries and regions, with the

aim of increasing the social power of those who fund, support and use such research. Ethical principles and codes have been introduced to protect rights, particularly of those who are the object of scientific research. Hammersley and Traianou (2012) describe the following ethical principles in educational research.

- ▶ Minimising harm, for the people being studied as well as others. Harm could be financial, reputational, etc.
- ▶ Respecting autonomy, in the sense of allowing people to decide for themselves, "notably about whether or not they want to participate". This principle also implies avoiding any kind of deception.
- ▶ Protecting privacy, by keeping data confidential and respecting the anonymity of all informants mentioned in a research report.
- ▶ Offering reciprocity, by offering those being asked to co-operate in the research something in return.
- ▶ Treating people equitably, by ensuring "that the various individuals and groups that a researcher comes into contact with in the course of research should be treated equally." No one should be "unjustly favoured or discriminated against."

These principles could be supplemented with informed consent, which makes decision making possible and respects autonomy. Finally, "ensuring that data are accurate is a cardinal principle in social science codes as well" (Christians 2005: 145).

However, it would be wrong to consider those principles as universal and indisputable since they primarily refer to traditional research, which makes a strong distinction between researchers and those being researched. In action research this division disappears due to the active involvement of all participants, not merely in planning and conducting activities but also in researching the whole process of carrying out change. Action researchers, united in a community of self-conscious and autonomous persons, take responsibility for changing practice. This cannot be reduced to the mere following of ethical principles, particularly codes enacted at an institutional level:

> Moreover, there may need to be resistance against attempts to impose excessive ethical or practical requirements that make it impossible to carry out research effectively, for example as a result of institutional forms of ethical regulation. (Hammersley and Traianou 2012)

It is important that participants of action research discuss all key aspects of the research and establish caring and trusting relationships. It is also important to be ready to deal with conflicts and misunderstandings in a peaceful and mutually beneficial way. If action research is conducted in this way, the need for extensive ethical principles that have to be strictly followed diminishes. Because participation is voluntary, Denzin notes, subjects do not need "to sign forms indicating that their consent is 'informed'". Further, confidentiality is not an issue, "for there is nothing to hide or protect". Participants are not subjected to pre-approved procedures, but "acting together, researchers and subjects work to produce change in the world". (Denzin, in Christians 2005: 145)

If it is necessary in a particular professional context to obtain formal permissions for conducting the research, as was the case with Maria, then the action researchers should try to do so with the awareness that inviting and involving other stakeholders in planning and conducting significant changes is the most important precondition for the success of action research.

My presentation to the participants covered everything that has been mentioned in this section. I also advised them to read additional literature, while making it clear that it is not possible to learn how to conduct action research simply by studying the literature. It is possible to become an action researcher only by dealing with action research in our own practice.

Participants' professional contexts and values

At the end of September we started a new phase of collaboration that was connected with representing our personal contexts and values. I clarified to participants the main purpose of explaining the research context and values for their action research projects:

> Each action research should be improving a practice. This means that we and our critical friends need to understand well our current conditions and values on which we ground our practice. Description and explanation of our contexts should be based upon gathered data. We could use different data resources (questionnaires, research diary, field notes, interviews, etc.). Actually, the most appropriate way is using multiple data resources. However, for education, videos are particularly important. (B. Bognar, personal communication, 26 September 2013)

The idea of using multimedia technologies such as video and audiotape recordings as an important way of gathering data is recommended by McNiff and Whitehead, who consider that:

> developments in the use of multimedia technologies are setting new precedents, because visual narratives can often communicate the actions involved in the action research better than words on a page. Often it is impossible to capture the full significance of actions and events through purely verbal reports. (2010: 44)

Therefore, I suggested that each participant present her/his own educational context by using some data resources, including multimedia. Also, I asked them to explain their values, which:

> are not just words that sound nice, but they represent our educational philosophy and each philosophy represents a systematic and consistent way of thinking. Therefore, values could be our goals which we use to give our lives their particular form (Whitehead 1989), but those goals should be clearly defined and mutually tuned if we would like to form something meaningful. Certainly, for those who do not have experience in philosophy and research, dealing with action research could sound tricky. Fortunately, action research is process of learning and learning implies improving our way of understanding and dealing with some aspects of our practice. This is a process, not a final result. Therefore, we do not need to show immediately the highest level of skillfulness in any aspect of action research although we could and should develop our research, theoretical, and creative abilities. (B. Bognar, personal communication, 26 September 2013)

For the process of activist learning, it is important to start dealing with what we would like to learn. In the process of learning, it is important to have the freedom to ask questions and to make mistakes. Therefore, I encouraged participants to freely pose any question and to not be afraid of mistakes. Maria asked about the approximate length of the text expected for this task. I answered:

> Dear Maria, I do not understand this activity as a task or homework, but as the beginning of our conversation about important issues related to our practices. Therefore, I would not try to give any instruction about length of that you intend to write and present.

> It is important that you and your critical friends understand the personal and social conditions of your work. (B. Bognar, personal communication, 28 September 2013)

I tried to avoid reducing this and other action research steps to mere tasks that should meet formal criteria. The main aim was to engage in communication which could result in a critical reflection about our own practice as well as better mutual understanding of the specific conditions in which participants were to conduct their own action research projects.

I also suggested reading several examples of action research reports. From the correspondence it was not clear whether all participants did so. However, Teresa mentioned reading materials about action research:

> But thanks to unexpected rest I have an additional opportunity to work on my presentation and to read more materials about action research. But the more I read the more questions appeared. And they help me to rethink many things connected with my life and work. (T. Vladyko, personal communication, 7 October 2013)

In the above comment it is possible to note the positive impact of reading on Teresa's thinking. Therefore, reading the literature on action research should be a constituent part of action research. Neglecting this important activity can reduce the whole process to superficial discussions and activities, which probably will not contribute to achieving significant changes in practice. To encourage the participant action researchers, I decided to write down fairly thorough answers in which I included quotations and references from relevant resources, particularly those that are available on the Internet. Some of my responses were embedded in other participants' texts. Here is an excerpt from my correspondence with Teresa:

> Dear Branko and our team,

> Why do I want to improve or change something for better in my work and in work of my colleagues thanks to action research?

> First of all because I am not satisfied with it and try to find all possible variants to brighten it. But the most difficult thing in my work with the teachers (some of them) at this time – is to help them to overcome their formal attitude in their work. Many times I tried to inspire and motivate them.

> And all seemed to be OK at that time. But then in some days everything went back. And those teachers told me all the time: why are you trying to improve something? We do our work as we can. If it is not interesting for the children, what can we do? Nothing …

> My opinion: If teacher's lessons or class hours are not interesting for children – it is not children's problem. It means that the teacher does not understand or doesn't want to understand that it is high time for him to change something in his work.

> With the development of informational technologies children run too fast to the future, but many teachers still remain in the last century ….

> Dear Teresa, I like your introduction about teachers' responsibilities in achieving a quality teaching. You are right; sometimes teachers see their job as a routine procedure which they have to carry out and about which results they do not need to worry about too much. Actually, some of them perceive themselves as clerks who perform highly routinized tasks with relatively little autonomy. Without autonomy/freedom there is no spontaneity and even if we participate in the process of change it is not effective:

While innovations in teaching methods and professional development usefully concentrate on cooperation and collaboration as a focus for improvement, they often do so in ways that are contrived and controlled – making safe simulations of cooperation and collaboration from which the dangers of spontaneity, sensuality and creativity have been removed. Cooperative learning strategies among students, and mentor systems or peer coaching systems among

teachers exemplify how desire can be denuded or deadened when feelings and emotions are subject to administrative control. (Hargreaves 1994: 13)

> Therefore, the situation which you mentioned points out that teachers probably do not feel enough creative and empowered to participate in the process of change autonomously. While teachers experience themselves as merely the victim not the subject of change, these efforts won't produce any significant improvement in their practice. Maybe you and teachers with who you collaborate could discuss your sense of autonomy along with desired changes which you would like to achieve. It is also important to bring to sense obstacles and fears which could hinder you in those attempts. (T. Vladyko and B. Bognar, personal communication, 9 and 11 October 2013)

Teresa expressed gratitude for my response, declaring that "notes have turned them to real dialogue, interesting and supporting" (T. Vladyko, personal communication, 11 October 2013). In fact, almost all participants reacted positively to my thoroughly elaborated comments. This indicates that for novice action researchers, such individually adjusted professional correspondence, which turns into a dialogue, is of greater significance than a lonely reading of recommended literature.

Certainly, this requires time, commitment and a certain level of professionalism on the part of a facilitator. It is also important to avoid turning such correspondence into a kind of technical action research wherein participants implement ready-made changes in their practice and obediently follow all the facilitator's suggestions. Rather, the role of facilitator should be Socratic and emancipatory. This means that a facilitator can initiate insightful discussions and pose challenging questions, but (s)he never should pretend to have all the answers or take on the responsibility of resolving the problems of others. Action researchers should be aware that they have to take personal responsibility for conducting significant changes in their own practice.

Two factors enabled the open and educational correspondence of project participants. First, we created a private forum that was available only to those who agreed to participate in the project. In this way a certain level of privacy was ensured, which is important for creating a safe web-based community of practice. Within this private space, each of the two teams used their own forum, and these were not completely separate; the participants of one group could read and even respond on the forum of the other group, thus enriching collaboration and participation in the project.

Another factor was connected with my detailed, participant-oriented responses, which incited critically reflective thinking even in those participants who still were not entirely ready for it. For example, Anastasija and Maria wrote about their usual teaching practices within the education institutions they worked in. Anastasija wrote that her working conditions were quite normal, "connected with the traditional type of lecturing in the university". She expressed concern that it was "very difficult to make something ordinary explicit" (A. Akulenko, personal communication, 7 October 2013). I responded:

> The fact that something is usual does not mean it cannot and should not be changed. The problem emerges when we accept this "ordinary" situation as something that should be. That what we perceive as normal could be connected with wider social conditions in which we live and work. Action research, particularly critical action research, tries to expose all those unquestioned, hidden agendas which we consider normal and usual with aim to create more productive ways of living. (B. Bognar, personal communication, 8 October 2013)

Maria described in detail the educational context of the secondary school where she is a regular teacher. I told her of my impression that her school offers a wide variety of educational options to students. I was interested to find out more about the students of this school:

> Do you have some data about their social background? Do you have any feedback from them how they are satisfied with the quality of education in the school? According to included photos it seems that they enjoy in a wide variety of formal, informal and non-formal activities. However, is there something they do not like or could be better in this school? I am asking those questions since you wrote:

> I place high value on participatory action research (Lykes and Mallona 2008). It is argued that when action research is also participatory it becomes endowed with liberatory and transformational potential (ibid.). In line with the aims of this action research study, traditionally, participatory action research targets amplification of knowledge by means of local transformation supported by social activism struggling for increased social justice, often through collaboration with external agents (ibid.). In other words, participatory action research is "a resource at the interface of radical humanism and structural transformation" (2008: 109). (M. Brown and B. Bognar, personal communication, 13 and 14 October 2013)

Maria responded that she could not elaborate on the students' positions since it was not the main focus of her research. Although she was not officially responsible for the professional development of teachers in her school, she put emphasis on this aspect of her practice since she felt it was neglected. Therefore, she was interested in formulating a draft policy in collaboration with stakeholders that would do justice to the status and professional development of teachers in her school. I sent her a quotation from the corresponding literature and encouraged her to think critically about the wider situation in her school since she had expressed an intention to base her action research on local transformation, supported by social activism. Marie expressed her happiness with my response:

> Wow, many thanks for your support and insights. I will certainly go into the suggested literature and work on some reflection. (M. Brown, personal communication, 19 October 2013)

I consider that discussions within the community of practice, particularly at the beginning of action research, should encourage novice action researchers to think self-critically about their practice with the aim to:

> transcend the challenges of particular situations and to recognize and name latent opportunities for growth that situations might hold. Teachers' knowledge communities support shifts in personal and collective perspectives that would be impossible to achieve through individual reflection alone. In knowledge communities, the scholarship of reflective teaching is nurtured. (Craig and Olson 2002: 117)

It would be excellent if all members could contribute to establishing a reflective community, but this would hardly be spontaneous in a group of novice action researchers. Therefore, I had to take on the role of "challenger", which was not always easy. Sometimes it seemed that I walked on the edge, asking provocative questions that could have caused discontent in participants who might not have been completely accustomed to and ready to adopt a self-critical stance. It is important to note that the participants of this action research project, if not experienced in action research itself, were all nevertheless experienced in peer-learning, critical friendship and co-operative learning, through the Pestalozzi Programme and elsewhere. This knowledge rendered us (Branko and Pascale) confident that the potential for success

in creating a community of action researchers was strong. Nevertheless, readiness to accept self-critical, self-examining stances is hard work and is always a challenge. The risk of provoking participants was reasonable since without critical reflection, action research can be reduced to a superficial and imprudent attempt, ending with only cosmetic changes. Fortunately, nobody resented my challenging questions and if there was some discomfort it was temporary and mostly cleared up in due course.

In our forum correspondence, we discussed the following topics regarding professional contexts and values:

- ▶ participants described the social and professional circumstances in which their practice takes place;

- ▶ they tried to describe and explain their professional duties – how they usually do a job, whom they work with, and who the other participants of their action research projects are;

- ▶ they also wrote about values (freedom, democracy, emancipation, dignity, tolerance, respect, empathy, co-operation, dialogue, creativity, critical thinking, autonomy, responsibility, care, etc.), and why their values are important for their practice.

Starting from declared values, most took a self-critical stance towards the social conditions and professional practices that helped them define research problems and potential solutions. Some participants discussed values with the participants of their action research projects. For instance, Teresa asked members of her action research team about their values, but they were unable to define them:

> The next step was that I asked them to think about their values, their goals or aims, their vision of their teaching in future and if their values as teachers have or not have much in common with their values as persons or individuals and so on … After some days I asked them for the permission to make the video of their speaking. They agreed. Analyzing these videos I saw some problems: it was not easy for all of them to define their values, to understand what is difficult for them in their teaching (it seems to me that they consider themselves to be ideal teachers), to see the ways of developing their students. All of them said that they want to educate their students as good people. But nobody could describe what does it mean "to be good people" in our days. (T. Vladyko, personal communication, 9 October 2013)

I emphasised the importance of Teresa's attempt to talk with teachers about their values and tried to explain why they may have been unable to describe their values:

> Some teachers do not think about values since they do not see themselves as autonomous professionals who could take responsibility for creating a practice which will be different to the way they were trained and habituated to do their job. To start thinking about values is the first and probably the most important step in teachers' professionalization. (B. Bognar, personal communication, 11 October 2013)

In our later correspondence I explained that values are not merely words that express our noble intentions. They represent our deeper philosophy of education. If we would like to be the creators of our lives, we should first take responsibility for our values, and then for the way we fulfil them in our living circumstances. If not, someone else (e.g. the authorities, social elites, corporations, or social, political and economic centres of power) will impose their ideology on us and exploit us for their aims, mostly presented as universal, natural, normal, desirable, noble, etc. Overcoming

this control over values and their fulfilment requires courage and learning along with the mutual support of teachers who are participants in communities of practices.

In order to describe their professional contexts and determine research problems, participants used questionnaires, photos and videos, and wrote their stories on the web forum. Pascale included a video presentation of the Pestalozzi online community of practice (http://youtu.be/PDUK_-uFqxg) and Thomas presented his professional context using only a video (http://youtu.be/-2pkAJ38chg).

Anastasija expressed concern about using videos before sharing common goals with her students, since she believed that "it would make them objects of the research, not active participants". I responded by saying that videos are not the only kind of data, and neither are they mandatory, although I consider that they could significantly contribute to an understanding of educational practice. I encouraged her and other participants to use any source of data they counted as appropriate to describe and explain their professional conditions.

In representing their professional contexts, ultimately, participants mostly relied on narration. Our virtual community of practice became like safe "storytelling places where educators narrate the rawness of their experiences, negotiate meaning, and authorize their own and others' interpretations of situations" (Craig and Olson 2002: 116). This was an important achievement since participants felt free to tell their professional stories, pose questions and discuss each action research step. This is confirmed by Teresa's comment:

> My dear team, I think that we all are the source of information and knowledge to each other and thanks to our regular meetings we can discuss our practical steps in our action research, it is very useful and helpful personally for me and I hope for everybody in our team. And I think that it is the only possible way for me to work with my school team of action research as we work in our WiA group. And as I told during our Skype meeting I closely connect in my mind the ways of improving my professional development (and I hope my school AR team) with Pestalozzi ideas. (T. Vladyko, personal communication, 9 October 2013)

Action research planning

After describing and explaining professional contexts and educational values the next step was to devise a plan of action research. On October 19, I set up a new forum discussion and posted guidelines for it. I suggested reading the relevant sections of Mario Gavran's paper (2009: 298-301), which describe his intention to promote child-oriented education, with an emphasis on democratic relations, independence and creativity of pupils. From the video and presentation of previous practice included in his paper it is clear that teacher Mario successfully fulfilled those values, but he wanted to improve this aspect of his practice anyway. It is not necessary to start a project from the negative aspects of practice, that is from problems, organisational ineffectiveness, incongruity and inconsistency (Argyris and Schön 1978) or from living contradictions (Whitehead 1989). It is possible to choose something we do well but that we still want to improve. Accordingly, it is more appropriate to define an action research challenge rather than a problem.

However, sometimes it may make sense to begin with an unsatisfactory aspect. I have tried to provide an example of this in my 2013 paper (Bognar 2013), in which I presented my own efforts to improve teachers' professional development in the

primary school context. I was not satisfied with the way in which this important aspect of teacher practice was organised so decided to tackle it. Therefore, when we notice a gap between our values and current practice then it is appropriate to define an action research problem or challenge and move towards changing practice.

I suggested that each participant define an action research focus/problem/challenge according to the values they believe in, and would thus like to fulfil through their practice. Since action research consists of two parallel processes – action and research – this means they needed to plan how they intended to improve certain aspects of their practice, and plan to research the process of change. I advised carrying out the following activities: reviewing the literature; establishing a community of critical friends; and finding creative solutions.

Reviewing the literature

The Internet is the starting point for locating appropriate resources to be included in a literature review. Craig considers that such a review is critical for the following reasons:

– To establish a connection between previously conducted studies and the focus of the action research study
– To connect the expertise of the practitioner to experts in the field
– To make a strong case that the study is needed
– To provide background information for people in decision-making positions. (Craig 2009: 57)

Although each participant read something that was related to the topic of her/his action research, only from the chapter about a positive orientation to education and critical friendship included in the second part of this book was an exhaustive reading of literature prior to starting this action research project apparent. Other participants read literature while they were conducting their action research projects, although not so extensively, due to their busy schedules. The following excerpt from Irene's diary confirms this:

I gave them [teachers] a 10-12 page paper to read, beyond what I said them about AR, in Greek language and I asked them to observe and write down and observe behaviours among students that destroy the class climate and the next time to discuss it
…
When I called them to ensure the time of our meeting, some of them told me that they will come as we have agreed but that they have not a lot of available time to be engaged in more things than their usual ones. (I. Papadaki, personal communication, 10 November 2013)

Reading literature was my whole-hearted recommendation, but it never was a demand.

Establishing a community of critical friends

I pointed out the importance of finding critical friends and agreeing on collaboration during the project. In action research, in which it is mostly practitioners as insiders who help each other in the realisation of their projects, critical friendship is seen as a contextual activity in which two or more researchers co-operate to achieve shared values. Campbell, McNamara and Gilroy (2004) consider that talking is the main mode of conducting a critical friendship but they also emphasise the import-ance of new technologies such as e-mail, video conferencing, websites and chat rooms, for future exchange and dialogue. To encourage a reflective approach in the

participants' action research projects I proposed developing critical friendships on personal, institutional, intracultural and intercultural levels.

Most participants established communities of critical friends in their professional context who communicated face-to-face. Some used the Internet for their correspondence. Sanja established a community of critical friends, comprising three students who attended her classes and agreed to participate in her action research on the Moodle forum (see the chapter "Positive orientation to education and critical friendship"). Irene established a reflective community of practice which consisted of five secondary school teachers who agreed to have regular meetings for four hours a month. They gathered in the afternoon after their lessons, in a school (see the chapter entitled "Becoming a reflective community of practice").

The main features of all established communities of practice were voluntary engagement with their members and invitational leadership. Voluntary participation was confirmed with the following excerpt from a communication on the Pestalozzi forum:

> It is obvious to me that not all of them [teachers] but some of them may change their opinions about it [participation] since I have talked about commitment but at the same time we do that freely, I mean by our own free will and not obligatory since it is well known that there exists the paradox of change: the pressure to change prevents change! (I. Papadaki, 10 November 2013)

Purkey and Siegel (2002) point out that an invitational leader is a person "who is guided by an exciting and specific dream and who enrols others in his or her vision." However, in our project this was not the case. Namely, most project participants who invited their colleagues or students to participate in their action research as critical friends and/or members of communities of practice did not have a clear vision of what they planned to do:

> Dear Branko, thanks a lot for your reply. Yes, you understood very well that teachers of my AR group did not have a clear idea WHY, WHAT and HOW to improve their practice, but I think that this problem was partially connected with me, as I myself do not understand clearly and so didn't explain them correctly that they have to concretize the vision of their actions for improving their practice and that these actions I could include into my plan. (T. Vladyko, personal communication, 10 November 2013)

Action researchers who were enthusiastic to start a process of change and learning were able to initiate and organise small groups of practitioners willing to accept the challenge of professional learning. It is possible to conclude that a specific vision is less important for the invitational leadership. Success depends more on a leader's enthusiasm. Fullan (2001) considers that energetic-enthusiastic-hopeful leaders are very effective in helping teachers to cope with the process of change:

> effective leaders make people feel that even the most difficult problems can be tackled productively. They are always hopeful – conveying a sense of optimism and an attitude of never giving up in the pursuit of highly valued goals. Their enthusiasm and confidence (not certainty) are, in a word, infectious, and they are infectiously effective. (Fullan 2001: 7)

The enthusiasm of practitioners and leaders represents fuel in the engine of change. However, action research is not an easy approach and it requires fairly high professional competencies. The problem is that action researchers, particularly when they are novices, often have not developed all the necessary competencies and the only way to develop them is through the process of learning oriented to change, in other words, by doing action research. Therefore, a willingness to learn and change

is key to successfully launching an action research venture. I tried to explain this in my response to Teresa:

> Your hesitation is understandable and normal in the situation when you are in position to help other people to do something and you still do not know enough about it. In the same time this is an excellent position since you are also learner and in that way you could better understand your colleagues – their doubts, emotions, problems, etc. From my experience, knowledge is less important in the process of change. The most important is willingness to learn. Certainly, in this process you will make mistakes but this is rather opportunity for learning than a serious problem. Since you are in the situation that you do something for the first time and you do not have any previous primers and literature in your context it makes your effort even more valuable and important. (B. Bognar, personal communication, 13 November 2013)

Established communities of practice share a basic structure which, according to Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002), consists of three fundamental elements: domain, community and practice. The main domain for all communities in our project was education in various professional contexts (formal and non-formal) and at various levels (primary, secondary and higher education). Although the participants of those groups already belonged to the same professional contexts, they were not members of communities. To be a community, the necessary preconditions are "interactions and relationships based on mutual respect and trust. It encourages a willingness to share ideas, expose one's ignorance, ask difficult questions, and listen carefully" (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder 2002: 28). These were mostly present in the communities that were established by project participants and it even became a focus of some action research:

> My concern after two years into the role of lead steward is to move from star-shaped interactions (stewards speaking to me and me redistributing to all) to a multidirectional as well as concentric community in which a core group communicates laterally on an ongoing basis, and where members of the periphery join in on certain occasions, moving to the centre or to the periphery following their interests and availability. For this I envision improving my practice as lead steward. (P. Mompoint-Gaillard, personal communication, 28 November 2013)

And finally, there needs to be a practice:

> The first characteristic of practice as the source of coherence of a community is the mutual engagement of participants. Practice does not exist in the abstract. It exists because people are engaged in actions whose meanings they negotiate with one another … Practice resides in a community of people and the relations of mutual engagement by which they can do whatever they do. (Wenger 1998: 73)

Finding creative solutions

Very often, practice presumes common ways of doing things according to shared standards. In this way practice is oriented to known procedures. But practice could be oriented to the future and it could support innovations (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder 2002); this is particularly important for our approach to action research. The action research we would like to promote does not mean implementation of ready-made solutions but is based on finding creative solutions. This is not always an easy task. It requires releasing and developing personal creative characteristics as well as establishing co-operative environments. The solutions that participants devised in their action research plans could be considered psychologically creative. However,

Boden's (2004) distinction between psychological and historical creativity may be too sharp since it does not recognise intermediate stages. Namely, in our project most ideas were creative at a psychological, personal level, but some were novel at institutional, local and even national levels. For example, Višnja was the first in her faculty who invited students to take on the role of a critical friend. Teresa pointed out that she and Anastasija might have been the first educators in Belarus to initiate action research. Sanja was the first in Croatia to introduce a positive orientation to education as part of an obligatory subject, pedagogy. Therefore, creativity ranged from psychological to historical with several intermediate levels: institutional, local and national.

In an action research plan, it is advisable to define aims (what you intend to do); activities (how you intend to achieve those aims); criteria (how you can recognise that specified aims have been achieved); data (how you can prove that criteria have been fulfilled); and a time-plan (when you intend to conduct planned activities). It is good to explain all aspects of the plan, but additionally it may be presented in the form of a table, Gantt diagram, mind map, or in some other creative form (e.g. drawing, collage, photo collage, Prezi presentation, YouTube video). Project participants mostly followed the suggested structure in their plans, and some used tables and diagrams to present their plans.

All plans were tentative. This was appropriate since in the initial stage of an action research project it is not necessary to make detailed plans. Lewin (1947) considered it important:

> that such a plan be not too much frozen. To be effective, plans should be "flexible." The flexibility of plans requires the following pattern of procedure: Accepting a plan does not mean that all further steps are fixed by a final decision; only in regard to the first step should the decision be final. After the first action is carried out, the second step should not follow automatically. Instead it should be investigated whether the effect of the first action was actually what was expected. (Lewin 1947: 148)

Irene expressed her satisfaction with the opportunity to be flexible in planning:

> That I like most is the flexibility which is spread in the text [guidelines] Branko sent us. (I. Papadaki, personal communication, 20 October 2013)

After completing their tentative action research plans, I encouraged participants to elaborate on them as they went along, through action and our communication on the Pestalozzi platform and at Skype meetings. By analysing practitioners' plans, it was possible to provide recommendations to avoid the problems noted.

Some plans were too complex and demanding, particularly for novice action researchers. Therefore, I suggested narrowing the scope of research. I explained why in my response to Claudia:

> Narrowing a research scope does not mean dealing with trivial/technical aspects of our practice. On the contrary it means putting emphasis on the most important issues which are closely connected with our values. (B. Bognar, personal communication, 25 November 2013)

This enabled practitioners to set achievable aims, for which it was possible to organise activities and, later on, collect data. This is in accordance with McNiff's (2013) suggestion to stay small and focused: "It is important to focus on one aspect only; this should be something you can do something about" (2013: 92).

Almost all action researchers focused on improving practices they were responsible for. However, some participants put emphasis on improving aspects that were out of the scope of their normal practice. Although their plans were well developed, it later transpired that due to their other professional and personal duties, they were not completely feasible. It was therefore recommended to plan improvements in practices for which they were directly responsible, unless they were willing to take the extra time and effort needed.

Planning is a phase of action research that can be confusing for less experienced action researchers. Thus, the role of more experienced researchers, critical friends and members of the learning community can be very helpful, as it was in our project. Planning may be best carried out collaboratively, although each action researcher bore responsibility for her/his own action research plan:

> After receiving your answer I had a moment of hesitation if I have enough energy to help them to understand importance of AR and all our actions. Because I understand my responsibility before my school group of AR … And at the moment of my hesitation G. (one of teachers in my team) came into my room and said that she wanted to speak with me about her AR, her ideas about her plan. I was really happy! And then I've decided to speak with all the women from my group individually … During Saturday I spoke with M. and N. B. On Monday I'll meet with N. S. and after that we'll all meet as usual on Tuesday and will discuss their ideas of plans all together. During these individual meetings I told them about my plan of AR, gave some examples of focus of AR in WiA. (T. Vladyko, 10 November 2013)

Any research is based on gathering and analysing data and this is valid for action research too. In our case most researchers had previous experience in conducting research, so I did not consider it necessary to coach participants on how to gather data in action research. I only suggested triangulation, the key element of which is "the use of multiple research methods and perspectives for data collection and analysis" (Check and Schutt 2011: 261). Participants mostly envisaged multiple data sources in their plans, though later it was seen that some had not taken care to ensure systematic data gathering and analysis. This suggests it is advisable at the outset to organise sessions on the systematic monitoring of different aspects of the research process. Particularly effective is blended learning,[9] which is already in place for teacher trainer modules within the Pestalozzi Programme.

Monitoring involves collecting and analysing data with ongoing critical reflection. McNiff and Whitehead consider that "possibly the best way of monitoring how you are developing the capacity for self-reflection is by keeping a learning journal" (2010: 145). This was the reason that we put special emphasis on the next phase of the project, in which participants recorded their experiences on the web forum of the Pestalozzi platform and kept research diaries. These diaries were open to comments from all project participants. Thus we tried to conduct monitoring as a collaborative activity within our virtual community of practice.

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9. Blended learning "represents an opportunity to integrate the innovative and technological advances offered by online learning with the interaction and participation offered in the best of traditional learning" (Thorne 2003: 16).

Conducting planned activities

Before starting this phase of the project I noticed the problem of unbalanced activity in the two teams. In the team ORACLES just three of six members had developed their plans and there were just 11 participant posts on their forum, compared to 42 on WiA's forum. Claudia noted, "it has been quite silent here in the ORACLES discussion" (C. Lenz, personal communication, 22 November 2013). She later explained the problem in more detail in the evaluation questionnaire she completed in January 2014:

> I think that the sub-group in which I was placed in the beginning of the project (ORACLES) never really developed a vivid co-operation, most likely due to an overload of working obligations on the part of some of its members. Compared to the other group (WiA) I feel that I have missed the "starting help" and motivating energy which is generated by actively following other people's progress. I feel, that my interaction in the first period has mainly taken place with Branko – with the exception of the Skype meetings, which were interesting and motivating. (C. Lenz, personal communication, 8 January 2014)

I was aware that lack of communication in either team could lead to discouragement and diminished participation even among those members who were eager to conduct their action research projects. Therefore, we agreed to establish just one action research team, consisting of eight participants, with myself as facilitator. This continued until the end of the project. A single forum thread was used to record the action research diaries.

I suggested making diary entries in narrative form at least once a week, incorporating different types of data (e.g. photos, videos, interviews, the results of questionnaires or evaluation sheets, the comments and suggestions of critical friends, students and other action research participants at a contextual or cultural level). By suggesting gathering and presenting data from different sources, I intended to point out the importance of triangulation – the effort to overcome biases in action research by using different methods, sources and perspectives in the analysis of and reflection on data (Patton 2002), as presented in an action research diary. McNiff and Whitehead (2010: 156) consider that a diary can be used to:

- ▶ make a timeline;
- ▶ illustrate general points;
- ▶ chart the progress of your action research;
- ▶ interrogate your own thinking.

Our intention was not to keep diaries in the same way as lonely action researchers who use a pencil-and-paper approach, or digital documents, which they write for themselves. Our diaries were kept in dialogical form on the Pestalozzi platform. We tried to stimulate participants' reflexivity through communication with critical friends at an intercultural level.

Since problems play an important role in learning, I expressed the belief that the members of our team would represent the whole process of success and failure. In this, "particularly important are 'thick' descriptions that show the complexities of a situation rather than 'thin' descriptions that present the situation as unproblematic" (McNiff and Whitehead 2010: 156).

At the beginning of our discussion Pascale faced the following ethical dilemma:

> As I am working on the plan and diary I realise I am in a bit of an ethical dilemma here. It feels strange to me to talk about people who are not present and can't know what I'm saying. In general how do you all deal with the feeling that you are talking about people without them being completely aware of what you are saying about them, or their practice or opinions, views, etc.? (P. Mompoint-Gaillard, personal communication, 28 November 2013)

Responding to this question, I pointed out that action research is a co-operative and inclusive process in which other people are not objects, but subjects or co-researchers:

> Therefore, it is advisable to inform and include other people in all aspects of your research: planning, implementation of planned activities (action), gathering data and reflection. Certainly, this is still your action research, but it is important that other people could be actively involved in the whole process, particularly when an action you conduct is your shared practice. It could even happen that some of them would like to publish their independent action research accounts. (B. Bognar, personal communication, 28 November 2013)

As a solution, Pascale asked the stewards for consent to be named, and for the content of their discussions to be published; she also proposed to share her diaries with them on an ongoing basis, in the private space on the platform.

An important precondition for creating a community of practice is interaction among its members. At the beginning we were overwhelmed with large numbers of posts on the forum that participants were not able to read and comment on:

> I would like to be paired or trio-ed here. I'm just thinking that I don't have time to review 7 people's work but would gladly spend time for one or 2 … What should I do? How do we go about it together? (P. Mompoint-Gaillard, personal communication, 28 November 2013).

> In response to Pascale, who writes that she would be interested in being paired or trio-ed, I would like to do so, too, ideally being three. I very much enjoy and learn a lot by reading all the documentation of the AR processes in this discussion. But to be honest, I do not think that I can engage in a systematic exchange with more than two. Which should not prevent me from commenting the other's work or to develop the feeling of being a part of an action research community. (C. Lenz, personal communication, 2 December 2013)

We discussed this suggestion during a Skype meeting and formed three "trios" of critical friends. In assembling teams we took care to look for similarities among the members of those groups (the topics of their action research projects, fields of their practice, language, etc.). One trio were Teresa, Irene and Maria, who worked with teachers in their professional contexts. Anastasija, Sanja and Višnja, who worked in higher education, constituted a second trio. Claudia, Pascale and Thomas made up the third trio. Teresa and Irene expressed their satisfaction:

> I think that it was a good idea to connect us into pairs [trios] for analysing and commenting our AR. The first thing that we have in common (and not only this one) – we work with teachers and I think that we could be very helpful to each other. (T. Vladyko, personal communication, 9 December 2013)

> Yes, indeed, it was a good idea to be peers as we both are working with teachers. It will be a pleasure and fruitful experience for both, I believe. (I. Papadaki, personal communication, 10 December 2013)

In order to check whether establishing critical-friend trios contributed to changes in communication on the forum "Action research diary", I analysed discussions in

two equal consecutive periods that lasted from 15 November (when this forum was established) till 6 December (when the critical-friend trios started to function) and from 7 to 28 December. From Table 5 it is seen that although the overall number of messages posted on the forum did not increase significantly, establishing smaller groups contributed to a rise of posts in which the members of trios referred to each other.

Table 5: Changes in communication on the forum "Action research diary" after creating critical friends' trios

	15 November to 6 December	7 December to 28 December
Communication with Branko	10	12
Communication with other participants	6	13
Communication with the whole group	17	12
Total	33	37

Although assembling trios of critical friends contributed to a higher frequency of communication among participants my activity was still the most prominent (Figure 8 below) until the end of the project. It is possible to specify at least three reasons why this happened and even was necessary.

Figure 8: Number of messages that participants posted on the forum "Action research diary" from November 15 to December 28
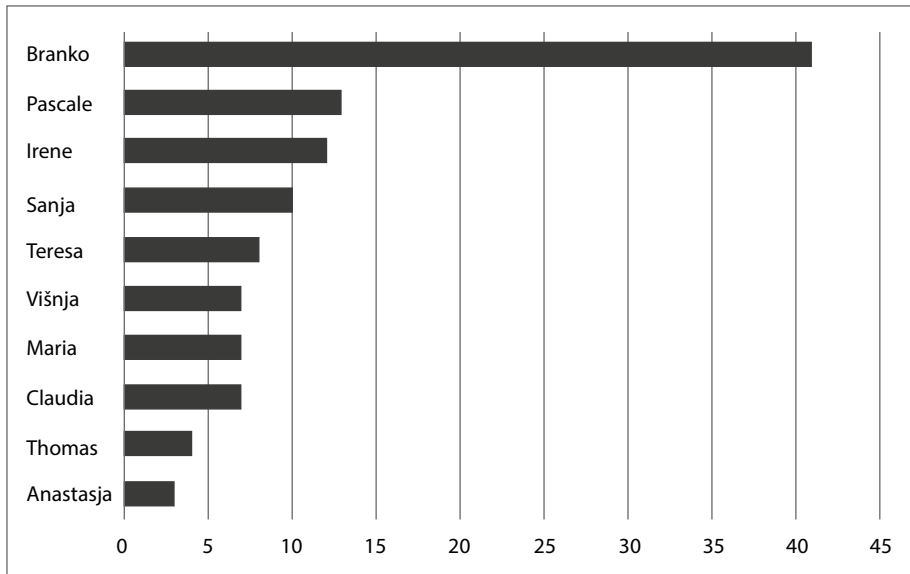
First, conducting action research requires a fair amount of effort and time on the part of practitioners. Hence, interactions among participants were relatively infrequent,

with long delays. However, they could count on my quick and detailed responses, which encouraged them to be active. Combining the interactions among participants and my responses, each team member got plenty of comments for anything they wrote on the forum. This created a feeling of togetherness and the experience of multiple voices participating in dialogue:

> Dear friends, thank you very much for your comments on my essay. I've read them all at once in Višnja's document and it was a great experience of multiple voices participating in the dialogue. It also made me feel being a part of something great, almost like history creating: being part of a very clever team sharing our ideas to make something significant. (A. Akulenko, personal communication, 25 January 2014)

Second, very often participants needed specific answers about the action research process and related topics and my previous experiences and knowledge about this field were helpful for them:

> Dear Branko, thank you for the comments and references defining critical friendship and the way in which this helps to cope with (if not even enjoy!?!?) the fuzziness of all the issues we desire to understand and still only access as bits and pieces …

> I appreciate your hint, that my interpretation of the fierce critique of the researcher-mother might have been more "personal" than it was intended. Maybe she is completely uninterested in our professionality, just reproducing the rigidity of the positivistic research paradigm. (C. Lenz, personal communication, 29 January 2014)

Finally, the main aim of my action research was to help other members of the team conduct their own action research projects. This required continuous monitoring of their activity and consulting them regarding the issues they faced.

In fact, one may conclude that such projects can hardly be realised without the engagement of experienced action researchers who are ready to help their novice colleagues in their efforts to take on the complex role of an action researcher. Probably the main reason why this fruitful research approach is still insufficiently represented in professional education programmes is the lack of initiatives that provide constant support to participants while they conduct their action research projects.

Considering the importance of the team leader, it is important to determine the main qualities that distinguish an effective one. Hackman (2005) points out four personal qualities:

> First, effective leaders know some things … If a team leader does not already know what it takes to foster team effectiveness, he or she can readily learn it. Second, effective leaders know how to do some things – they have skill both in extracting from the complexity of performance situations those themes that are consequential for team performance and in taking actions to narrow the gap between a team's present reality and what could and should be ... Effective team leaders have sufficient emotional maturity to deal competently with the demands of the leadership role. Leading a team is an emotionally challenging undertaking, especially in dealing with anxieties – both one's own and those of others … Finally, team leaders need a good measure of personal courage. Leadership involves moving a system from where it is now to some other, better place. That means that the leader must operate at the margins of what members presently like and want rather than at the center of the collective consensus. (Hackman 2005: 136-7)

Moreover, in our project, it became apparent that the facilitator should look after each participant regardless of her/his engagement and success:

On this, I may say how impressed I have been by Branko's moderation of the AR online space. He avoids, as a general rule that he does not take lightly it seems, to choose: he responds to everything. His choice not to choose is an important option in terms of

limiting such biases that create rewards and punishments in everyday moderation of online discussions. (P. Mompoint-Gaillard, personal communication, 9 March 2014)

In addition, the relaxing and witty atmosphere of our communication played an important role in my leadership of the team. This was supplemented by using poems, music, videos, cartoons, photos and photomontages. Thus, I sent a Christmas card as a collage that consisted of participants' photos. By using an online photo editing application I added funny hats on each head (Figure 9 below), and this brought out positive reactions from all the participants:

> Wow!! What a surprise!!! Thank you, chief Santa. (I. Papadaki, personal communication, 23 December 2013)

> Hohoho Branko, it is such a nice surprise this morning while having my coffee, thank you for your gift! May I share it in the coffee shop to send all the Pestalozzi members a cheerful Merry Christmas and happy New Year? (P. Mompoint-Gaillard, personal communication, 24 December 2013)

Figure 9: Christmas greeting card made of participants' photos with funny hats

Pestalozzi action research Santas

Creating a positive group atmosphere and trusting relationships probably represents the most important precondition for successful learning, particularly that which is based on principles of constructivist and activist theories. Pascale expressed the opinion that developing good relationships, particularly among critical friends, is more important than even professionalism:

> As a facilitator, I particularly hold dear this step in the learning partnership, when we develop a relationship in order to construct new knowledge collaboratively, with learners, around a concrete task (action plan), I find this reflective loop among critical friends an important motivational factor too and notice that when the relationship is "good enough" then practitioners "do their homework".

> I think these moments when I engage in constructive but critical feedback on educational action plans, when done in grace and love (even more than professionalism), are those

where I learn the most about learning. (P. Mompoint-Gaillard, personal communication, 22 January 2013)

We created friendly and trusting relationships; this may be confirmed by the numerous comments of project participants. This even led to the idea of writing a book about becoming an online reflexive community:

> We are getting in the mood … It is this process of reflexive inspiration in this group I meant when I suggested that we should write a text about be(com)ing a reflexive community online in our envisioned publication. (C. Lenz, personal communication, 27 January 2014)

However, it would be wrong to consider that creating good relationships is enough for initiating significant changes. For this it is necessary to be ready to take risks and deal with the anxieties that manifest themselves as a result:

> In my 1st entry I spoke about the risk I was taking. I can say today that it was well worth it and that although I did feel on edge there were clear benefits for the process of our work in the team. (P. Mompoint-Gaillard, personal communication, 22 December 2013)

> Feeling that something we intend to do implies risk is the best sign that we are on the road of action research. To follow well-known procedures particularly those which other people told us to do could be less risky way, but in such way we cannot change and learn too much. (B. Bognar, personal communication, 28 December 2013)

With constant support and trusting relationships coping with risk becomes less difficult. This is confirmed by a comment by Charlot Cassar, one of the stewards for the Pestalozzi Community of Practice and a participant in Pascale's action research project:

> I think Branko touches on a very important element in his reaction to your comments – that is the fact that you were able to take such a risk because of the level of trust within the group. I am not sure I have ever experienced this same level outside Pestalozzi and more specifically outside the stewards' group (I keep saying stewards rock). I feel almost totally safe within this group and I have no problem to go along with any suggestion because of this and the level of trust. (C. Cassar, personal communication, March 2014)

Creating supportive conditions for change presumes a continuous balance between a relaxing, witty and friendly atmosphere and the anxiety that appears when taking a risk. In this balancing the danger of going to extremes always exists. If a relaxing mood prevails throughout, then our co-operation may be reduced to sheer entertainment. On the other hand, too much anxiety could cause burnout and withdrawal from further activity.

Action research is an emotional process. In our case it started with mainly positive emotions from most participants:

> I am having much more fun at work since I've started researching, I don't know about you? (P. Mompoint-Gaillard, personal communication, 6 December 2013).

As the project developed, problems started to appear along with negative emotions, about which participants wrote openly:

> I still feel that I am far from steering my firm research process along a secure road. I rather feel that I maneuver an unknown vehicle while I pave the way I am going for each step of my AR.

> I depend on many people and many conditions that I do not control (the overall development of Dembra, the group dynamic in the project group, will my critical friends stay with me, will I manage to generate valid data?) That makes me feel very insecure. (C. Lenz, personal communication, 9 January 9 2014)

This opportunity to openly express her problems helped Claudia transform them into something unique and valuable:

> In fact, I know these feelings of "losing control" from previous research processes (in which the danger from deviating from a detailed and pre-defined research plan was a real threat) and I have learned a lot from experiencing that these moments often are the beginning of something really new and surprising breaking through. Still, I feel, that having a reflective community that gives the kind of affirmation we all receive (and give) here in this AR project makes a REAL difference. It is not "close your eyes and just get through it" but "open your eyes, right now something unique and valuable happens." (C. Lenz, personal communication, 9 January 2014)

After achieving changes, positive emotions of gratitude, joy and pride prevailed again:

> I would also like to share with all one very emotional moment I just had with my class in one other group (that is not part of research). The team (students) gave themselves name "Non-creative ones." Today, they had to imagine one class of history that was oriented on positive capabilities of students. I gave them some directions, but they were given freedom to create best class ever. I will just say that team "Non-creative ones" was the most creative, they had so many ideas that they asked me if they can create three different classes ... I just asked them to remind me about the name of their team. They said "Non-creative ones." When they said it and realized why I asked them that question, they were glowing of pride! They realized they are actually super-creative! Nothing can describe that moment and emotions I felt. (S. Simel, personal communication, 8 January 2014)

To carry out planned changes action researchers need to self-critically monitor the results of their actions and take into account the suggestions of critical friends. In doing so it is important to have some kind of written communication. The advantages of written communication in carrying on a critical friendship in comparison with Skype communication were as follows

- ▶ Only a few people actively participated during Skype communication.
- ▶ Participants better expressed their thoughts without being interrupted and disturbed by other people.
- ▶ Written communications were more elaborated and focused on the topic of discussion.
- ▶ Participants better informed themselves and took more time for thinking about the topic of discussion.
- ▶ In written communication it was easier to refer to someone else since everything was noted and could be easily checked.
- ▶ In such conversation everything was preserved and could be used anytime when it was necessary and for different purposes (reminding, quoting, data gathering and analysing, reporting).

This was the reason that written communication represented a foundation of our project. Nevertheless, verbal communication also has some advantages. While written communication contributed to learning, spoken communication was more beneficial for developing friendly relationship in critical friendship:

> This is also very interesting for me because my impression of you I gained through our Skype meetings is that you are very professional and smart, but there was often a smile on your face so you instantly had my sympathy. (S. Simel, personal communication, 10 January 2014)

Whatever mode of communication we use, dealing with problems is often painful and requires a high level of maturity, as Pascale demonstrated in her action research. Namely, she shared with us a video of an activity in which she had responded to a participant in a joking manner. In her diary she tried to grasp the reasons behind her behaviour:

> Am I using humour to cover up a manipulation? An authoritarian stance? If so, is it ok to do that? (P. Mompoint-Gaillard, personal communication, 22 December 2013)

I responded to Pascale that from the personal point of view it is not easy to cope with such issues and a productive way of dealing with it should avoid at least three potential lapses.

The first of these is self-laceration which, according to Brookfield, implies a belief that we ourselves are the cause of all emotions, automatically inferring that we are also the solution (1995: 24). Things are more complex and to understand them deeply it is important to stand back and try to see the bigger picture. We are important, but we are not omnipotent in either a positive or negative sense.

Suppression is another lapse. Sometimes action researchers avoid facing unpleasant situations although they could be very important for their practice. Earlier, I had read a published action research account in which a very important event was presented as mere fact in a completely unproblematic way. Later I found out that this situation was, at the very least, a difficult one, and as such deserved to be self-critically examined. It was clear that the authors had covered up the problem. This begged the question: "What else was concealed, and can I believe in this story at all?" By contrast, Pascale openly presented her problem and in that way avoided the lapse of suppression. I feel that facing up to such unpleasant issues contributes to the credibility of action research and its quality.

It is also advisable to avoid rationalisation (making excuses), as it represents:

> an explanation of one's own motives and behavior which has been selected from among many possible explanations, because it enhances and defends the individual's self-structure. When something happens that we find difficult to accept, then we will make up a logical reason why it has happened. The target of rationalization is usually something that we have done, such as being unkind to another person. (Lall and Sharma 2009: 241)

It is very important to be aware that our behaviour is complex and cannot be easily explained, even if we are well meaning. Sometimes we do things that contradict our values and it is important to understand why this happens. However, it is not always easy to raise awareness of our living contradictions (Whitehead 1989) and publicly confess them. It requires inner strength to accept one's own imperfections.

This is why I consider action research to be a kind of therapy, wherein each of us can face and overcome our own weaknesses. It is also important to be aware of social pathology, which very often causes our individual problems. Action research, with its emphasis on our own choices and actions, represents a liberating and therapeutic process.

In spite of efforts to achieve significant changes in practice it is challenging to conduct action research in a hierarchical and bureaucratic social and institutional context. If action researchers have to ask for permission for each activity they want

to conduct and if they need to wait for their superiors to give them permission, then their freedom is uncertain. But even more important is that action researchers not adopt an authoritarian approach, since this would bring into question the main principles of action research. Maria was aware of this:

> I compiled the expression of interest … and emailed it to the head of school. I did my best to sound as non-authoritarian as possible, not only because it is being addressed to my peers but also to be faithful to the participatory action research principles. (M. Brown, personal communication, 22 November 2013)

Due to increased activity, some action researchers faced resentment from their families. For example, Teresa's mother, husband and some friends and relatives thought she was working too much for something she was not paid to do. However, she got support from her daughter, who considered that she had achieved success:

> My husband said that I began to live at the 2nd floor and forgot about the family. (He is the best friend of my mom!)
>
> Then my best friend visited me and said that this project took all my free time and I never rest and have no time to speak with her.
>
> Then my relatives and other friends began to call me.
>
> Then I switched off the telephone and my daughter said to me: Mum, you have a real success! (T. Vladyko, personal communication, 12 November 2013)

In spite of initial mistrust, Teresa managed to get her husband interested in the project by sharing stories and positive impressions with him:

> Yesterday my husband asked me if he could enter my project because he understood that there is something that he could change into his professional work and into his personal way of thinking and that he saw great possibilities in this project for his changes. (T. Vladyko, personal communication, 29 November 2013)

Pascale was understanding about Teresa's experience:

> What you describe with your friends and family … I have been experiencing this for now 7 years, since I joined the Pestalozzi Programme. My loved ones used to complain that I spend too much time with my pestas and pestos … Now they are interested about all the stories I tell about it. It might be viewed as a romanticised vision, but I must say that Pest is one of my families now, and this group a special part of it today. (P. Mompoint-Gaillard, personal communication, 6 December 2013)

Since action research requires time and effort it is recommended to inform one's family members about the reasons for participation and explain to them the benefits, mostly connected with professional and personal development. Action research represents an excellent opportunity to increase trustful and productive relationships with our professional colleagues as well as with our family members. However, it is not an approach that can be easily applied to all the difficulties we face in our professional and private lives. In fact, a certain level of persistence and emotional maturity is an important precondition for taking on the role of action researcher. If we are faced with strong resistance and a lack of understanding in our family or professional context, then dealing with action research can be a stressful and unattainable undertaking. This is often the main reason why some very diligent and enthusiastic practitioners eventually give up.

Values help us to launch and persist with carrying out significant changes. Those values represent more or less devised concepts that develop as action research goes on. The reason why values are themselves in transition are twofold. First, conducting

changes implies our personal development, which contributes to changes in our value system:

> At this moment I was smiling in my heart as some days ago at our forum in Moodle N. agreed with my thought that our values are not constant concepts, but they changed with our growth. (T. Vladyko, personal communication, 26 November 2013)

The second reason is co-operation with other participants who do not necessarily need to agree about everything, and particularly about values. This happened to Sanja and Claudia in their action research projects. Sanja's critical friends did not fully support her values of positive orientation and creativity in education (see the chapter "Positive orientation to education and critical friendship"). At the same time, some of Claudia's working colleagues were not ready to engage in critical friendship and discuss their individual goals in her project openly (see the chapter "Exploring critical friendship in a project for the prevention of racism and anti-Semitism in Norwegian schools"). Although Sanja and Claudia were eager to act on their values in their practices, they soon realised the necessity of negotiating values with other project participants.

Disagreement among action research participants about their values could seem like a problem to be overcome. However, it represents an opportunity for mutual learning and respect; that was the case for Sanja as well as Claudia. I suggested to Sanja that action research couldn't be reduced to transmitting the values of someone who is more "emancipated" to other, less self-aware participants, "but it means open discussion in which all sides could learn something" (B. Bognar, personal communication, 7 January 2014). Sanja admitted that this perspective encouraged her to be more open to the opinions of her critical friends:

> I must admit I didn't reflect on that from this perspective, and that is why I realised I have so much to learn and to be even more open to this process and let myself learn from them [her critical friends] also! Now I realise that one of the most important thing is to understand why they react the way they did, and to truly accept their arguments. If we want this to work, we must be honest to ourselves and accept students as equal in this process of learning. I believe that everyone we meet is here to teach us something, whether positive or negative. If we accept that; the same way they can learn from us. I also think this is a universal topic, because we can use this in everyday life! (S. Simel, personal communication, 8 January 2014)

Participants were the most active in this phase of the project, aimed at conducting planned activities. Figure 10 shows that more than 50% of all participants' activity on the forums, expressed in the number of posts, took place on the forum "Action research diary". At the same time, this was the phase that lasted the longest, starting in November 2013 and ending, for some participants, in May 2014. This was both an advantage and a shortcoming. Namely, we intended to conduct all planned activities over a period of three months. Following this, we meant to carry out data analysis and start writing our action research reports (Table 3). Due to ambitiously defined action research plans, several participants kept their diaries for six months and even more.

Figure 10: Variation in the number of posts in different project phases
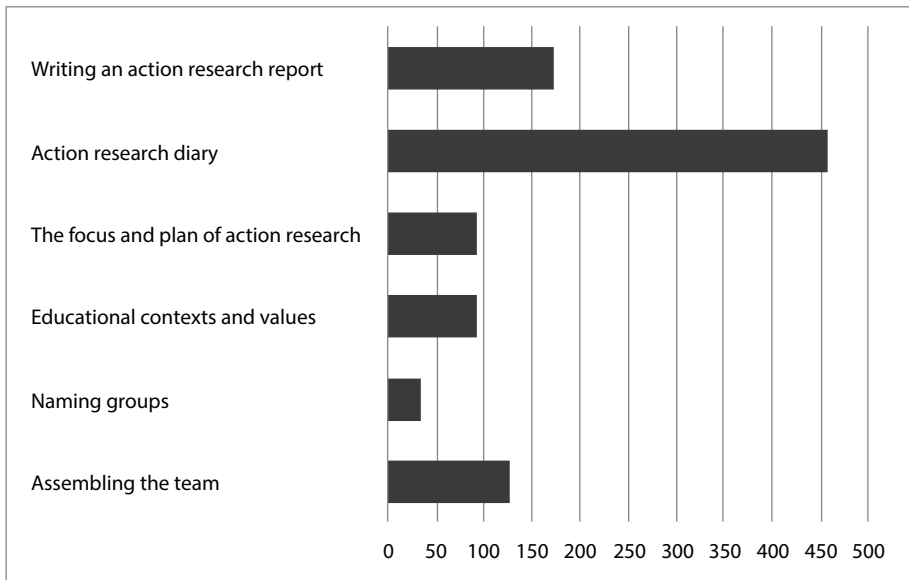
Although it is common for action research projects to last a long time, for novice action researchers it would be advisable to conduct shorter projects and complete them with an action research account. This is the main distinction between similar approaches like action learning and reflective practice. Both approaches are concerned to improve practice and to allow practitioners to develop their competencies (Leitch and Day 2006) as well as action research, but they are not systematic and rigorous in the sense of analysis of data and publication of research outcomes (Kember 2000). This was the reason that we devoted the last part of the project to writing action research reports and their publication in this book and elsewhere.

Writing action research reports

We started the last phase of our action research venture at the end of January 2014, when several participants who work in higher education accomplished planned changes in their teaching practices. I created a forum and attached guidelines about writing an action research report.

Since action research is a creative process, I did not want to prescribe a "proper" way to write reports. Instead, I elaborated general principles that could be helpful for creating and assessing an action research account:

- ▶ it is important to describe and explain the professional context so that readers can imagine the conditions under which the action research was conducted;
- ▶ it is recommended to show how researchers fulfilled their values in action;
- ▶ the action research report should describe the changes that were achieved;
- ▶ the report should describe the problems researchers faced;

- it is advisable to show how researchers generated their educational theories and what they learned from the research;
- an action research report usually does not end with conclusions, but rather with new questions, opening up new perspectives to build on the progress achieved thus far.

All these principles were thoroughly explained and corroborated with examples taken from published action research accounts. Maria, Višnja and Sanja responded positively to the guidelines. Sanja particularly emphasised the freedom and creativity they discovered through the process:

> I am starting to write a paper about my AR. Regarding Branko's materials, it is great how it provides us guidelines, because it is our first time to write something like that. I like the most the fact that there are no prescribed rules how it is supposed to look like; we can be free and creative in this process. And that is also a relief, instead of pressure! (S. Simel, personal communication, 28 January 2014)

In January, Anastasija wrote a short essay which, she pointed out, was the result of her "satori" (a Zen word meaning sudden enlightenment, or awakening), which happened while she was writing comments on Sanja's comments:

> The idea that struck me is the following: usually these moments of clear vision and realization happen when you are on your own, when you reflect or meditate on some issue. We are used to treat thinking process as an individual thing, as something that happens in your head. But the strength of my ideas was connected with the process of answering, being involved in the dialogue ... Today I had the moment of the LIVE dialogue thanks to all of you (my critical friends). (A. Akulenko, personal communication, 23 January 2014)

Her essay aroused interest in her critical friends Višnja and Sanja:

> Both Vygotsky and Dewey agree that the human condition is based in social interactions. Humans are initially social beings who slowly develop their individual selves through their relationships (experiences) with others.

> For me the idea of AR as a collaborative process is very important. Although we concentrate on our own practice, we do things together. The role of the critical friends and online space, Skype, in our case is extremely important. It is just the matter of the right question or having to change perspective due to a comment or a question of critical friends that makes me rethink and reflect on what I thought was obvious. (V. Rajić, personal communication, 24 January 2014)

> I believe this is also the case of Rogers' significant learning, in which we experience and live ideas – they change us! (S. Simel, personal communication, 24 January 2014)

This essay and the correspondence that followed show how important the online community of practice was in our project. Although this was an inspiring communication for all participants, Anastasija's essay does not represent an action research report. It was not based on data, but on an inner dialogue that became a real dialogue with her critical friends. If she had decided to write an action research account, instead of an essay, she might not have been able to do so, since she did not collect sufficient data. This was the reason that I attempted to encourage her to start another cycle of action research, in which she would pay more attention to gathering and analysing data (www.tubechop.com/watch/4489792). Unfortunately, this did not happen.

In February 2014, Thomas sent us a video produced by his students (http://youtu.be/S3cUBqjnxKI). This was the outcome of his action research project, in which

Thomas and his secondary school students tried to explore how the Nazis came to power and created a reign of terror. In class, they sifted through historical facts while watching films and reading documents about the time. For a more direct experience, they decided to visit the sub-camp of Mauthausen concentration camp nearby. In his post Thomas also informed us about the reason for his absence on the forum:

> the video is finished – it was a work with the students – we have one more session with the witness of time and then I hope I will find more time to write my diary – it is true that to write the diary in English needs more time than to write it in German – because of this I need some free time – I am nearly at home only to sleep – nothing more so – I hope this will change soon. (T. Krammer, personal communication, 6 February 2014)

I congratulated Thomas and his students for everything they had achieved in the project and on a great video presentation. Later, I suggested that he put together his action research report in the form of a multimedia presentation:

> I consider that your project is very important and I am thinking how to help you to create the final story. Actually, I am wondering whether you have enough data for writing scientific paper or it would be more convenient that you along with your students create multimedia representation of your project. McNiff and Whitehead consider that "multimedia forms of representation, however, have revolutionised the field forever. It is possible to show the live action of non-linear dynamic processes, which are far more appropriate for representing the realisation of values in practice than words on a page" (2010: 95). What do you think about this idea? (B. Bognar, personal communication, 26 February 2014)

Thomas was confused by my suggestion and asked me to explain how he might create a video about his action research project. I said that it could be a story represented in a visual way instead of a written account. It could however parallel a written account in terms of its structure, containing the following parts:

> *My educational context, personal background and values*. You actually did it at the beginning our cooperation (http://youtu.be/-2pkAJ38chg) and I wrote my response …

> *Research problem/challenge and plan*. You could explain how you and your students decided to start action research in which you intended to organize problem/project based learning about immoral laws, governments, and practices in which human rights of minorities were not respected. It is important to describe and explain how and what you planned to do. If you have some videos and photos about those activities, you could include important inserts in the final representation, or you and your students could narrate a story about that.

> *Descriptions of action, changes and problems*. You wrote in the research diary that you planned to discuss and investigate the following topics: Role of Hitler and his criminal "laws" (order and moral, humanity and duty), Stauffenberg and terrorism (the right of resistance), profit seeking and humanity (economy and exploitation), and hopelessness. You also intended to take the following activities: visiting KZ Mauthausen and monuments in your town about the crimes of the Nazis, inviting eyewitnesses of the horror of the Nazis. It would be great that you represent some important activities by using original videos, photos along with your or students' narration. You could show improvements achieved in your practice or at least your efforts to fulfil educational values. It is also very important to describe and explain problems with which you faced during the project.

> The final step is an *interpretation* in which you could include reflections, conclusions, learning and perspectives of your action research. It would be recommendable to give different perspectives, i.e. to enable different voices. It could be done by including visual narration of you, your students, and critical friends about project.

> It would be really great if you along with your students would be able to create such kind of action research report. This would be probably the first one of such kind. (B. Bognar, personal communication, 2 April 2014)

Following the short guidelines and suggestions I provided, Thomas and his students made an action research video in which they presented the most important aspects of their project (http://youtu.be/KdDVmVJ14sk). Creating an action research story from the students' perspective represents the strength of this video. Although Thomas led the whole process, he allowed his students to express themselves and create a very interesting documentary about their project. Indeed, it could encourage other action researchers to create their own multimedia forms of representation, to be published on YouTube or similar video-sharing websites.

Teresa, who was very active in the previous phases of the project, and who inspired us with her lucid and witty diary entries, eventually ceased to participate in project activities. In May she wrote her last message on the forum:

> I miss all my action research friends, but I hope that there will be one day when we could meet and speak over Skype again. Frankly speaking, I'm lost somewhere in May at school, at home, in the garden. And it seems to me that thanks AR I began to change my attitude towards some things in my life... values. (T. Vladyko, personal communication, 12 May 2014)

This was a sign that writing an action research report could pose difficulties for most of the project participants. Very soon this turned out to be the case. From the beginning, the activity on the forum "Writing an action research report" was slow, whereas it was lively on the forum "Action research diary" and over Skype.

I was afraid that none of the participants would get around to writing their reports. This would represent a failure of the project, since the main prerequisite for becoming a full-fledged action researcher is publishing a report. To overcome this problem and encourage the others, I decided to help Sanja, with whom I closely co-operated, to complete her report. Sanja predicted that her report would be finished in February or at least March, but ultimately it was completed at the end of April and translated and posted on the forum at the beginning of May. Pascale wrote the following response to this document:

> I apologise for disappearing the last 3 weeks. This is unfortunately going to happen again in June ... It's the busiest time of year for me. I will try to write before June so as not to leave Branko with all the work coming in in July and August.

> I must say that my reading has not helped me much to find what red thread I can follow to write my report. I find literature on AR to be a bit repetitive ... And not often well written. I think a bibliography would help me a lot.

> Thank you Sanja and Branko for the report. Maybe as I read it I will get some ideas! I'll try to send you feedback by the end of the week. (P. Mompoint-Gaillard, personal communication, 6 May 2014)

I tried to encourage Pascale to write her report, explaining to her that she just needed to follow the steps we had carried out previously and include data she had already presented in her diary:

> I would be happy if we could start working on your paper. I understand that you feel confused about it. However, I would like to encourage you by simplifying and demystifying the whole procedure … You do not need to start from scratch, but you could and should use everything that you already wrote, and all our correspondence in which we reflected and interpreted the most issues in your research … Therefore, let's start writing your first action research account. (B. Bognar, personal communication, 6 May 2014)

Although Pascale was aware of the learning opportunity that writing presented, she was hesitant to write about certain sensitive aspects in relation to the stewards who

participated in her action research. Her case was quite singular, since she and her critical friends are moderators of the Pestalozzi online platform, and therefore well known to all the members of the wider community and the trainees of Pestalozzi courses and training events. As a result, she decided not to publish her account in this publication:

> My problem is that I don't think I can publish what I am writing as it is. I want to continue writing it for this group of course and it's an important and significant learning opportunity for me, but I am too exposed in it, and too visible in the community to be able to publish it. (P. Mompoint-Gaillard, personal communication, 20 June 2014)

However, Pascale published her account in another publication. Within this project, she devoted her efforts to writing within the chapters of the book and editing the participants' accounts. She also helped me to write this book.

Pascale considered that the report that Sanja and I produced was very clear and well structured, although it could have been shorter. She also suggested using more dialogue in the report:

> I would have liked to see more dialogue in the report. By this I mean that often you relate the quotes from your peers in AR but only on one occasion you write your own post in reply to their posts. Having both would allow to reflect more on the dialogue, as in the ping pong that happens in your Moodle conversations. I think that online conversations are very interesting to analyse and quite particular in their setting and process. (P. Mompoint-Gaillard, personal communication, 10 June 2014)

I explained to Pascale that the only person who responded to almost all posts was Sanja. She tried to include her critical friends in the discussion, but they mostly wrote essays in a monological form, or kept to dualogues, instead of dialogues. Dualogue could be defined as:

> monologue disguised as dialogue, in which two or more men, meeting in space, speak each with himself in strangely tortuous and circuitous ways and yet imagine they have escaped the torment of being thrown back on their own resources. (Buber 1947/2002: 22)

Certainly, we were not satisfied with such discussion. We would rather engage in the being mode conversation in which parties are not afraid of changing own opinions and themselves. Participants in such communication are fully alive:

> because they do not stifle themselves by anxious concern with what they have. Their own aliveness is infectious and often helps the other person to transcend his or her egocentricity. Thus the conversation ceases to be an exchange of commodities (information, knowledge, status) and becomes a dialogue in which it does not matter any more who is right. (Fromm 1976/2008: 29)

However, it was obvious from Pascale's comment that we did not explain the problem of dualogical communication well and we could include this interpretation in our report. I particularly emphasised the question: "How to achieve real dialogue between participants of a particular conversation?" Dialogue seems like a feasible goal, but in real life, it is not easy to achieve. This could be the focus of the next action research project(s).

Meanwhile, Maria was eager to finish her action research report (http://youtu.be/DeeFVKKz6b8). She wrote in her correspondence and in the interview we conducted over Skype in May that her think tank had created and conducted a questionnaire about the professional development of teachers in her school. She wondered how to connect her action research, which meant investigating her own practice, with the questionnaire, which aimed to ask teachers about professional development. My

opinion was that the questionnaire could serve as a starting point for an activity in her think tank about professional development, but Marie did not agree completely. She told me that they had dealt with many different activities and the questionnaire was just another branch of her project (http://youtu.be/CnYC2uUuATI). My response to her on the forum regarding using the questionnaire was as follows:

> I hope you will find a way to include results of questionnaire into your action research. However, it is important to take care that action researchers mostly evaluate their own actions, not so much actions of other people. (B. Bognar, personal communication, 1 May 2014)

In September Marie wrote the following message on the forum:

> I truly apologise for not having been in touch throughout summer. I had to finalize my PhD and was only able to submit it some days ago due to a number of issues that cropped up, mainly bureaucratic but alas very time-consuming. I am now waiting to defend it – sometime late October or November.
>
> I still follow the thread every now and then with the AR report on my mind. I have also kept contact with the Maltese AR think-tank group of my school and we are currently co-authoring a paper on our experience in AR on PD for teachers in my school which should be finalised by the end of this month – to be published in the MRER online journal. (M. Brown, personal communication, 17 September 2014)

I got the impression that Maria, as a PhD candidate and author who had published more than 20 papers, was more inclined to traditional methodology than the action research approach, which is based on a different philosophy and methodology. This probably was the reason for her devoting more time to conducting a questionnaire about teachers' professional development than to monitoring her own practice.

Claudia, Irene and Višnja decided to write their action research accounts in the way Sanja and I had earlier. Our report encouraged Claudia to write her account:

> I just wish to send a "sign of life" to you and tell you that reading about the progress of your AR reports is very encouraging and inspiring for me.
>
> I am also writing on my report – in fact, I have produced quite an amount of text – but I am dealing with issues which are intellectually challenging (using my documentation and rather scattered data to create a meaningful narrative about my AR) but even more I wrestle with emotional aspects (hopes, disappointment, personal and professional relations at stake). I think that the latter prevent me from having a "break through" in the working process and that I need to accept that this takes time. (C. Lenz, personal communication, 14 June 2014)

Claudia, as an experienced researcher, wrote her account independently. When she finished it, I posted my review on the forum "Writing an action research report". Here is an excerpt:

> Dear Claudia, I've enjoyed reading and commenting your action research account very much. I supposed that you would send it piece by piece but you created the whole paper. In that way you proved my presumption that you are independent and skilful researcher who is able to write an excellent action research report on its own.
>
> …
>
> Although your action did not gain all expected changes in your practice, I like the way you represented and explained problems with which you faced. Usually, facing with problems could be more important than successes we are able to achieve during an action research project. If we are able to face with problems in self-reflective way, it could be more educational than happy-end stories which mostly are not as happy as some people want to present them.
>
> …

> From my point of view, to be able to cope with conflicts and problems shows someone's maturity and readiness to initiate significant changes. Even if we are not able to make anything significant in short-term attempts, eventually it could become fruitful. Particularly, when we learn enough about various obstacles and develop necessary skills to overcome them. I suppose that this action research project represents an excellent starting point to significant changes in your practice. (B. Bognar, personal communication, 13 July 2014)

I also gave her suggestions on how to improve her account: by including more references about critical friendship, explaining the influence of the Pestalozzi action research team in her research context, including more explanations/interpretations of described activities and represented data, connecting her reflections and interpretations with the literature, and using the APA citation style in her paper.

I invited other members of our community to help each other improve their individual papers, which had been sent to the forum. Unfortunately, they mostly relied on my and Pascale's comments.

When Irene finished all her planned activities in June, we talked over Skype about how to write an action research report. At that time she did not have a clear idea what an action research report should look like and how to begin. I asked her if I could help her in doing this. She expected me to give her comments whenever she uploaded something on the forum. In other words, she needed my continuous help to finish her account. She preferred written communication, although she felt a bit embarrassed to post parts of her paper on the forum since the other participants were quite silent at that time. So she suggested some form of private communication. So we partly communicated over e-mail while she was writing her action research report. When she finished her account and posted it on the forum I wrote the following comment:

> Dear Irene, I've enjoyed reading your finished action research report. I think that you succeeded to narrate the story from which is clear where you started from, what you did, why and where you ended, and what you think it signifies (Winter and Munn-Giddings 2001). I admire your persistence and readiness to learn. Although it was not an easy venture, you achieved significant changes in your practice that could inspire other practitioners in your and other European countries to abandon isolation and to start process of significant learning in a reflective community of practice.
>
> I admire you and congratulate you! (B. Bognar, personal communication, 24 November 2014)

She responded that she feels "sooooo good and happy!" (I. Papadaki, personal communication, 24 November 2014).

When Višnja sent her paper in November I wrote a thorough review of it and talked with her several times over the phone about her report. Here is an excerpt from the first review that I sent to her on the forum:

> In this chapter you included various data: results of learning contract, feedback from critical friends, but for me still is not clear what you actually did. Therefore, someone, who works in a similar professional context as well as you (for example I), could be curious to find out more details about your practice that could contribute to conducting planned changes. From those descriptions of your practice, this person could learn something and (s)he could try to apply it in her/his conditions. I consider that this represents the most important advance and distinctive feature of action research, therefore, it should not be neglected. For example, you mentioned Moodle, but I do not know how discussions you initiated were organized and what were their impacts. (B. Bognar, personal communication, 20 November 2014)

Višnja told me that she was concerned by my comments but that they helped her to re-edit the paper into a full-fledged action research report.

This project, as well as my previous experience in leading similar projects in Croatia, indicated that writing an action research account represents the most difficult part in conducting action research. It often happens, for example, that novice action researchers do not devote enough attention to the systematic gathering of data and monitoring the process of change. Mills (2000) suggests that when practition- ers do not have enough data to corroborate conclusions, they can call upon their experience. Namely, conducting action research presumes personal participation in most activities and practitioners know best what has happened and how they felt during the activities. Sometimes their recollections can substantiate interpretation, though this should not be taken as a general rule – if we do not have enough data, we can hardly write a quality account.

Even with sufficient data it is necessary, before writing, to analyse them and select what we consider important for an action research report. This requires certain skills and experience, and this is why beginners usually find it hard to devise and structure a report which:

> is likely to have the general form of a narrative, but a narrative which explains itself as it goes along. (This is where we started (and why); this is what we did (and why); this is where we ended, and what I/we think it signifies). You will need to explain the initial problem, and explain the reasons for your various practical decisions, i.e. who were involved as participants, how you worked together, what data you collected, how it was analysed, etc. In other words your report will need to combine narrative, description and analysis. (Winter and Munn-Giddings 2001: 241)

In our project, it seemed that even when an action researcher had enough data and was able to analyse them, s/he could be faced with the fear of the potential negative consequences that a report could produce in her/his practice. It is true that one should be careful about how one describes and explains contentious situations to avoid embarrassing other participants. However, if we put the emphasis on analysing our own actions, and if we direct the research towards our own learning, then a report should not produce negative reactions. Writing a report requires courage and skill to reflect on the positive as well as negative aspects of our practice.

Until recently, an action research report was deemed to be a kind of written account intended for publication in scientific journals. However, multimedia representations could be a more convenient solution for teachers and particularly for their students. These new approaches are in accordance with non-linear ways of thinking and reporting, which could contribute to the popularisation of action research:

> New forms of enquiry tend to use non-traditional ways of thinking. The aim is to show how dynamic processes of enquiry can lead to improved practices; perhaps the best way is to use creative ways of thinking and non-linear forms of reporting that show the processes of "I wonder what would happen if…". Non-linear ways of thinking and reporting can be represented using a variety of forms and media, including writing, story-telling, dialogue, visual narratives, and other forms of physical representation such as dance or performance, and a combination of all these forms. (McNiff and Whitehead 2010: 223-4)

The idea of creating and publishing multimedia reports is attractive but it is still rarely attempted. In addition, it is not clear how to assess the quality of such reports. I consider that multimedia reports should meet the same criteria as written reports,

although their use will probably open up some issues that action researchers did not have to deal with previously (e.g. quality of sound, video, performance, subtitles).

To help action researchers in acquiring experiences and developing the necessary competencies for writing reports it would be advisable to split their action research projects into shorter cycles including planning, acting, observing, reflecting, writing, re-planning, etc. In this way, they could produce a short report after several weeks and then make a revised plan for the next cycle of their research. At the end they could produce a final action research report. Such an approach could contribute to their learning and gradual improvement of the action research process, which often starts with a fuzzy research question and methodology. This is not a problem in itself, as "[p]rovided that the fuzzy answer allows you to refine both question and methods, you eventually converge towards precision. It is the spiral process which allows both responsiveness and rigour at the same time" (Dick 1993).

From the data presented it is clear that novice action researchers need help, particularly in writing reports. Communication with their less experienced counterparts is encouraging, but this is not enough for the successful completion of this demanding task. Help needs to be provided by experienced action researchers who are familiar with the whole process. The level and frequency of help needed is not the same for each novice action researcher, as it depends on her/his previous research experiences, developed skills and personal style of learning. However, help is almost always necessary and advisable.

The action research report that Sanja and I wrote, it seemed, was very encouraging for those members of the action research team who were willing to write their accounts. This suggests that facilitators should also conduct their action research projects and participate in writing reports with other participants to show by example how it can be done. Ultimately, participation in action research, particularly writing a report, depends primarily on the practitioners' own decisions and activity. If someone is not ready or cannot devote the time and effort to finish it, then the example and encouragement of others will hardly help.

Certainly, action researchers could take more time to write their reports if they are not able to do so immediately. Sometimes, a delay can even be helpful as this can mean participants are more emotionally detached from the process of change they participated in and in this way be more reflective on their own practice. In addition, this allows practitioners to recognise the permanent changes that were achieved during action research. In any case, it is important to complete a report, since only then can it be said that action research has been truly accomplished.

Problems noted, changes achieved and new perspectives

In this action research project, our intention was to establish an online community of practitioners who were willing to take on the new roles of critical friend and action researcher. Those roles required practitioners to conduct action research projects, and write and publish reports.

From the data presented in the previous section it is possible to conclude that we successfully established an online community of practice which practitioners voluntarily joined with the aim of learning how to conduct action research. All participants were intrinsically motivated to a high level.[10] To the question "What motivates you to participate in the project?", which was included in the evaluation questionnaire conducted in January 2014, some of answers were:

> The desire to change my practice and become better teacher, to have an experience of action research and to develop research and analytic skills. (A. Akulenko, personal communication, 23 January 2014)

> AR is a form of reflexive knowledge production and professional development I have wished to use in my job for a long time. The AR project in the Pestalozzi community is a unique chance to learn by doing. I certainly will continue to work with AR in my work in the future and I am learning a lot about the preconditions which need to be in place to be able to do so. (C. Lenz personal communication, 8 January 2014)

> The key motivation was the idea that my practice can be better. After working on my PhD for the last few years I finally have some time to deal with my teaching practice. It is the course that was given to me to teach the last and I feel there is a place for improvement. (V. Rajić, personal communication, 31 December 2013)

Although as facilitator, I was the most active in our online community of practice, other participants communicated not only with me, but also with other members of the team. This happened particularly after the creation of "trios" of critical friends (Table 5). In spite of this Pascale considered that the participants were not active enough with their mutual communication on the forums:

> The "star-shaped" communication was not what we had envisioned, and is not ideal. Participants did not fully engage in peer feedback and critical friendship. Maybe this is due to time pressure on behalf of participants, but more realistically it can be due to the relative quality of the feedback given by the facilitator: when comparing own feedback to the feedback from the leader a peer may decide to "step down." The group was composed of beginners in AR, this result might be different in another cases. (P. Mompoint-Gaillard, personal communication, 20 December 2014)

I agree with Pascale that communication in which a facilitator dominates is not ideal, but the question is what the alternative would be for a group of novice action researchers who needed support:

> I entered the project with VERY diffuse ideas of AR and unclear expectations, but the support I received from Branko is an absolutely positive surprise. (C. Lenz, personal communication, 8 January 2014)

My opinion is that such communities of practice cannot survive and develop without dedicated and quality leadership. Certainly, leadership should not consist of providing ready-made answers and expecting others to accept them obediently. Quite the opposite:

> we should be calling for leadership that will challenge us to face with problems for which there no simple, painless solutions – problems that require us to learn new ways. (Heifetz 1994, in Fullan 2001: 3)

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10. On the questions in the evaluation questionnaire: "Estimate your motivation for participation in the project" (from one – low, to five – high) and "Estimate the type of your motivation (from one – extrinsic, to five – intrinsic) almost all participants (seven) chose option five as their response in both cases. Only Anastasija marked four to both questions.

Although leadership was necessary in our community, the question lay in how to reduce its negative impacts:

> Too much dependence on the activity of a coordinator or on the charisma of a leader makes the community vulnerable to their departure. It is also tends to silence other voices and decrease the diversity of perspectives in the community. Thus, it becomes very important to spread leadership and share responsibilities. (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder 2002: 146)

To avoid this pitfall, I could have given other participants the chance to take more responsibility in leading some project activities. For example, I facilitated all the Skype meetings, though we could have swapped the role of facilitator. I also could have asked the more experienced researchers to help their less experienced counterparts in some aspects of the research process. In this project, leadership could have been more spread out, shared, and other members of the community could have taken more responsibility in organising or at least facilitating some activity. However, I do not believe that participants could have taken on too many new responsibilities since in their answers to the question, included in the evaluation questionnaire: "What prevents you participating more actively?", almost all participants mentioned lack of time. On the other hand, with a group of more experienced action researchers, this kind of leadership would be completely inappropriate; spread leadership could be a better solution.

Our intention was to create a collaborative learning environment and this was partly achieved. At the beginning we established two groups with six participants in each. The number of group members was limited since we were hoping to achieve symmetrical communication. This was important since "only if there is a symmetrical distribution of the opportunities for all possible participants to choose and perform speech acts does the structure of communication itself produce no constraints" (Habermas 2001: 98). Unfortunately, the early dropout of three members in the group ORACLES and relatively infrequent communication among the remaining participants indicated the necessity of merging the two groups. Establishing one bigger team only partly solved the problem, since participants became overwhelmed with too many posts. For this reason we accepted Pascale and Claudia's suggestion and established critical friendship "trios", which improved communication and collaboration among participants (Table 5).

In the last phase of the project, the aim of which was writing action research reports, communication and collaboration among participants almost completely ceased. Participants who decided to finish their action research accounts communicated only with me. The reason for this could be an earlier completion of reports (Sanja and Thomas) or withdrawal from the project (Anastasija, and Teresa). In that way Claudia and Višnja stayed outside of their base groups, while Maria and Irene, who were overwhelmed with personal and professional duties, communicated only with me. Further, the project extended for six months more than had been planned (Table 3), leading to fatigue and satiety in the remaining participants, who had to focus on other duties. On the other hand, without the extension, none of the practitioners' accounts included in this book would have been completed.

It appeared that mentoring was a more helpful approach than co-operation with other members of the community of practice, in a context of novice action researchers writing their reports. However, the reading of the finished accounts had an

inspirational impact on participants who were hesitant to start writing. It is possible to conclude that although the activity on the forum was reduced to communication with me and later with Pascale, who also commented on practitioners' accounts, the community of practice still played a significant role in the learning of its members.

On the question on evaluation in the questionnaire: "To what extent do you feel you have learned while participating in the project?" participants could choose from one – learned nothing to five – learned a lot. The average value of eight responses was 4.5. Teresa wrote in the questionnaire that she tried to learn "through reading recommended literature, comments, experience of other participants and discussing important moments during our Skype meetings" and with her school action research team, but the most significant learning for her occurred through the process of change she initiated and carried out in her action research:

> The changes that I could achieve in my professional life as well as the changes that I could see in the life of my colleagues (I mean the improvement of their work thanks to AR). And personally for me it is the process of AR, during which I am learning thanks to wise guidance of Branko and inspiration from all the participants! (T. Vladyko, personal communication, 7 January 2014)

It is possible to conclude that action research represents the most important type of significant learning, which according to Rogers "has a quality of personal involvement … It is self-initiated … It is pervasive. It makes a difference in the behaviour, the attitudes, perhaps even the personality of the learner. It is evaluated by the learner … Its essence is meaning" (Rogers 1969: 5). In our case significant learning occurred in the online community of action researchers.

Critical friendship was also obtained at the intercultural level, requiring communication among participants living in six European countries and speaking different languages. Such co-operation was more of an opportunity for learning than it was a problem:

> I found the environment to be stimulating and friendly. It was a pleasure to see that in spite the different countries or educational settings we all strive to improve our teaching/learning process, and that there are teachers that care about the quality of their educational practice. (V. Rajić, personal communication, 31 December 2013)

In this stimulating and positive environment Anastasija learned to be more self-reflexive; Claudia was able to "'keep track' with what I am doing, becoming aware of the challenges, reviewing my practice, documenting it, writing about each step of the process"; Irene realised "how important is to be open, to share questions and doubts with the teachers and to be willing to create a context where tough situations can discuss honestly"; Maria learned about "literature in the field, more on participatory action research, narratives, diary keeping, ICT in research"; Teresa learned "about values (personal and professional as well)"; Pascale became aware about one's own practice: "some habits I want to change, some feelings I can validate and accept as useful and meaningful resource; some different perspectives on observations (things that I tend to see as problematic and others help me view as an asset)" and about action research: "how to conduct it, how to facilitate it"; and Sanja came to understand that "the best way to learn is to learn with others, by exchanging our ideas and experiences".

The best environment for critical friendship is a community of practice in which positive and trusting relationships prevail. The other side of the coin is a challenging and risk-taking attitude, without which critical friendship could be easily diluted into a chatty relationship more for entertainment than for anything else.

Critical thinking is the fundamental ability that practitioners who participate in critical friendship should develop. Paul and Elder (2014) recomend critical thinking "which is global, Socratic, explicit, systematic, emancipatory and based on natural languages." They consider that such critical thinking enables the thinker to:

- ▶ Reason better within any subject, discipline, or domain of thought (because it is global in nature).
- ▶ Reason fair mindedly (because the thinking is Socratic rather than sophistic[11]).
- ▶ Identify problems in his or her reasoning (because the reasoning is explicit).
- ▶ Approach complex problems and issues in a systematic and integrated, rather than a fragmented or episodic, way.
- ▶ Minimise the mind becoming indoctrinated or made captive by taboos, illusions, delusions, biases, prejudices, and other forms of intellectual pathologies.
- ▶ Use one's own natural language in analyzing and assessing thought (thus precluding the need to learn a technical language for critical thinking). (Paul and Elder 2014: 369)

In our project, the positive traits of critical thinking prevailed and helped, for example, Pascale:

> to validate the orientation I chose for the work; helping me deepen my reflection; widening the reflection through comparison with other situation. (P. Mompoint-Gaillard, personal communication, 13 January 2014)

For Anastasija, a lack of understanding of what others were doing in their action research projects was confusing. This probably occurred due to a lack of information provided by other participants on the forums, but it could also be due to a preoccupation with one's own action research projects. Mutual critical friendship in a community of practice represents an enriching experience, but it cannot be easily obtained when participants are overwhelmed with other duties:

> With all the obligations (work, home) it is sometimes too time consuming. It just confirms reflection takes time and if we are to reply to each other's entries it can be a bit challenging. (V. Rajić, personal communication, 31 December 2014)

The main project aim was to help our group of practitioners, at an international level, to learn how to conduct action research. At the beginning I provided them with the most important information about action research, recommended relevant

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11. Socratic critical thinking, according to Paul and Elder, represents "an attempt to link critical thinking with traits of mind that enable the thinker to exercise intellectual humility, intellectual empathy, intellectual integrity, etc." Such critical thinking is "usually global in orientation (since the traits of mind that serve to improve thinking are useful in all domains of thought)." On the other hand sophistic critical thinking is usually a selfish and narrow-minded "attempt to develop concepts and tools that enable one to recognise how to manipulate or 'trick' people into accepting poor reasoning as good and thus enable (sophistic) critical thinkers to win debates, irrationally persuade, and otherwise to 'misuse' or 'abuse' critical thinking tools" (Paul and Elder 2014: 368).

literature in the field, and tried to answer any questions they posed. Certainly, this was important for their learning, but I hope this chapter corroborates the following statement: the only way to learn action research is to do it. Action research does not merely represent a concept that can be defined and understood. It can only truly be grasped through the process of learning oriented to conducting significant changes in our practice.

Since we consider that action research represents a creative process, we started our project with a discussion about values and a self-critical examination of initial conditions in our contexts. In this way we made steps towards critical-emancipatory action research, which represents:

> the attempt of teachers to organize themselves into communities of researchers dedicated to emancipatory experience for themselves and their students. When teachers unite with students and community members in the attempt to ask serious questions about what is taught, how it is taught, and what should constitute the goals of a school, not only is critical self-reflection promoted but group decision making becomes a reality. (Kincheloe 1997: 74)

In this action research project practitioners did not implement ready-made strategies devised by experts. Rather, they autonomously devised all their activities in agreement with other participants of their projects. In so doing, some organised communities of practices in their professional contexts, within which they discussed their values as well as working conditions in their institutions. On the basis of those discussions, participants identified research focuses and designed plans that they later implemented. Those plans were not always realistic, particularly in terms of scheduling, but they were mostly feasible.

Planned and achieved changes were significant for each action researcher, at least personally. In several cases they were important for their collaborators and even for family members:

> When it was my turn to say some words I decided to begin my "speech" saying about the changes that AR brought into my life and about my school team of critical friends. It gave everyone a good reason to say something about our project, and I was pleased.
>
> Opinions were different but all positive. All my critical friends noted that they had less free time, as they began to read more, to think more, to evaluate their actions and try to connect their values with them. One of the teachers added that she felt positive changes in her work with students, their growing interest in her lessons and classroom hours. And all that was due to our AR and all the activities that were connected with it (the participation in the seminars, discussions, Moodle discussions). All my school critical friends mentioned that such interesting words as "AR" and "project" deeply penetrated into their families and even some kind of process of action research had begun in this or that way with the members of their families! (T. Vladyko, personal communication, 27 December 2013)

Action research does not just mean bringing about changes. It means gathering data with the aim to monitor practice as we are changing it. One of the main sources of data in our project were the research diaries that almost all practitioners kept regularly and shared on the web forum. Therefore, narration was the main mode for practitioners presenting their activities. In addition, they presented data from other resources such as interviews, questionnaires, videos, photos, etc. Although I recommended videos, only Sanja, Thomas and Pascale utilised them exhaustively

in their projects. Some participants were reluctant to use multimedia resources and even when some included videos in their diary entries we faced a language problem. For example, Claudia sent us the following message and video:

> Here is a taste of how the Dembra trainings look like: in Norwegian – but you can sense the atmosphere: http://youtu.be/zl-TlGVhKz4. (C. Lenz, personal communication, 5 February 2014)

I suggested including subtitles to overcome the language barrier:

> An option for including subtitles exists in YouTube. For creating subtitles you could use freeware software DivXLand Media Subtitler that is relatively simple for using. Maybe we could try how it works at video you sent. If you would need any help, please let me know. What do you think about this suggestion? (B. Bognar, personal communication, 6 February 2014)

Unfortunately, Claudia never created subtitles although she was willing to do this:[12]

> I think I will subtitle the parts which show the effect of the reflections following the evaluation and suggestions by my colleagues and use this in my report. (C. Lenz, personal communication, 16 February 2014)

In this case the language barrier appeared to be unbridgeable. Probably the problem occurred when she started to learn how to use software for which she did not have instructions. In future projects, it would be advisable to make available essential applications for communication and the presentation and analysis of data along with guidelines. Initial training in using multimedia applications would also be helpful. There is a need for organisational support to facilitate the whole process and to release the pressure on the facilitator and the practitioners, who have many other more important responsibilities to deal with.

Most practitioners gathered data from different sources. Unfortunately, some participants neglected this important aspect of research and this, in the end, jeopardised the writing of their action research reports. Here, too, more systematic initial training on gathering, presenting, analysing and interpreting data could be beneficial for writing reports. With the help of Pascale and myself, four practitioners completed their reports, which have been included in the next part of this book.

Claudia Lenz presents her efforts to establish critical friendships and a community of practice with a piloting group responsible for an interschool project for the prevention of racism and anti-Semitism in Norwegian schools:

> action research was based on the assumption that, besides contributing to professional development in general, systematic reflexivity and self-reflexivity are crucial for an educational practice that aims to counteract all forms of group-focused enmity. (Lenz 2016, p. 91 of this volume)

Although Claudia did not achieve all her aims, her report is an interesting read. She describes and interprets the most important issues she faced while she was attempting to improve her own practice, confirming Winter and Munn-Giddings's opinion that:

> even if after a lot of effort you were finally unable to do what you intended (e.g. if the change you tried out did not have anything like the effect you hoped for), you will still have the basis for a report which others would find interesting, in which you describe

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12. We discussed the issue of using and subtitling videos in action research during our Skype meeting on 6 February 2014 (see www.tubechop.com/watch/4489709).

a sequence of experiences, your interpretation of these experiences, and what you have learned from the overall process. We can learn very effectively from our "mistakes", and/or from finding problems that we had not at first anticipated. (Winter and Munn-Giddings 2001: 242)

Irene Papadaki presents the process of creating a community of practice consisting of five secondary school teachers. Their community of practice was established:

to help teachers reduce the feelings of alienation that they might have experienced in their school environment, increase awareness about their inner conflicts, and develop readiness to be self-critical about their practices (see the chapter "Becoming a reflective community of practice").

Instead of dealing with superficial problems, she and her colleagues dug much deeper and started productive discussions about values such as democracy, love, mutual respect and tolerance. Most importantly, Irene did not impose her own values on her colleagues. They reinterpreted the meaning of education through open discussion. She noted the following significant change that was achieved through their action research project:

Briefly, I could say that those teachers who felt isolated in their schools appreciated our collaboration a great deal and all of them considered that the collaborative discussions and actions that took place during our meetings were something "new" for them. They spoke about the community of practice as a preferable kind of professional development to occasional two-day seminars, since they were "here the active subjects and not passive listeners" (Teacher F. T., personal communication, June 2014). I think this represents a significant change that could lead to the next age of teacher professionalism. (Ibid.)

In action research that aimed to promote the values of democracy, emancipation and participation, Višnja Rajić presents her efforts to improve her teaching practice at university. Faced with a traditional institution in which the teaching process is split between lectures and seminars, Višnja tried to make her teaching interesting and dynamic for her students. Moreover, she encouraged students' activity and co-oper-ation, mostly through seminars and web-based learning, which was an optional activity. A particularly important change in her research was the role of students as critical friends. This role was new for her students and it is a rare practice in Croatian higher education. Through action research Višnja improved her practice and left it open to further improvements planned for the future:

It was a valuable experience that enabled me to conduct research on and improve my practice. It has confirmed that my efforts to foster democratic education in higher education are feasible. It made me reflect on my values of democracy, participation and emancipation in education and clarify which of these I am not willing to give up on. It opened up questions of teacher-student communication and relations and the role of the teacher, and had an impact on the planning and delivery of my everyday practice. Further, there are concrete actions that I plan to take in preparing for the course in the future to ensure students' deep learning in co-existence with the values necessary for a democratic educational process (see the chapter "Action research approach to professional development in higher education: teaching a course on evaluation and assessment for prospective teachers").

Sanja Simel and I collaboratively conducted action research in a higher education context. Sanja decided to include the positive orientation to education as the main topic in her seminars of pedagogy, attended by a group of students – the future teachers of the Croatian language – over a semester. Three students from this group accepted Sanja's invitation to be her critical friends. They discussed all the classes, which were videotaped and available over YouTube, and also used the web forums

at Moodle. Sanja was particularly concerned to allow her critical friends freedom to express their opinions, to encourage them to take note of and develop strengths and creative potential in themselves and others, and to express positive emotions, empathy, humour and future orientation in their discussions. At the end of our report we concluded that:

> Critical reflection is one of the key competencies of future teachers that could be developed through critical friendship and action research. For these reasons, we consider it crucial to urge students to deal with action research (e.g. for the purpose of their graduation thesis). This could contribute to the development of a positive orientation in education. We encourage students and teachers to publish their action research accounts in professional journals and other publications, and we hope that this report shows one way to do this (see the chapter "Positive orientation to education and critical friendship").

We hope that you will enjoy reading these accounts as much as we enjoyed writing them. Although we tried as hard as possible to write quality action research reports we are aware that they could be improved in various ways. Our intention was not to present the perfect examples of action research but to encourage you to read them critically and try to conduct and publish your own action research. If this happens, then the reports will have fulfilled their purpose.

This was a pilot project that aimed to explore the possibilities of creating an online community of action researchers within the Pestalozzi Programme. We tried to prove that it is possible to help practitioners from several European countries to become action researchers. We hope it is possible to conclude that education for action research cannot be done on a massive scale since it requires good organisation and permanent support on an almost daily basis from experienced action researchers. Enthusiastic leadership was key to carrying out this project. However, it would be wrong to expect that our experience will become common practice without systematic institutional support.

Fortunately, the Pestalozzi Programme represents an institutional and organisational framework within which our experience can be suitably integrated and developed. This was the reason why we devoted the last part of the meeting held in Strasbourg in December 2014 to the question, "How to implement action research into the Pestalozzi Programme?" Accordingly, we organised an activity in which, along with the participants of this meeting (Josef, Pascale, Sanja, Višnja and Branko), several stewards of the Pestalozzi Community of Practice were involved over Skype. The results of this activity were visually presented by Pascale with the use of the virtual wall Padlet (see http://padlet.com/pascale_mompoin/2y4gkv6od1ks).

We concluded that the main aim should be to devise ways to educate new action research leaders who could help participants of existing Pestalozzi educational activities to become action researchers. Particularly, these skills could be applicable in modules for teacher trainers that start and end with face-to-face meetings, with online collaboration in between. Each module series deals with a particular topic and requires the active engagement of participants to come up with outputs through a workshop, project or some other educational activity. Pestalozzi facilitators organise modules and they are also responsible for leading online collaboration on the

Pestalozzi platform. The easiest way to implement our experience in this organisational structure is to educate existing facilitators for action research.

Another opportunity could be educating stewards of communities of practice so they can conduct and lead action research projects. In addition, action research could be integrated in summer schools, international workshops or projects that are organised in European countries. Finally, action research could become the standard mode of internal evaluation of the Pestalozzi Programme, which would contribute to its further development.

The publication of this book, among others, could contribute to promoting the idea of action research in the Pestalozzi community. Establishing a web-based journal in which action researchers can publish their reports along with the organisation of action research conferences could also encourage practitioners to become full-fledged action researchers.

We foresee that the action research approach has a bright future within the Pestalozzi Programme. The way to develop this fruitful approach is to dream big but go step by step. This project and its results, this book, are the first steps in our big dream. We invite you to join us to make this dream come true.

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Appendix

Initial questionnaire form – Pestalozzi action research project

Your name:

1. What is your motivation to participate in the project of action research?

2. Have you participated in any research projects? Yes: ☐

If you've checked the box, please, describe your research experience.

3. Have you published any articles? Yes: ☐

If you checked the box please write reference(s) of published works.

4. Do you have any experience in critical friendship or reflective practice? Yes: ☐

If you checked the box, please, describe your experience in critical friendship or reflective practice.

5. Do you have any experience in online learning environments? Yes: ☐

If you checked the box, please, describe it.

6. Do you have any experience in action research? Yes: ☐

If you checked the box, please, describe your experience in action research.

7. Please describe your computer skills, particularly your ability to edit and publish videos on YouTube.

8. What multimedia equipment for the action research is available to you?

9. Could you spare 3 to 4 hours a week for this project, reading, writing, researching, communicating in English with other members of a team? Yes: ☐

Please, specify what could hinder you to spend the time necessary to participate in this project.

10. How do you intend to support learning of other participants in the learning community?

11. Please specify the focus of your action research.

Why does this topic interest you?

12. Please write your questions or suggestions for realisation of the project.

Part Two

Action research accounts

Exploring critical friendship in a project for the prevention of racism and anti-Semitism in Norwegian schools

Claudia Lenz, The European Wergeland Centre, Oslo, Norway

The practitioner allows [her]self[13] to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which [s]he finds uncertain or unique. [S]he reflects on the phenomenon before [her], and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in [her] behaviour. [S]he carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation. (Schön 1983: 68)

What this report is about

In this report I will reconstruct the different steps of an action research process that, at its core, dealt with the attempt to establish critical friendships and a community of practice among the organisers of the Norwegian project "Democratic preparedness to prevent racism and anti-Semitism" (Dembra).[14] This project linked the prevention of group-focused enmity to the development of democratic and inclusive school cultures. The action research was conducted during autumn and winter 2013-14. It recounted the obstacles and limitations, but also the experiences of shared reflexivity and its effects on project work.[15]

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13. My gender adaptation.

14. Information about the project is available at www.theewc.org/Content/Library/Research-Development/Project-documents-and-reports/Dembra-Faglige-perspektiver-paa-demokrati-og-forebygging-av-gruppefiendtlighet-i-skolen and in Norwegian at www.hlsenteret.no/undervisning/dembra, accessed 11 July 2015.

15. I wish to thank all the colleagues from the Dembra project who have answered my requests, joined in discussions with me and given me feedback at different stages of my action research. And I wish to thank my critical friend from the Pestalozzi action research group, Pascale Mompoint-Galliard, for providing an outsider perspective once in a while as well as the other members of the group for being sources of inspiration. A very special thanks goes to Branko Bognar for being the facilitator and "wise man" in this process.

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My action research was based on the assumption that, besides contributing to professional development in general, systematic reflexivity and self-reflexivity are crucial for an educational practice that aims to counteract all forms of group-focused enmity. This assumption is based on my interpretation of Theodor Adorno's essay "Education after Auschwitz."[16] In this text he claims that post-Holocaust, the highest goal of education should be to prevent the mechanisms that led to it from unfolding again – mechanisms that are deeply embedded in our societies and subjectivities. So, what is needed to prevent prejudice and hate from rising again, leading to genocidal violence? Adorno states:

> I do not believe it would help much to appeal to eternal values, at which the very people who are prone to commit such atrocities would merely shrug their shoulders. I also do not believe that enlightenment about the positive qualities possessed by persecuted minorities would be of much use. The roots must be sought in the persecutors, not in the victims who are murdered under the paltriest of pretences. What is necessary is what I once in this respect called the turn to the subject. One must come to know the mechanisms that render people capable of such deeds, must reveal these mechanisms to them, and strive, by awakening a general awareness of those mechanisms, to prevent people from becoming so again. It is not the victims who are guilty, not even in the sophistic and caricatured sense in which still today many like to construe it. Only those who unreflectingly vented their hate and aggression upon them are guilty. One must labor against this lack of reflection, must dissuade people from striking outward without reflecting upon themselves. The only education that has any sense at all is an education toward critical self-reflection. (Adorno 1998)

Adorno's point here is that knowledge transfer alone may miss the ways in which prejudice and resentment often immunise themselves against any rational argument or critical inquiry. The prejudice reduces the other to what is excluded from the self and leads to a destructive affective process in which the other is identified with everything the subject rejects and finally desires to eliminate. As a witness to the destructive consequences of anti-Semitism, Adorno claims that education needs to focus on constant critical reconsideration and self-reflection. Only this enables the subject to escape the "mechanisms that render people capable of such deeds".

Research about prejudices (Allport 1954/1979) supports Adorno's notion, that abstract learning about prejudice is not sufficient to counteract them: many prejudices against minorities are deeply rooted in our cultural traditions and practices. We have grown up with commonly accepted images of these groups, comments about them in everyday situations and negative feelings expressed towards them – these nonverbal expressions contribute effectively to imprinting prejudice in our attitudes. So, it requires a constant critical exploration of the views we hold unproblematic, to develop the awareness, willingness and ability to dismiss group-focused enmity. This cannot be done by the individual alone, it needs to be developed through interactions and exchange with others.

In relation to the Dembra project, this means that we need to initiate reflexive and interactive processes, through which teachers:

▶ develop an awareness of the phenomena and mechanisms of prejudice and group-focused enmity;

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16. In 1966 Adorno gave a speech on German radio. This speech was entitled "Education after Auschwitz" and published in various publications (e.g. Adorno 1998).

- ▶ recognise incidents in school in which group-focused enmity is expressed;
- ▶ develop strategies to address these expressions in sensitive ways that contribute towards reducing prejudices and negative attitudes;
- ▶ develop a shared professional ethos that aims at preventing group-focused enmity;
- ▶ contribute to developing an institutional (school) culture and educational vision that is built on these values.

This points to two core elements of emancipatory action research which express:

> a commitment to bring together broad social analysis – the self-reflective collective self-study of practice, the way in which language is used, organization and power in a local situation, and action to improve things … It has a strong commitment to participation as well as to the social analyses in the critical social science tradition. (Kemmis and McTaggart 2005: 560-1)

Or, in the words of Grundy, it:

> promotes emancipatory praxis in the participating practitioners; that is, it promotes a critical consciousness which exhibits itself in political as well as practical action to promote change. (Grundy 1987: 154)

In its ambition to foster democratic preparedness in students and to counteract racism, anti-Semitism and other forms of group-focused enmity, which represent virulent threats to democratic pluralism, the project fits into this description. It aims at positive changes at an individual level (teachers and students), institutional level (school) and societal level.

Before elaborating on the project and my action research journey related to it, I will describe some of the elements that informed my intentions and actions in this context.

Professional context and values

My educational context, especially the value base of my work, is informed by a number of dimensions of "belongings" (national, local and cultural, and institutional). At the beginning of my action research I became aware of them as mutually informing, composing a kind of framework that guides me in my professional practice – and even more so in the particular project my action research focused on.

I live and work in one of the richest countries of Europe; the ongoing economic and political crisis in Europe is hardly felt in everyday life here. Norway has a strong democratic culture, accompanied by an egalitarian tradition, which I appreciate and enjoy. However, the flipside of this egalitarianism is when it is conceptualised as homogenous. When this happens, heterogeneity, diversity, dissent and controversy are easily regarded as challenges, problems, and even threats, in the sense that they do not represent how people should live together "naturally".

Figure 1: The layers of my educational context
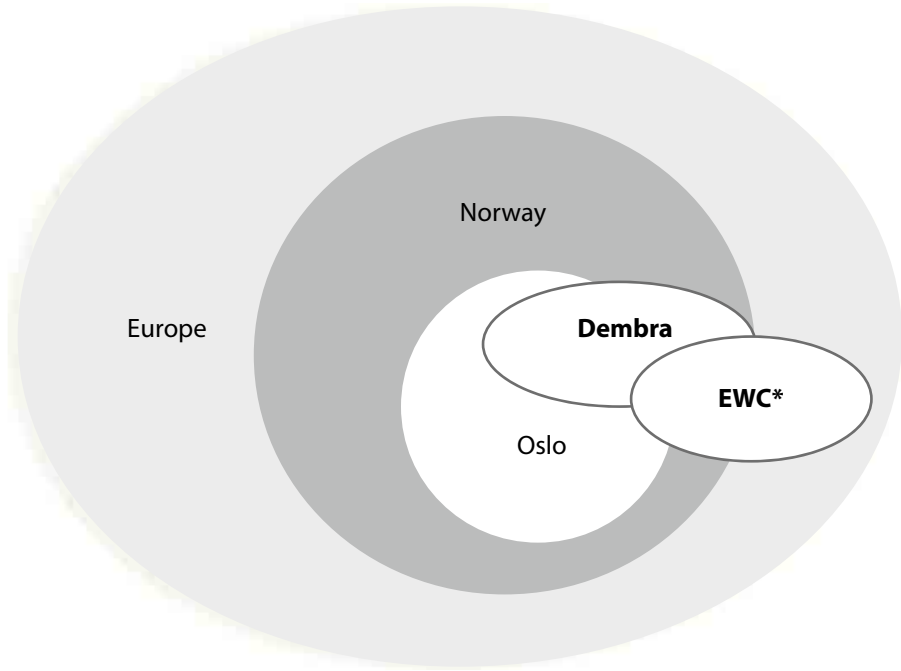
* The European Wergeland Centre

Norway has never been dominated by aggressive nationalism. But it has a track record of problematic phenomena linked to nationalism, e.g. the assimilationist policy against national minorities in the 19th and early 20th centuries. My working context is influenced by one event in particular: on 22 July 2011, the terrorist Anders Behring Breivik first detonated a car bomb in the government quarter of Oslo and then went to the island of Utøya where the Workers' Youth League was holding a summer camp. Here, he killed 69 young people. This was in many ways a shock for Norwegian society. Terror in peaceful Norway? Many – including myself – initially assumed and feared that it was Islamist terror. In the hours of disorientation after the attack, the Norwegian broadcasting companies showed images from 9/11 and the bombings in London and Madrid. Muslims were harassed in public that day. The terrorist turned out to be a white Norwegian who had grown up in the best neighbourhoods of middle-class Oslo. In a 1 500-page pamphlet, Breivik told the world about his motives: he saw himself as a warrior ("knight Templar") fighting an existential war against Islamist domination and the multicultural destruction of Norway and "Norwegianness". This was a wake-up call for Norway as regards the racist, aggressive nationalist and anti-democratic undercurrents in society.

Positioning myself

Reflecting on my background, it became more and more clear to me that I am very personally involved in the Dembra project, including the action research. I am a

"privileged stranger" in Norway. With my German background, I enjoy all the structural privileges of an EU citizen and I am regarded as culturally "close" to Norwegians. My German accent tells everyone immediately that I am not "from here", but people give me credit for my "good Norwegian skills". This is but one signifier for the fact that I am "normalised" in many ways. But still, I feel at the same time like an insider and an outsider, being frequently reminded of the fact that I have different experiences, which result in different interpretations and sometimes, failure to "get" the cultural codes my Norwegian friends and colleagues appear to share naturally (which is, of course, not the case).

I work as head of research and development at the European Wergeland Centre (EWC), an Oslo-based resource centre for the Council of Europe in the fields of Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education and intercultural education. Dembra was the first time the EWC engaged in a quite extensive and ambitious project in Norway. It also allowed me to co-operate with my former colleagues from the Norwegian Center for Studies of Holocaust and Religious Minorities, where I had worked as a researcher for several years.

Dembra

Dembra is a three-year project aimed at teachers and head teachers in lower secondary schools to support them in their work against racism and anti-Semitism.[17] The project is funded by the Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training and is part of a follow-up of a report on racism and anti-Semitism in Norwegian schools (Eidsvåg et al. 2011) as well as a White Paper on motivation, learning and the learning environment (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research 2011).

Dembra was developed by three institutions: the Norwegian Center for Studies of the Holocaust and Religious Minorities (leading partner), the EWC and the Department of Teacher Education and School Research, University of Oslo. It has been implemented in 11 schools over the whole project period (2012 to 2015) in Oslo and its neighbouring counties, each project cycle involving four to five schools simultaneously over a period of six months. From 2016, the project will geographically expand to other parts of Norway.

The overall project goal is to support teachers in reflecting on the situation in their own schools and equip them with knowledge and educational approaches and methods that help them to become agents of change for inclusive and democratic school cultures.

During the six months of each cycle, the entire teaching staff from each school participates in three seminars with theoretical and historical content, combined with hands-on methodological exercises, inspiring uses in learning processes inside and outside the classroom. At the same time, a selected team – including the head teacher – takes part in the process of analysing the school's situation regarding participation and views on minorities and prejudices, resulting in the planning and

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17. Dembra website (in Norwegian: http://www.hlsenteret.no/undervisning/dembra/index.html).

organisation of local activities in each participating school. These activities aim at improving the school ethos and climate, keeping in mind that the prevention of racism and anti-Semitism is not limited to teaching and learning in the classroom. During the whole project cycle, the teams receive support from the organisers, both online and during school visits by members of the project group.

My action research started at the end of the first project cycle and lasted the entire second project cycle (November 2013 to March 2014).

From the beginning, there were disagreements in the project group regarding the overall approach. Some colleagues advocated a focus on the transfer of knowledge and skills geared towards school subjects and syllabuses, whereas others suggested a focus on the whole school environment. This "whole school approach" is based on the assumption that racism and anti-Semitism are phenomena related to individual, institutional (school) and societal levels and that the project needs to facilitate processes in which teachers create interactions involving colleagues, students and parents, aiming to change school culture. In this view, teaching is of course an integral aspect, but it requires much more intense interaction between the project organisers and the teachers.

For me, it was logical to initiate processes of reflection and change in the participating schools in the light of my understanding of the prevention of anti-Semitism as it has been outlined above. I also assumed that inviting teachers from the Dembra schools to critically explore and develop their practice would require the same type of self-reflexivity[18] from us, the organisers of the project. This directed my attention towards the concept of critical friendship:

> Your critical friend (also called a "critical colleague" or "learning partner") is someone whose opinion you value and who is able to critique your work and help you see it in a new light. Critique is essential for helping us to evaluate the quality of the research. (McNiff 2010: 31)

In this context, the possibility of taking part in the action research project offered by the Pestalozzi Programme suited my interests and needs. It provided a framework (a limited time frame, structured along the steps of the action research process), facilitation via an online platform, and the opportunity to learn from and share with other members of the group. For me it was an opportunity to complement my theoretical knowledge about action research with practical experience, while linking a systematically reflective process to my engagement in the Dembra project.

Initially, I intended to link the Pestalozzi project to my responsibility to support the teams of teachers and school heads in their tasks (as described above). However, I quickly realised that there was another layer in the Dembra project I needed to concentrate on – interaction and collaboration within the project group. As noted, there was underlying conflict, or at least tension, between an approach of transmission of knowledge and skills for classroom teaching and a more comprehensive "whole school" approach. Therefore I decided to focus my action research on the

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18. Reflexive is related to the individual's capacity to critically explore own attitudes and actions – reflective is related to a type of practice which is constantly reflected and adjusted with regard to its value base (Bolton 2010).

possibilities and limitations of a reflexive community of practice, as manifested in the project group, and the effects this would have on my work with the Dembra schools.

Though my action research did not address teachers and school heads from the participating schools as critical friends and (potential) members of a community of practice, the co-operative, mutually supporting and self-reflective work in the project group could have positive effects on the degree to which we are able to support the school teams in becoming "reflecting, planning, acting communities".

Research methodology

The facilitator of the Pestalozzi action research group, Branko Bognar, had designed an introductory lecture about action research (http://goo.gl/EhoQQn), in which the different approaches in the field (e.g. technical, participatory, critical action research, living theory) were introduced. I easily placed myself in the "critical" or "emancipa-tory" approach. In fact, I wanted my action research to be transformative – not only to conduct the Dembra project more effectively, according to a logical framework (with goals, expected outcomes and indicators) and as defined in the application to the funding agency, but also to empower teachers and schools to positively change their practice, school ethos and school culture. Action research in this sense needs to link the project group's interaction and co-operation to the ambition to support the Dembra participants in becoming "agents of change".

Regarding these different relations (members of the project group v. teachers constituting the Dembra school teams), I found some useful distinctions in the Carr and Kemmis publication *Becoming critical*, wherein they sketch out different positions and relations in the action research process, including that of "process consultancy":

> In "practical" action research, outside facilitators form co-operative relationships with practitioners, helping them to articulate their own concerns, plan strategic action for change, monitor the problems and effects of changes, and reflect on the value and consequences of the changes actually achieved. This is sometimes called a "process consultancy" role. In such cases, outsiders may work with individual practitioners or work with groups of practitioners on common concerns but without any systematic development of the practitioner group as a self-reflective community. (Carr and Kemmis 1986: 203)

This describes pretty well the relationship I have with the teams of the participating schools. It will not be possible to engage them in the whole process of reflection about their own schools' realities and professional practices. But it is my task to facilitate their interactive process of analysing, reflecting, planning and improving practices.

With the project group, however, I assumed that we would have the opportunity to work closely together in sharing our experiences, analysing them in the light of our personal and professional ambitions – as reflected in the project goals:

> A self-reflective community is created when a group of practitioners comes together to reflect, not only on their own professional practices, but on the practices and functions of education more widely. (Sandretto 2007: 3)

Table 1 shows the parallel work on the three layers of my action plan, and indicates what kind of data was collected in each.

Table 1: Action research plan

What (aims)	How (actions)	Data
Build a reflective community of practice	Arranging meetings, agreeing on common aims and procedures, establishing modes of exchange, producing documentation	E-mail exchanges, recordings from meetings, notes from meetings, action research diary
Continue self-reflection on my role, motivation and actions in the project	Keeping an action research diary, asking the reflective community for feedback	Action research diary, and eventually recordings from meetings in the reflective community group
Develop the elements of Dembra in which I am involved, so that they reflect my values and the project's reflective approach	Tracing changes which result from my reflections and exchanges with critical friends	Notes taken during workshops, video recordings, feedback from critical friends

The data was gathered from November 2013 to March 2014. As shown in Table 1, different types of data were available for the different layers of my action research process. I had hoped to have the chance to communicate directly about my action research with my colleagues in the project group by inviting them to take part as "critical friends". However, only four of the six who had been invited agreed. In the context of an attempt to constitute a community of practice, the reasons given for refraining from participation are of importance and I will get back to this at a later point. The communication with and responses of those colleagues who decided to participate constituted my main empirical data, composed of e-mail exchanges with group members and audio recordings from the first and last meeting of the action research group. My action research diary is a supplementary resource in reconstructing the attempt to establish a reflexive community of practice.

Regarding the third aim, the development of the work with the Dembra school teams, I identified some crucial "issues" during the first project cycle which allowed me to study the degree of reflexivity/critical friendship in the project group and some of the effects this had on the work with the schools, namely the relation/balance between knowledge and reflection in the training of school staff, and the development of a survey of "friendly" and "unfriendly" critiques.

The data sources used to explore these issues are e-mail conversations with colleagues, the protocol from a midterm evaluation meeting of the Dembra project, a videotaped training session and a discussion about it with a project group member via e-mail and SMS, as well as my action research diary. In addition I have documentation of the feedback from the school teams following the training sessions and some documentation of the work of the teams indicating the degree to which the self-reflective approach of the project group was appreciated by the school teams and led to reflexivity on their part.

Steps in the action research process

"Tuning into" my action research – Looking for support in the project group

In October 2013, I started to inform the members of the project group about my action research and invited them to join. Three colleagues from the leading institution of the project, the Norwegian Center for Studies of the Holocaust and Religious Minorities, were interested and agreed to take part in an orientation meeting in which I would inform them about action research and their possible participation in it.

However, two colleagues from the third partner institution refrained from taking part. In an e-mail response, E. M. explained his reasons:

> Thank you for the invitation to join this reflective process and action research based on the implementation of Dembra! ... It is, of course, flattering to be invited. Since you are right, this project comprises steep and bold learning curves for us. (E. M., personal communication, 29 November 2013)

He then made a critical remark about the action research focus I had chosen (he was sceptical that I would manage to collect data about my work with the teachers, something he was proven right about, since I moved away from that aim), and described his own learning process in Dembra, related to the "existential challenges" teachers deal with, concluding:

> So, there is little doubt that Dembra contains lots of (explosive) stuff. Despite this fascination about being a part of Dembra I don't have the motivation or capacity to systematically invest in research about what I am doing. (E. M., personal communication, 29 November 2013)

He ended his message by saying that he had talked to the other colleague from his institution, who had also decided not to take part in the action research, even if for somewhat different reasons.

I appreciated that E. M. had taken the time to think about my invitation and share some of his thoughts about it. I felt respected and acknowledged and did, of course, respect his decision. On the other hand, it made me a bit sad to see my colleagues engaged in deep reflective processes related to Dembra (in E. M.'s case, as he put it, about encountering "the existential challenges of teachers in the classroom situation"), without wishing to engage in a collaborative effort to develop and improve our project's responses to these issues. In the project group we often engaged in discussions about the overall direction and approach of the project, which everyone seemed to experience as tiring and not very constructive – while our ongoing practice offered so much experience that would have been worth using as a resource in order to develop the best possible responses and support for the participating teachers.

Reading this message again while writing this report some months later, I realise that there are two crucial points here, which relate to our overall difficulties in communicating about Dembra: the first is the notion of "systematic investigation". Obviously, my colleague didn't wish to take part in an effort to systematically reflect, document and produce insights about our shared practice, which at the same time could help us to improve this practice and produce and publish documentation that could be shared with and used by others. Did he feel it was not worth it or that it would be too much

effort? In my view, a shared systematic reflection about the experiences in the ongoing project could have saved us many disputes at a very abstract level. But maybe this didn't seem to be a promising option due to the "explosive stuff" in the project group?

This leads to a second point: the question of trust. There is a vulnerability related to the "explosive stuff" E. M. mentions in his message. We didn't dispute hypothetical issues but choices that needed to be made in an ongoing project. We could have failed in our efforts. Worse, we could have left the teachers who participated in the project with the feeling that they had wasted their time participating in Dembra. Such doubts can create anxiety – but they also make you strive harder. For me, striving harder also meant improving our co-operation in the project group by initiating shared reflection and learning. But the climate in the Dembra project group at that time probably was not the most trustful one, and I interpret E. M.'s message also in that way, that he chose not to share the rather "personal" and vulnerable aspects of his Dembra involvement with the intensity of a "systematic investigation".

Though I appreciate E. M.'s response and honesty, I feel his position is somewhat symptomatic of the limitations in the co-operation within the Dembra project group. Disagreeing on some of the fundamental features of the project and at the same time feeling vulnerable on "unknown grounds", the project members didn't develop the trust and routines which would have been necessary to find common solutions through systematic co-operation and reflection.

Action research dinner

In the end, three colleagues (all of them employed at the lead institution for the project) did consider taking part in the action research endeavour. On 9 December 2013, they came to my house for what we called an "action research dinner". I have a long history of co-operation with all of them and we have even developed friendships. So the atmosphere was relaxed and it took a while before we turned to the subject of action research. I used Branko Bognar's Prezi presentation (http://goo.gl/EhoQQn) on action research.

The first to make an active link to what action research could be in the context of Dembra was K. V.:

> So, now we just put some ideas on the table and then see what can actually be relevant and okay … so, for me it is interesting, if we should join the action research, "did we forget something important within…?" (K. V., personal communication, 9 December 2013)

He also made some early suggestions on what he might be interested in investigating:

> What I would be curious about is linked to what I at times fail somehow to do, and that is about maintaining and de-briefing conversations. Or, in general: conversations with the teachers, during the plenary sessions … school sessions. (K. V., personal communication, 9 December 2013)

He concluded that this question of how to interact with participants so they get engaged in reflections could be his action research focus – this would not be limited to improving Dembra but would be a part of his aim to improve his practice as an educator in his institution.

Next, M. G. expressed a wish to take part in work with the school teams. At the same time he made it clear that his involvement in the Dembra project already was very time consuming and he was not sure if he would be able to intensify his engagement. But he noted that the inputs from the project group were important and that "following up the teams is important. There will be no change, if they don't do anything more with it". (M. G., personal communication, 29 November 2013)

This triggered a conversation on the need to be in contact with the teams from the schools throughout the entire project period. Some of us expressed that they felt a distance since they only did the training for the entire teacher staff at some schools and missed out on the more intense work with the teams.

The last of my colleagues to reflect on her personal interest in Dembra-related action research was T. B. Though she was surprised that she was expected to develop an action research focus for herself, she quickly formulated a topic related to her role in Dembra: teaching about anti-Semitism: "How to teach about anti-Semitism that engages teachers" (T. B., personal communication, 29 November 2013).

In this regard, T. B. outlined a tension between a "transferring" knowledge approach and an approach that, being based on stories about the negative effects of anti-Semitism, appeals to empathy with the victims of anti-Semitism. She felt she needed to balance cognitive and emotional aspects in teaching.

I also mentioned self-reflexivity with regard to one's own prejudices. This led to a general conversation about the challenge of integrating how a teacher might integrate how s/he deals with her/his own prejudices into teaching about prejudice. The conversation touched upon some experiences with prejudices expressed by participating teachers in previous Dembra trainings and T. B. concluded that her perspective would be very much the same as K. V.'s: handling interactions in the context of Dembra trainings.

During this dinner, the four of us identified very important common ground regarding an interest in reflecting on how racism and anti-Semitism can be prevented and handled in our own practice as project facilitators. The intensity and quality of an open and constructive exchange of thought that evening was a brilliant example of critical friendship among colleagues (Kember et al. 1997).

I was very optimistic that this kind of process would continue and that our interaction as a group could form the empirical basis of my action research. However, things turned out differently due to our professional and private duties:

- ▶ K. V. was on parental leave for two months, M. G. substituted for him as project leader, which left him with more administrative duties related to Dembra;
- ▶ T. B. and M. G. applied for a PhD position at their institution, and needed to prioritise writing a project outline along with their regular professional obligations;
- ▶ I travelled a lot for my job, which limited my possibilities for face-to-face meetings.

As a result, the group only met three times between December 2013 and March 2014 (after the first meeting never all the members). So, in a way, we never

developed a continuous reflective practice. Instead, communication and co-operation with the individual members of this group became the place for shared reflections and at times approximated critical friendships.

Looking back, I think that this dinner – despite raising expectations regarding the continuity and intensity of our action research co-operation – did create a common awareness about the need to share experiences and support each other in reflecting on our own roles and contributions to Dembra for the purpose of project development. In the rest of this report, I will focus on how these shared reflections and interactions with critical friends within the project group helped me in developing my Dembra-related practice. I will also reflect on the positive impact of this reflexive practice on several aspects of the Dembra project.

Towards a distinction between criticism, "friendly critiques" and being a critical friend

One aspect of the Dembra project that all the project group members could agree on was a baseline survey on a democratic environment, group-focused prejudices and hostility, which was conducted in all participating schools. The survey was anonymous and voluntary, and the Norwegian service for data protection in the social sciences (NSD) had obliged us to inform the parents of all pupils about this. We felt in fact that we were quite in line with all ethical requirements. As of January 2014, more than 2 500 pupils and teachers had responded to the survey (which has been redesigned and improved since the first cycle).

During the second cycle, two mothers contacted us. The first, who introduced herself as a German, was worried about the fact that one of the questions in the survey listed "Germans" among the groups that might face prejudices. She was afraid that this would be embarrassing for her son, especially since she couldn't perceive any hostility against Germans as a group in contemporary Norway (in contrast to the recent past, when Germans were associated with the Nazi occupation of Norway during the Second World War). Being a German myself, I responded that we had made a very clear decision to put Germans on the list – since many people (like her) still remembered that there had been such resentments in the past.

I experienced this request as a very honest one, and it challenged me to make transparent my/our reasons (criteria) for doing things as I/we did them. Since she also made us aware of a formulation that could easily be misunderstood, I felt (and told her) that she really had helped us improve our work.

The other request came from a mother who introduced herself as a researcher. She was convinced that she had found an inconsistency in our survey regarding voluntary participation, linked to the fact that some questions in the online survey couldn't be skipped. So, students who didn't wish to answer these questions needed to cancel their participation in the whole survey. The teachers had been told that the students could do this at any moment. But this didn't convince the researcher-mother and in a conversation spanning about 10 e-mails (with T. B.), she accused us of having violated the principles of research ethics.

In the project group, we started to feel that she was trying to "hunt us down" and we started to wonder what her motives were. We did not, however, ask her this since we feared that this would only prompt more hostility – in all her messages there had not been a single sign of interest in the purpose of the survey or a consideration that the set-up might be appropriate for this purpose. I started to think myself that "voluntary" participation in the institutional context of the school, where students are forced to give tests every week, might be an interesting topic to reflect upon – but this was not what she intended.

Since she was so obsessively insisting on technicalities, I felt at some point that her whole agenda was to prove that we were "unprofessional", no more, no less. That left me angry, and at some point, sad. At the same time, one of the other members of the Pestalozzi action research group, Sanja Simel, published an action research diary in which she portrayed one of her critical friends like this:

> Well, what to say about I. … She is the most critical one, but she does not give constructive criticism but mostly negative, and she does not see anything wrong with it; she is actually proud of that "skill." (S. Simel, personal communication, 7 January 2014)

It struck me that she was facing the same situation, of someone "being critical". This led to the following reflections, noted in my action research diary:

> Critical thinking is one of its centre pieces of our Norwegian project. This is what we wish teachers to teach students and practice with them when facing prejudices, stereotypes and hostility against minorities. Here, critical is attached to the idea of finding criteria for what is a valid argument, a legitimate statement and to identify alternative ways of thinking/speech (exploring the validity/legitimacy of these). All bound to the Kantian tradition (his "critiques" (Kant 1781/1996; 1788/1993; 1790/1988) were explorations of what reason, judgement, etc. might be) and, of course, Habermas' idea of *deliberation* (Habermas 1996).

> These idea(l) of being "critical" need to inform the idea of a "critical friend." Someone who helps you to see, understand, what you wouldn't be able to see and understand alone, due to your limitations, biases, missing access to information, everything which friendly-minded "others" can bring to you, share with you. Not at all for altruistic reasons only, but in order to take part in – and profit from – this constant search for better insight. (C. Lenz, personal communication, 27 January 2014)

Having experienced this form of constructive/friendly critique in developing the survey made it easier to relate to the aggressive criticism of those who chose to insist on technicalities, instead of engaging us in a dialogue on the serious ethical issues we were facing.

Balancing cognition and (self)-reflection

In this section, I will describe an example of how shared reflections about the ongoing Dembra activities contributed to the development of critical friendship and at the same time to project development.

One element of the workshops for the school teams was an exercise in which the participants reflected on some of the project's core concepts, such as tolerance, racism and anti-Semitism.[19]

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19. The session has been videotaped and is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=zI-TlGVhKz4#sthash.LX0GFS1d.dpuf, accessed 11 July 2015.

M. G., a member of the project group and one of my critical friends, had attended the session and expressed a critical view on the exercise, especially regarding the concept of anti-Semitism. He was sceptical that letting people formulate "working definitions" based on their existing assumptions was a useful start, since this might just reaffirm their existing prejudices. In addition, he was not satisfied with the selection of definitions I had chosen for the second part of the exercise (in which the participants were asked to critically reflect on these contradictory definitions and their previous working definitions). We engaged in a conversation that mostly took place via e-mail:

> Hi Claudia, it is this aspect of anti-Semitism I assume to be lacking at [Helen] Fein (and others) which I think is essential for understanding at least central parts of it: "It is not the individual Jew but the Jewish spirit and Jewish consciousness that has taken over in the world" (Marr 1879). Good weekend! Best regards. (M. G., personal communication, 21 February 2014)

Here, M. G. expressed the concern that our participants would end up with a wrong or incomplete understanding of anti-Semitism, providing one definition that he felt covered what Dembra participants should learn during our project. This touched upon the core of the tension in the Dembra project: was our aim to "teach" the most correct knowledge (in fact, the definition of anti-Semitism is contested in the academic debate) or was it essential that participants be able to critically reflect on different ways of defining anti-Semitism and to contextualise them, not least with regard to ideological and political (ab)uses? I hoped M. G. could relate to my way of facilitating conceptual work and clarify where he regarded this to be problematic.

In my reply, I asked M. G. about:

> one thing which is important for my Dembra related action research: We have a video clip (http://youtu.be/zl-TlGVhKz4) about the concept learning exercise at the team workshop on 21 Jan. Can you have a look, especially on the part when the group speaks who had the concept of anti-Semitism and my reaction on them? And can you write some sentences on
>
> 1) What you think is problematic here?
>
> 2) Which ideas you would have for changes in the set-up of the exercise and/or my moderation that would have made it less problematic in your eyes? (C. Lenz, personal communication, 21 February 2014)

I received the following answer:

> My problem is, as I have indicated, somewhat fundamental: the definition [of anti-Semitism, CL] they elaborated is, as far as I can see, meaningless: "Discrimination against Jews. Important to distinguish between Jews and the state of Israel." We do not need a particular concept for it: discrimination is discrimination. The best I can recommend is to hand out the quote I sent you or at least something that can bring them on the track of something reasonable … I discuss this also directly with you if you wish. Best, H. (M. G., personal communication, 25 February 2014)

Even if I was not convinced that the ideas about anti-Semitism the group had come up with were "meaningless", as M. G. suggested, his critique made me aware that I should be careful to call the result of their initial reflections "working definitions" because this might be associated with something more elaborated and final than was the case. In the working process this was the first, intermediate stage of "stock taking" of the participants' own assumptions. So I decided to change the naming

of that step in the working process to "initial assumptions of the group", and communicated this to M. G.:

> Hi M., thank you for your feedback … Moreover, I think I will have less focus on a "working definition" next time, since this despite the intermediate intention can be associated with "definition" and something static. Rather focus on "clarification of initial assumptions". This is what it is meant to be: a helping tool to reflect that we never are "blank" when we enter a learning process – as if it were a void to be filled with knowledge – so Dembra is neither the beginning nor the end of the great journey of learning and reflection. So, once more: thank you for being a critical friend. (C. Lenz, personal communication, 27 February 2014)

This resulted in a very short SMS reply:

> I have quickly read your e-mail: Understanding instead of definition is genial. (M. G., personal communication, 1 March 2014)

Summing up, this interaction came close to the kind of shared reflection I had hoped for. On my part, it had resulted in a clarification and adjustment of the terminology I used in the moderation of the training unit. I do not know if it resulted in any reflection on M. G.'s part on the necessity not only of "proper knowledge" but also the awareness that one always encounters new knowledge with some pre-knowledge and assumptions that shouldn't be disregarded. Within my action research, this counts as an example of the ways in which critical friendship can help one become aware of unintended meanings and messages in one's own practice. In this interaction, we had come close to the idea that at its best:

> participatory action research is a social process of collaborative learning realized by groups of people who join together in changing the practices through which they interact in a shared social world in which, for better or worse, we live with the consequences of one another's actions. (Kemmis and McTaggart 2005: 563)

In the next section, I will describe how this process of collaborative practice made me more aware of the differences between criticism and constructive critiques and the necessity to develop the latter as an attitude guiding co-operation.

Exploring reflexivity and critical friendship in the Dembra project

At the end of my action research period, in March 2014, I wished to explore to what extent a reflective community of practice had emerged and how far critical friendships with some of my colleagues had developed during the first cycle of the Dembra project. Of course, those colleagues who had agreed to be a part of the action research process were an important source in this regard. I invited them to another meeting (the third one since December) on 28 March 2014. A week before that, the first Dembra project cycle had concluded with a last workshop for the teams from the Dembra schools.

For the purpose of my action research and in the light of plans to include an action research dimension in the last cycle of the Dembra project, the conversation had the character of "stock taking" – Where are we right now? Which of the preconditions for collaborative action research did we achieve, what couldn't be achieved and why? I decided to focus on two aspects:

- ▶ has the whole project group improved in sharing reflections and developing critical friendship throughout the first cycle of the Dembra project?
- ▶ have we (the subgroup of those who agreed to participate in my action research) developed critical friendships in this period?[20]

The beginning of the conversation was difficult; there was some uneasiness, which might be reflected in this first answer provided by K. V.:

> We have in some regards accepted that we have some disagreements and in there we do not go further with critical reflections. So the answer is both yes and no … I think we have accepted some limitations of change and reflection. (K. V., personal communication, 28 March 2014)

Looking back touched upon difficult issues, including disagreements and limitations which were not always easy to talk about, especially since not everyone involved in the conflicts was part of the conversation. But K. V. eventually described the situation somewhat more positively:

> I think all of us have a better knowledge of each other's views and communicate somehow. At the same time you can say … I think we have moved quite far in the entire group, too, towards some common reflection. And so we have these limits which I think we have not managed to overcome. That's my diagnosis. (K. V., personal communication, 28 March 2014)

However, at this point, the project group seemed to have been portrayed as more or less frozen in the acceptance of contradicting ideas on the way the project should be designed and run, which resulted in a division of labour/compartmentalisation of responsibilities. A lack of shared understanding of the project had, again, resulted in limitations and avoidance of sharing experiences and reflections regarding the ongoing project. This was supported by M. G.:

> We are only partly a community – everyone goes along with his own parts. (personal communication, 28 March 2014)

And he suggested why, in his view, this division had occurred:

> In my opinion there has been insecurity all the time. (M. G., personal communication, 28 March 2014).

But why should this be a factor blocking a shared process of reflection? M. G. pointed to the anxiety of failure, regarding the expectations of our project. He recalled that teachers had sometimes articulated the wish for a "quick fix" recipe:

> M. G.: But you cannot be sure that this exists – and I think, in fact, that this does not exist. It is not just like carrying out one method with all the students and then it is fixed.
>
> P. N.: This is one of the fundamental critiques of the anti-mobbing programmes …
>
> M. G.: And I believe in this, and I stick to the thought that … no there are no recipes.
>
> C. L.: But there is a doubt – do you do the right thing?
>
> M. G.: Yes. (M. G., P. N. and C. Lenz, personal communication, 28 March 2014)

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20. In his feedback to my action research diary, Branko Bognar suggested that I should have started the conversation with an open question of the type "how has the critical friendship in this group developed?" Agreeing that open questions are more appropriate to explore the ways in which other people make sense of situations, I decided to ask in this direct way since we had very little time (30 minutes) and I wished to provoke my colleagues and prevent them from avoiding difficult issues. After some initial hesitation, this seemed to work.

M. G. and K. V. agreed that it was much more difficult to find an answer when it came to the prevention of racism and prejudice than to judge the quality of work of a car mechanic who is supposed to "fix the car". I eventually summarised the paradox: the project aimed at creating personal reflexivity and reflection regarding educational practice but at the same time its members were insecure about whether they were doing the right thing to reach this aim. This insecurity could have been a driving force for a joint reflection on what does it mean to do the right thing and learn from the mistakes we were making on the way. But as a whole project group, we didn't manage to release the insecurity, share it and actively exchange our experiences.

M. G. assumed that the tensions in the project might have been so powerful that addressing them would have put the entire work of the project at risk:

> Maybe we wouldn't have moved anywhere if we all the time had been aware that this is a shared project … then, we wouldn't have managed to take the next steps and just would have stood still. (M. G., personal communication, 28 March 2014)

The conversation then turned towards the potential of differences and even contradicting views, especially within the frame of a project that wished to build competence to negotiate differences among teachers:

> It is also a strength that we have cultural relativists and cultural essentialists … in our group. We can hit the tone in a teacher staff room … we communicate better with them than they do among themselves. (K. V., personal communication, 28 March 2014)

Here, K. V. referred to occasions when teachers talked very negatively about certain political views even though it was clear that some of their colleagues present held these positions – but there wouldn't be any open disagreement or debate:

> K. V.: I believe it is very valuable that we have diversity in our group.
>
> M. G.: I do completely agree.
>
> C. L.: And I think that we have not realized this potential. (K. V., M. G. and C. Lenz, personal communication, 28 March 2014)

He continued:

> It might be interesting to reflect on how we could use the disagreement in the project group in order to focus the project even more. (K. V., personal communication, 28 March 2014)

Here, we had reached a point where the conversation could have moved from looking back on the process of the project cycle which had just ended to looking forward and reflecting on "if" and "how" critical friendship could be developed further in the ongoing second and the third (and last) project cycle. At the same time, the conversation had already helped me to understand some of the hesitation and even resistance to engaging in a community of practice, a resistance that might be a more fundamental reason for the difficulties in my action research than all the other "objective" obstacles we had faced.

Conclusion: obstacles for the community of practice – Opportunity structures for critical friendship

My action research gave me a hard time. It was an emotional journey, comprising hopes, aspirations, setbacks and disappointment, but also great moments of learn-ing

and discovery. In this last section, I will summarise my experiences by analysing the reasons for the difficulties and, finally, the limitations in establishing critical friendships and a reflexive community of practice in our project group. So, what were the obstacles?

I start with some external factors. The first was a constant lack of time. Dembra is a complex project and since it was a pilot, we hadn't developed any routines of co-operation. Much time was consumed by "learning by doing", "trial and error" and, sometimes, making up for errors. Each member of the project group spent more time on the project than estimated (only one of us had – for a short period – no other projects to work with other than Dembra).

Since action research was not an integral part of the project, this extra dimension of the project work was not prioritised, given our high workload and recurring "emergencies" in the project. The personal situation of some project group members made it doubly difficult to focus on this additional element. Another relevant factor is what I would call the lack of authorisation and "mandate" to conduct action research. I suggested incorporating action research to the project group. Therefore, it was probably identified as my personal interest rather than something that could help conduct the project more effectively. This lack of mandate to take the lead for an additional element in the project had a negative impact on my capacity to create a clear framework for action research co-operation (e.g. meeting frequency and obligation to show up to appointments). As a consequence, my attempts to motivate my colleagues were accompanied by the constant feeling of "demanding" too much – sending reminders, asking for support, etc.

Further, my colleagues had other priorities. Taking part in the action research (that is, a systematic reflection on our experiences in the project as a community of practice) was not a priority. But here, we need to look beyond external factors.

Looking back, I am very sure that there was another reason for my difficulty to motivate my colleagues to use our critical friendship (the existence of which, I think, my action research proved) to systematically improve our own contribution to the Dembra project and, in this way, the entire project. This was my lack of experience.

This was my first encounter with action research and my own understanding of it developed along the way. My messages to my critical friends regarding what action research is all about, what they could gain from it, and what it would require from them were probably quite fuzzy and confusing. The term "research", after all, is still associated with rigorous research design and methodology applied "on" some object of investigation. Action research, in contrast, means juggling with and making sense of many dynamic variables – related to subjects and their actions, not to passive objects – all the time (Dick 1993). In hindsight, I could have guided others through the process more clearly and confidently.

But did my colleagues – beyond all practical issues – really desire to enter this deep process of (self-)critical exploration of our way of "doing things" in Dembra? I see another factor here, which I call the lack of intrinsic motivation among my colleagues.

The underlying dissent in the project group regarding a feasible educational approach to prevent group-focused enmity made it difficult to engage in any intense interaction. Engaging in critical friendship and openly discussing our different, individual goals and ambitions in the project seemed to be "dangerous" – the chance of turning these differences into a productive resource was not realised.

From the perspective of participatory action research, one could say: these are exactly the conditions under which people should co-operate, form a community of practice and jointly reflect on how to achieve the aims of the project, in order to develop the best solutions for recurring challenges. So, why was it so difficult to establish this sense of being a reflective community?

Recalling the entire process of action research and especially the final conversation with my critical friends, avoidance seemed to be crucial issue: being insecure about what you are doing makes you feel vulnerable. You feel everyone will know that your actions are not built on the firm ground of "having done this before" but are, rather, attempts to make sense of a new context and situation. Given the underlying disagreement it seems that project members did not expect that the systematic shared reflection and feedback of their colleagues would be supportive and constructive but just a sort of, "I knew that this couldn't work". This seemed to be the case as long as we related to the entire project group and even more when we started to discuss the "overall" approach of the project.

However, my exploration of co-operation with individual colleagues on specific aspects of the project (the survey, the workshops for the school teams, and the methods applied there) showed that sharing experiences, reflections and ideas improved these concrete elements of the project work significantly. Obviously we managed, to some degree, to become reflective practitioners (Schön 1983). But we didn't manage to establish a reflexive community of practice and, in that way, become living examples of what we wished the participating school teams to become.

I still think that the Dembra project has great potential for action research, and I would like to implement this in a "proper" way – as an integral part of the project design – during a possible future continuation of the project or any implementation of a similar approach. It would be especially interesting to find out if co-operation as a community of practice within the project group can have positive impacts on the work with the schools, for example regarding the capacity of teachers to develop critical friendships and co-operation that fosters personal and professional development.

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Becoming a reflective community of practice

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Introduction

In the past the "reflective teacher" was a vision for great educational reformers. These days, reflective, thoughtful teachers are a prerequisite for schools seeking to fulfil their educational goals. Therefore, it is not enough for a teacher to just have knowledge of specialty topics; they need to be aware of the values, beliefs that guide them in their personal and professional life. Moreover, Schön (1995) considers that teachers and other professionals should not just apply knowledge, but generate it through "reflection-in-action".

Since learning occurs "in the context of, and as a result of social interaction" (van Harmelen, in Pritchard and Woollard 2010: 34) with peers, reflective communities of practice are important in order to allow teachers to share their knowledge, experiences and beliefs (Caine and Caine 2010). The Pestalozzi Community of Practice, a group of people "informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise" (Wenger and Snyder 2000: 139), was the core element for professional learning and developing the reflexivity of the participating teachers. Through our meetings, we conducted activities that aimed at obtaining consciousness of our influence as teachers, and reflected on our practices. Thus, to mirror and be mirrored.

Research context

I studied Political Science at Panteion University in Athens, Greece. Afterwards, I pursued postgraduate studies at Reading University in the UK and at the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. Between 1985 and 1987 I worked with refugees at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees office in Athens.

Becoming a teacher, I think, was inevitable for me. Since I was a child, I used to play the role of teacher with my friends. I gathered them round in a circle and told them stories, or I "taught" them what I had learned at school. Later on, as a teenager, I read A.S. Neill's (1960) book about Summerhill and I think that it was a very significant moment for me, as democracy, love and freedom seemed to be a reality in that school.

I have been working as a teacher of citizenship, law and sociology in high school for about 24 years, and I became a school advisor three years ago. Working as a school advisor, I have many duties to accomplish across a very wide geographical area consisting of nine municipalities belonging to the regions of Sterea Ellada and Thessalía. My duties are to provide professional support to teachers of social and political studies. Therefore, I travel very often to schools in these areas.

According to a law introduced in 2013, I have to evaluate teachers' performance of their duties, as well as their didactic methods and performance in class. I am expected to support educational innovations, and in monitoring the realisation of these innovations, I write reports and submit proposals and remarks to the Institute of Educational Policy. Furthermore, as pedagogical advisor I am responsible for a number of schools in Lamia, and I deal with any pedagogical issues that might arise in these schools. I co-operate regularly with headmasters and teachers regardless of their specialties.

I am also responsible for citizenship teachers' professional development through occasional seminars. These seminars can be conducted by school advisors, either in co-operation with another advisor or a university professor. They are very diverse and may be focused on subjects such as the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in teaching, subject specific curricula or students' misbehaviour.

The Greek educational sector has undergone a number of reforms in recent years:
- ▶ new curricula have been designed and new textbooks provided for secondary education;
- ▶ student-centred teaching has gradually superseded teacher-centred teaching;
- ▶ projects, at the upper secondary level, and experiential learning, at lower secondary level, have been introduced into the curricula. These promote both co-operative learning and inquiry. However, they represent a meagre proportion of student time (e.g. experiential activities take up an hour a week in the first and second year and two hours a week in the third year of lower secondary, while project learning takes up two hours a week in the first year of upper secondary, just one hour in second year and is not part of the third year);
- ▶ some teachers have begun to use ICTs according to the Ministry of Education and Institute of Education Policy initiative for developing teachers' skills in using ICT in class.

However, the education system is still largely traditional. Society in general and parents in particular expect very high marks in the national exams so students can get into university. Nevertheless, educators are confronted with processes of change and renewal and schools are now required to perform self-evaluations in order to improve themselves and the education sector in general.

The teachers who participated in this action research project teach citizenship, law, sociology and economics. The group consisted of four women, aged 49 to 55 years, and a man aged about 40. One teaches at lower secondary level, three teach at upper secondary level and one teaches at lower secondary as well as upper secondary levels.

The participants are also employed in different schools. Three teach in the Lamia area, and one in an upper school in the Stylida area, 18 miles from Lamia, where she lives. Another teacher works in an upper school in Kamena Vourla, 40 miles from Lamia, where he lives.

We began our meetings at the end of October 2013 and held our last meeting at the end of June 2014. At the beginning of our co-operation, we agreed that we would have regular meetings, four hours once a month. Our meetings took place in the afternoons, following school lessons. This provided support and stability for the process of action research to take place.

Research problem and plan

Since one of my duties is to conduct seminars or workshops aiming at teachers' professional development, I organise them regularly. Nevertheless, such seminars and/or workshops do not give me the opportunity to make deeper contacts and support teachers in carrying out significant changes, since this is a more complex process.

With the aim of enabling deeper communication and co-operation, I planned to establish a community of practice which, according to Wenger, has three dimensions:

▶ What it is about – its joint enterprise as understood and continually renegotiated by its members.

▶ How it functions – the relationships of mutual engagement that bind members together into a social entity.

▶ What capability it has produced – the shared repertoire of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artifacts, vocabulary, styles, etc.) that members have developed over time (Wenger 1998).

Such a community of practice could give me the chance to fully live my values of co-operation, mutual respect and dialogue in the professional field. Particularly, I value the dialogue that is the core of democracy. Through dialogue you can involve people and be involved, you can reflect and "be reflected" and, in so doing, be a reflective citizen and in our case, a reflective educator striving to understand "what I do and how I understand what I do" (Schön 1995).

On the values inherent to education, I completely agree with Whitehead:

> education is a value-laden practical activity and we cannot distinguish a process as educational without making a value-judgment. I am taking such values to be the human goals which we use to give our lives their particular form. (Whitehead 1989)

I could not choose a better method than action research to promote learning. I consider learning a collective process and for me action research is a participatory method that allows participants, who are regarded as equals and unique human beings, to learn by reflection and engage in self-research in small groups. In addition, action research is an approach that "focuses rather on people studying themselves

and its aim is to improve your own self-understanding in order to see how you might influence your particular situation for good" (McNiff 1995).

Ten years ago, I had been a member of a community of practice, composed of seven secondary school teachers from different educational specialties. At that time, we were investigating how the way we had been brought up influenced our responses towards students' misbehaviour. It was an insightful experience for me.

This time, I established a community of practice to help teachers reduce the feelings of alienation that they might have experienced in their school environment, increase awareness about their inner conflicts, and develop readiness to be self-critical about their practices.

In planning my action research, I experienced what Schön refers to as "knowing-in-action", which means that I did not follow from the beginning the well-known action research cycle of planning, action, monitoring and reflection. Rather, in the beginning, I started to listen to and reflect on teachers' narratives about their daily practices in their classes with the help of my critical friend, Branko Bognar.

However, as I was thinking about my plans, I took into consideration what Schön (1995) has argued, that the most effective interventions "are those that try to draw teachers together within the framework of a school and to get them to think in various ways about what they are doing". I also kept in mind Carr and Kemmis's (1986: 15) direction that action research is:

- ▶ improvement of practice;
- ▶ improvement of the understanding of practice;
- ▶ improvement of the situation in which the practice takes place.

Understanding our values, beliefs and the conditions in which these have been formed is necessary to gain self-consciousness in the context of our lives, schools and communities. Therefore, I, as facilitator, planned to conduct a questionnaire to find out about teachers' and students' beliefs and values. As this was taking place, an important question came up: what were teachers doing to ensure and realise their values, beliefs and intentions, which they mentioned in the questionnaire and in our meetings, in their teaching practice? Was there any contradiction between what they believed and what they did in their practice? (Whitehead 1989).

Moreover, since action research is collaborative, which means involving not only those responsible for action, but also those who are directly concerned and influenced by the investigated practice, that is the students, the group planned to formulate a questionnaire asking the students to articulate their opinions regarding their teachers' didactic methods, express their interest in the subject, and assess the class environment. The purpose was to make teachers aware of what motivated their students' learning and what they should change in their teaching approach to address this.

After discussing the responses of students, I planned to ask teachers to devise lesson plans and present and discuss them at our group sessions. I hoped this would help them to plan changes in their teaching approach. Moreover, lesson plans would

indicate whether they organised their classes as transmitters of knowledge or whether they acted as mediators of learning.

My intention was also to follow as a critical friend one or two of the teachers in their classes, since this is a very rare practice in our schools. The plan was to videotape their teaching in order to discuss it and reflect on it later on. I proposed this because I believe that:

> teaching is a complex, ever-evolving activity wrought from disciplinary knowledge, human encounter and the institutional negotiation, that doing it well means thinking hard about it, weighing, deliberating, asking others for their take on action. (Rose 2003:x)

I hoped this would help teachers notice and discuss what really happens in their classrooms, and obtain a clear understanding of the quality of their teaching and the relationships they have with their students. It would also give them an opportunity to self-evaluate their practices and thus to improve their teaching.

I planned also to show the teachers some videos from TED (www.ted.com), and recommend that they read some articles on humanistic education. This was intended to "surprise" them since:

> it is through surprise that we come to generate new forms of understanding. The surprise interrupts the routine, spontaneous activity. And then in the response to surprise, the inquirer reflects both on the surprising phenomenon and how she has been thinking about it. (Schön 1995:4-5)

My concern was to liberate the curiosity of teachers and trigger the feeling that "everything is open to questioning and exploration" (Rogers 2013).

In my action research I included data collection methods such as a reflective diary on the Pestalozzi platform, audiotaped conversations, interviews, two questionnaires and some photos. As Caine and Caine (2010) point out, collecting data helps educators see what is actually happening at school and at the same time, it is the basis of professional learning communities.

Description of process, with interpretation

In this section I will describe where we started from, what we did, why and where we ended, and what I think this signifies (Winter and Munn-Giddings 2001).

I noted in my first diary entry that the issue which teachers brought up at our first meeting was students' misbehaviour and teachers' attitudes towards this behaviour. D. T. said that when a student misbehaves, he provokes him by insulting him in order to make him stop his "bad behaviour". He said that in this way he managed to "psychologically neutralise" students' aggression. I got the impression that D. T. was trying to use techniques which he had used in his previous work as a prison sociologist, and remarked that he was now working in a different context. I told him that his students would consider him an authoritarian, even if it were not the case.

M. M. admitted that she couldn't approach "disobedient" students and did not know how to include everyone in the learning process, especially the most "indifferent" ones. She needed to feel more complete as a teacher. When I asked her what she

thought needed to change, she had no answer. She and then F. T. acknowledged that in one of her classes only five students out of 25 were interested in actively participating. M. M. pointed out that other teachers who taught this class reported the same. When I suggested that they might be creating a kind of stereotype of this class and that, with their attitude, they might be reinforcing or even creating the disruptive behaviour, she seemed to experience a "Eureka" moment. She whispered that this could be the case. I was trying to point out that there could be a tendency on the part of teachers to underestimate students' potential to learn, and that such an attitude represents a self-fulfilling prophecy. Weinstein noted:

> When we respond to the individual differences among students by lowering our expectations and providing inferior educational opportunities, we underestimate the capacity of all children to grow intellectually and we fail to provide adequate tools for learning. In these ways, we confirm our own predictions. To prevent such educational tragedies we need to both embrace and support pedagogically a vision of possibility regarding the educational achievement of all our children. (Weinstein 2002: 2)

M. M. remarked that in her class the students did not get along with each other, they were indifferent towards each other, and they did not really co-operate. She felt that because of this class climate she could not work properly. Some students had said: "If someone doesn't agree with us then we are against him/her, we are enemies." The teacher concluded: "Such aggressiveness destroys any learning process."

My critical friend Branko commented:

> It is interesting that those teachers started their communication about the problem of students' misbehaving in their classrooms. Obviously, they see their job as some kind of controlling and managing people. It would be interesting to find out do they perceive themselves as transmitters of knowledge or as mediators of learning (Adams 2008). I am wondering could you ask them to read and discuss some resources about humanistic education (e.g. Rogers 1961; Glasser 1992; Neill 1960). Namely, this approach to education represents a completely different philosophy that could induce significant changes in teachers' practices. (B. Bognar, personal communication, 21 October 2013)

About this day, I wrote in my diary:

> As I was listening to all the above I thought that teachers' common problems and issues were that of democracy attitudes (put and respect the rules, respect the others, listen to them, be an active part of the group). I can easily figure out the reasons behind students' attitudes but for me it is important how the five teachers and I will design an educational intervention for those classes. The teachers admitted that there was an issue of democracy and I asked them to observe their students' behaviour over the next few weeks and to write down what they observed for our discussion next time. Moreover, we agreed to make a questionnaire for measuring students' attitudes concerning democratic ethos in their daily life. Teachers liked the idea a lot. (I. Papadaki, personal communication, 19 October 2013)

Branko commented:

> It is great that you started to talk about practice. Actually, this is a kind of reflective community practice in which you may discuss and deal with problems which emerge from classes. (B. Bognar, personal communication, October 2013)

Caine and Caine consider that:

> Communities of practice spring up wherever people work together. The informal learning that takes place is both a strength and a weakness, because people share what they do and know and currently believe – which means that they could be sharing good practice or bad practice. (Caine and Caine 2010: 25)

In the next meeting, some of the teachers narrated events from the previous weeks in their classes. I recounted the meeting in my diary:

> This time the discussion began when M. Z. said that in her class there are 3-4 students who annoy the rest of the students, by being talkative. She and other teachers told the class that "they are very noisy" and that "the class has a bad image among school's teachers". The representatives of the class promised that they will discuss the issue with the whole class and that they will try to find a solution. After some days, they found M. Z. in the corridor and said to her that they had a meeting as a class (the noisy were included too) and they decided that if the "noisy ones" would not change their behaviour, then the students by themselves would write the noisy students' names in a paper and request of teacher a punishment for them (usually noisy students are expelled by the teacher from the class for one hour or even one day or more, it depends on the situation and the decision is taken by the teacher or the headmaster in particular situation).
>
> To speak the truth, when I heard that, I felt uneasy, I asked the rest to tell what they thought about this decision. One teacher was wondering if that means that the teacher has lost the control of the class and the students took over.
>
> I replied that what I understood (and maybe I am wrong) is that the students had introjected the authoritarian style of behaviour they experienced and they would like to exclude the "noisy" schoolmates instead of discussing and finding ways to include them. (I. Papadaki, personal communication, 6 January 2014)

Branko commented:

> Great conclusion! The problem is that students do not learn only educational contents: they learn how to survive in school context. That means they learn how to deal with problems and how to treat other people, particularly their peers. Good example for that is the film "The wave". (B. Branko, personal communication, 7 January 2014)

In fact, we did not watch the film *The Wave* with the group, but I told them about it and I was surprised when, during our final meeting in June 2014, three of them told us that they had watched the film on TV during the Easter vacations. One of them had even postponed a visit in order to watch it. I felt very positive when I realised the influence that our group had had on its members.

Following the meeting, I wrote in my research diary:

> M. Z. told me that in a recent evaluation test she asked questions for cultivating their critical thinking. However, a high percentage failed to answer it in a critical way. (I. Papadaki, personal communication, 6 January 2014)

I replied that if we as teachers do not exercise our critical abilities, students could not be expected to do it on their own. Moreover, I reminded them that since we constituted a generation brought up on teacher-centred education, it is up to us, as teachers, to turn to student-centred education, with a positive attitude towards lifelong learning. I added that many seminars are focused on this nowadays.

M. M. also told us a story about her son asking her to go watch a movie about Nelson Mandela. He felt that if he asked his schoolmates, they would refuse. I asked M. M. if she had spoken about Mandela's death in her class, since one could not assume that all students had the proper information from their families regarding issues of human rights and justice. She told me that she had, and had also asked students whether they considered school to be a prison, as a student had told her once. She was happy when her students replied that they learned many things from her and did not feel walls around them, but open windows.

Branko commented:

> the real education starts in such atmosphere when we help each other spread our views, not keep each other within certain bounds or enforce us to do something we do not like. (B. Bognar, personal communication, 7 January 2014)

Such education contributes to creating life-affirming relationships that are characterised:

> by care, and the capacity to recognise the other's individuality and originality of mind and spirit, that is, the recognition of the other as a human being who is capable of making their own decisions and speaking for themselves, and a concern to enable them to do so. (McNiff 2003:7)

At the meeting held in December 2013, M. Z. recounted that in her attempt to form groups to work on the projects, she was faced with a group's refusal to accept a "shy and introverted" girl. This created a bad environment in her class. She attempted to advocate on behalf of the girl, saying that the members of this group had made the same choice concerning the subject of the project, which meant that they had something in common. She told her students that she couldn't see any reason for someone to be excluded and that they should find a way to resolve the issue.

I proposed a role play for this situation, with the aim to help teachers realise how important feelings are in educational processes. Role play is an activity "to put ourselves in the place of others and act as they would act" (Griffin 2012: 58). This is in accordance with the symbolic interactionist approach in which Harper Lee's quotation fits well: "you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them" (Harper Lee 1970).

Therefore, when I asked the teachers how they would react in the above-mentioned situation, the majority of them said that they would discuss the issue in the group, inquiring about the reason for such an exclusion and then tackling students' arguments in a logical way.

D. T. said that he would discuss not the fact of the rejection, but his impression that there was a victim and an abuser in the case. At this point, I asked him to do a role play, with us in the students' role, instead of describing what he would have done. During the process of role play he provoked many negative feelings in us, as students. At the end, I asked the participants to speak about the feelings that were evoked during this activity. They felt stress, tension, discomfort, strangulation, worry and narrowness. I asked D. T. to think whether he would like to evoke such feelings in his students in order to solve a problem. I told him that he did not need to give us an answer, but that it would be fine just to think about it.

Branko commented on this part of the diary:

> That's a great idea! I think that such kind of activity could be very helpful to face teachers with impacts of their practice. However, I consider that activities which would produce positive feelings could be even more effective. Sometimes the problem is that teachers do not know how to do things differently. They could be afraid of losing control, but they may be unaware of student-centred teaching benefits. If they would experience something else, then I believe they would be more inclined to continue with that. Therefore, negative experience could be very powerful, but that positive ones are even more powerful. (B. Branko, personal communication, 7 January 2014)

However, I consider that emotions influence us to move in one direction or another and that they can motivate us to find solutions to specific problems. I believe that teachers teach what they are themselves, which means that the more they develop self-awareness the better teachers they can become.

I gave the group a questionnaire to explore their values and attitudes towards life. My purpose was to raise awareness in teachers about internalised value patterns that might direct them in their professional and personal life. The discussion that followed, regarding their replies to the questionnaire, contributed positively to our interpersonal relationships and alleviated feelings of external threats. Rogers argues that if a person is free from external threat, "then he can begin to experience and to deal with the internal feelings and conflicts which he finds threatening within himself" (1961: 54). This could lead to significant changes in one's personal life and professional practice.

Regarding the teacher's responses, first, they have positive attitudes towards others and life, which I believe is a precondition for being a teacher. Nevertheless, and this seemed contradictory to me, the majority could not conceive of Rogers' concept of "unconditional positive regard". That is if someone has a positive attitude towards somebody else, then it should mean prizing him/her in a total rather than conditional way (Rogers 1961). The positive regard is important since:

> the teacher who can warmly accept, who can provide an unconditional positive regard, and who can empathize with the feelings of fear, anticipation, and discouragement which are involved in meeting new material, will have done a great deal toward setting the conditions for learning. (Rogers 1961: 287-8)

Second, as I was interested in how they perceived and understood teaching, I asked them what experiences had led them to choose the teaching profession. Two said that they chose to become teachers because they love children and like to have contact with them. The rest replied that when they were students themselves, certain teachers who had understood them, had good contact with them, and stimulated them to learn had inspired them.

It seems that they were all referring to the "psychic rewards" of teaching, that is the satisfactions of working with young people and caring for them. As Hargreaves (1994) argues, the "psychic rewards of teaching are central to sustaining teachers' senses of self; their senses of value and worth in their work" (1994: 173).

Looking to further explore their understanding of education, I asked the teachers to tell me the kind of person they wanted their students to be. Their replies were quite similar: they would like their students to be honest, respect each other, be tolerant, be active citizens, be considerate to others, and be creative.

Interestingly, responding to a question regarding their own basic values the teachers mentioned honesty, respect for others, tolerance, sincerity, justice, dignity, responsibility, solidarity and dialogue. I can see a connection between their vision for their students and the basic values that regulate their own lives and their relationships with others. However, there was sometimes an incongruity between their values and practice. For example, a teacher who values "respect for others" stopped attending our meetings in February without informing me of her decision and the reasons why she was curtailing our co-operation. I can guess that she was having

difficulties since she is the mother of young twins, but I expected some explanation from her. Another example of incongruity concerned a teacher who wrote that he values tolerance, dialogue and acceptance of others, but recounted an incident in class that did not "fit" with these values – namely, that he seeks to impose discipline by making disruptive students stand up and stay in a corner of the class silently.

"The experience of holding educational values and the experience of their negation", Whitehead (1989) named a "living contradiction". Facing this contradiction could move us "to imagine alternative ways of improving our situation". Argyris and Schön distinguished two ways of learning in a situation where there is an incongruity between espoused theory (governing values) and theory-in-use: single-loop learning (Model I) mostly implies that the actors and their relationships will become more defensive, group dynamics will become rigid and "there will be little freedom to explore and search for new information and new alternatives" (Argyris and Schön 1974: 73). "In the case of double-loop learning (Model II), however, norms are themselves in transition," they declare, "They cannot be taken as given and used as criteria for learning" (Argyris and Schön 1978: 144). In Model II defensiveness will be replaced by mutual help and open discussions about different views that could lead actors to new ideas and solutions for detected problems in their practice.

In the behavioural world of Model II, participants will tend to publicly test the assumptions of their theories-in-use; they will tend to be open to possibilities for change in behaviour that may result from this testing. Attributions will tend to be formed openly and on the basis of directly observable data (Argyris and Schön 1974: 91).

To become double-loop learners and to emancipate themselves it is important for teachers to face their own fears. I asked them whether they agreed with the following statement: "I admit my fears, but I am not shackled to them." All replied "yes". Nevertheless, one of the teachers, who also positively replied to the above question, said in a meeting that he counts a lot on evoking feelings of fear in his students in order to keep them quiet. When I asked him whether a frightened person is an active citizen or a submissive person, he pretended that he had not heard me and did not reply. I suppose he realised the ambiguity inside him. Later, however, he said that my questions about fear had been very stimulating. Regarding fear, Maslow wrote:

> that the great cause of much psychological illness is the fear of knowledge of oneself – of one's emotions, impulses, memories, capacities, potentialities, of one's destiny. (1968: 60)
> …
> But there is another kind of truth we tend to evade. Not only do we hang on to our psychopathology, but also we tend to evade personal growth because this, too, can bring another kind of fear, of awe, of feelings of weakness and inadequacy. And so we find another kind of resistance, a denying of our best side, of our talents, of our finest impulses, of our highest potentialities, of our creativeness. (Maslow 1968: 61)

Branko commented:

> Dealing with action research for more than 15 years I realized that it is not only about gaining improvements in practice, but this is some kind of therapy in which each of us could face with own defensive mechanisms and reduce adherence to psychopathology. It is also important to face with social pathology that very often causes our individual problems. Action research represents a liberating process through own choices and actions. (B. Branko, personal communication, 22 May 2014)

I think that understanding our own contradictions is the first step towards moving on from a mental map that hinders our emancipation. Usually, this is hard to achieve through self-reflection. Rather, it requires critical reflection, which is:

> a social learning process in which we depend on others to be critical mirrors reflecting back to us aspects of our assumptive clusters we are unable to see. I have also (like many others) urged that true adult education is collaborative and collective, the building of a learning community in which the roles of teachers and learners are blurred. (Brookfield 2005: 199)

M. M. said that the questionnaire helped her carry out a kind of introspection, and that she had appreciated the process. In order to reply to some of the questions she had to express her beliefs, her character, her values and her priorities, and that allowed her to better understand herself.

In the next meeting, we watched two videos: one was about an inspiring theology professor and principal in Kapareli, Klimis Pirounakis (http://youtu.be/hOB2zMjObVA), who spoke about his creative work with his students. The second, a Greek psycho-therapist called Yosafat, talked about parents' overprotection of their children.

Pirounakis talked about his attempts to create an alternative, learner-centred school, a school that cares for its students. As he put it, the students were discovering the truth by dealing with environmental issues and in discovering the truth, they acquired self-knowledge more easily. Among other creative, collaborative activities, they built a co-operative school canteen, set up a climbing team, carried out tree planting and recycling, conducted a photography class using money from the students' association, and bought bicycles for a cycling team. They also bought the equipment they needed and every other week, they went to the movies together.

One teacher said that while watching Pirounakis's work with his students, she wondered where he got the energy to do so many things. She added:

> It seems that he took energy from his love for others and his care for his students. (M. L., personal communication, 9 January 2014)

Another teacher repeated the words of the psychotherapist, who said that a man who does not give love is an empty man, a man with a vacuum. She felt that such a person could be easily manipulated. This is in accordance with Fromm's opinion that:

> the dynamic quality of love lies in this very polarity: that it springs from the need of overcoming separateness, that it leads to oneness – and yet that individuality is not eliminated. Work is the other component; not work as a compulsive activity in order to escape aloneness, not work as a relationship to nature which is partly one of dominating her, partly one of worship of and enslavement by the very products of man's hands, but work as creation in which man becomes one with nature in the act of creation. What holds true of love and work holds true of all spontaneous action, whether it be the realization of sensuous pleasure or participation in the political life of the community. (Fromm 1942: 225)

Branko noted:

> I completely agree with your colleague that Klimis Pirounakis gets this energy from love for others and his caring for his students. This is the great educational influence of your project and the next question is: "How each of you could come up this understanding in your practices?" Certainly, the question could also be: "Why we should bother with such issues? Is not enough to do the job without love and passion?" Your colleague had an answer on that question too: "Man who doesn't give love, is an empty man, a man having vacuum and that make him as she understand it a person easily manipulated" (Teacher,

personal communication, 9 January 2014). I agree so much with her as well as you.

To conclude, during the last session you discussed some very important issues, which actually represent essence of education and life. Instead to deal with superficial problems you dug much deeper and started philosophical discussion about governing values which, once re-interpreted, could lead you to significant changes in your practices. The most important is that you do not impose your values to your colleagues, but through open discussion, you all could re-interpret meaning of education. (B. Branko, personal communication, 4 February 2014)

Our next activity in the group was the creation of a questionnaire which the teachers and I designed to find out about their students' opinions on citizenship lessons and the didactic methods that their teachers use, as well as about their participation in lessons. In this meeting, we decided that once we had the students' responses, each teacher would make a lesson plan accordingly, to be discussed at a meeting. All the teachers suggested questions for the questionnaire.

Figure 1: Students' preferred learning styles (n=104)
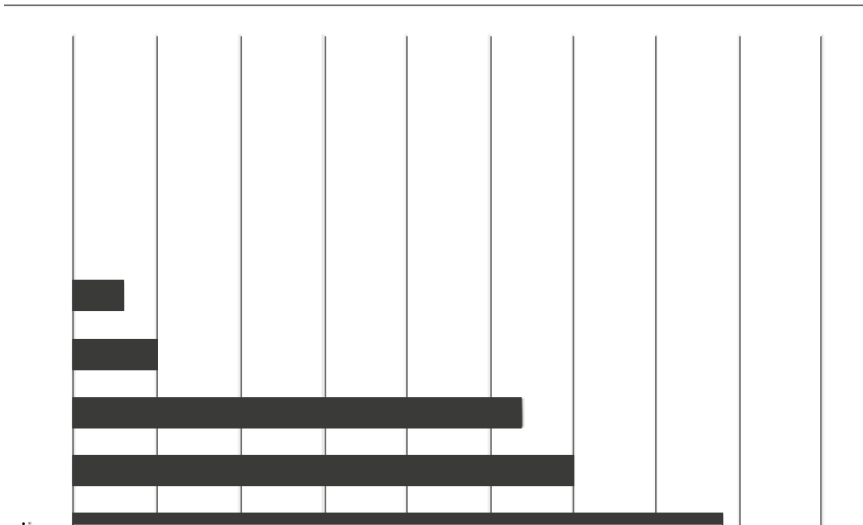
We asked the students if they found the citizenship lesson interesting, and also if they thought it was useful for their lives. Most students considered the course interesting (86%) and useful (84%). On being asked how they participated in the lesson, the majority of students replied "through dialogue". When we asked about their preferred learning styles, they chose experiential learning, then ICTs and dialogue (Figure 1).

Teachers told me that their students were very excited when they filled in the questionnaire since it was the first time in their school life that teachers had asked them (anonymously) for their opinion about teaching practice. I commented that emancipation, creativity and self-confidence are empowered when students learn to evaluate their learning and have the chance to express themselves. Moreover, to be active citizens, they should learn to participate as much as possible in controlling their own life, and that what is happening in class constitutes their life for the time they are present.

Branko agreed with my conclusion that students should have a measure of control over their own life and that what is happening in a class is their life. He pointed out this was in accordance with Dewey's (1897) idea that education "is a process of living and not a preparation for future living". Regarding the questionnaire and the results, he commented:

> Actually, the results are not bad at all regarding student-centred learning. The problem is that you do not have some other data (e.g. observations) to corroborate and compare findings from the questionnaire. (B. Bognar, personal communication, 25 July 2014)

It was true that I did not have the chance to observe classes since the teachers were reluctant to accept such a mode of professional co-operation. Therefore, I was unable to validate my findings through triangulation by comparing the findings from the questionnaire with teachers' practices. One teacher said that the idea of allowing us into the classroom put too much pressure on her, and I did not insist at all, as this would have been counterproductive.

This reluctance may indicate the age of the autonomous professional. As Hargreaves (2000) explains:

> the development of teacher professionalism as passing through four historical phases in many countries: the pre-professional age, the age of the autonomous professional, the age of the collegial professional and the post-professional or postmodern. (2000: 151)

In the age of the autonomous professional:

> one of the overriding characteristics of teaching at this time was its individualism. Most teachers taught in a box. They instructed their classes in isolation, separated from their colleagues. In the 1970s and the 1980s individualism, isolation and privatism were identified as widespread features of the culture of teaching. (Hargreaves 2000: 160).

My intention was to help my colleagues step out of isolation and reach the next phase of teacher professionalism, implying mutual learning, support and collaboration with other teachers. I also hoped that they would "direct their collaborative efforts toward positive change not only within their schools, but also with their colleagues elsewhere, across the profession as a whole" (Hargreaves 2000:171).

Teachers get used to the culture of isolation and therefore might develop a lack of confidence about their effectiveness as an outcome of the limited feedback on their performance they get. However, I think this can be changed since during the presentation of their lesson plans, they commented eagerly on each other's plans and one teacher admitted that she understood how poor her plan was. Teachers have the potential to become reflective practitioners and critical friends who are willing to openly examine their own and others' practices; also, they need time and encouragement to take the steps necessary for their new professional roles.

Changes achieved

At the end of June 2014, in order to see if any change had occurred since the completion of our meetings, I invited each teacher separately to discuss some of their experiences on participating in the reflective community of practice.

It is interesting that all the teachers said that they had become aware that their role had expanded to spheres beyond mere academic knowledge. They realised that a lot of energy and thought was needed to resolve disciplinary and learning problems.

All of them appreciated the collaborative experience we had in our group. Two teachers said that it was an innovation as far as professional development was concerned; they were used to participating in one- or two-day seminars without follow-up. This reflective community of practice was a very new experience for them.

F. T. said that she felt more confident than before as a teacher, as she had had the opportunity to learn about how the other teachers were performing in their classes and to compare this with her own practice. Moreover, the feedback she got every time she spoke made her feel more secure in her teaching practice. Another teacher admitted that the role play was a turning point for him, as he realised for the first time in his life that certain feelings could lead to specific practices.

M. L. said that as a result of her students' answers to the questionnaire, she realised how urgent it was to develop ICT skills for her teaching practice even though she has no inclination towards technology. Another teacher said that because of the positive connection in our group, she had taken on the responsibility and risk of preparing her students for participation in an online conference with other schools and the ministry concerned with e-government. It had been a very enjoyable experience for her and her students.

M. M. emphasised how much her students' answers to the questionnaire had helped her regarding their feelings and preferred learning styles. It had been a powerful "mirror" for her. Two teachers realised that they should customise their teaching to each student's learning needs instead of approaching them as a homogenous whole. Another declared that she had become more aware of her influence on her students' life in the present and the future, and that she really appreciated the fact of being a teacher.

M. M. added that, with hindsight, her refusal to invite us to her class created frustration in her that she had not responded to this new challenge. At the same time, through this experience, she was made aware of a weakness she had had as child, and recognised that she had not overcome it yet. I felt that this teacher had come into contradiction with herself regarding the self-actualisation process, since her refusal to open herself up to a new experience conflicted with her desire to develop.

Further, the teachers' resistance to mutual visits among classes may have been connected with the fact that from the coming school year, they will be exposed to external evaluation that will be conducted by counsellors. The teachers' syndicate and a majority of teachers themselves do not agree with such an evaluation of their teaching practice, therefore, their refusal to be observed in their class could be part of a reaction to this official measure.

The teachers' responses corroborated my belief that people learn more easily when they learn by doing or creating something and when they reflect on their practice in a collaborative climate. This action research experience also strengthened my belief that learning is a social process that can be mutually beneficial if there is a

collaborative culture and sharing instead of competition and isolation. As Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (2011: 83) argue, "teachers learn by doing, reading and reflecting (just as students do): collaborating with other teachers, looking closely at students and their work, and sharing what they see."

Briefly, I could say that those teachers who felt isolated in their schools appreciated our collaboration a great deal and all of them considered that the collaborative discussions and actions that took place during our meetings were something "new" for them. They spoke about the community of practice as a preferable kind of professional development to occasional two-day seminars, since they were "here the active subjects and not passive listeners" (Teacher F. T., personal communication, June 2014). I think this represents a significant change that could lead to the next age of teacher professionalism – to the age of the collegial where:

> professional development is usually most effective when it is not delivered by the extraneous experts in off-site locations, but when it is embedded in the life and work of the school … and when it is the focus of collaborative discussion and action. (Little 1993, in Hargreaves 2000: 165).

I would say as well that this transitional period is being supported by the new structures adapted by the educational system, which propose implementation of new teaching strategies such as co-operative learning, ICT teaching, metacognition, projects and computer-based inquiry.

The action research we conducted in the Pestalozzi Programme revealed to me that bringing about changes requires the establishment of a positive atmosphere and acceptance and, at the same time, support for practitioners who are the change agents. Moreover, it gave me the opportunity to realise that self-critical discussions and reflections in a community of practice can help teachers change themselves and their practices. However, I agree with Hargreaves's point that "if collegiality is 'forced' or 'imposed', teachers can quickly come to resent and resist it" (2000: 166).

The co-operation which I experienced among our group's members through the Pestalozzi platform while conducting our action research was a stimulating, demanding and at the same time, inspiring experience. I realised that conducting action research could be a creative adventure when the environment is accepting, understanding and supportive.

I shifted from my previous belief that changes could happen only as a result of visible actions. I remarked that reflections and discussions of a problem might lead to new attitudes: for example, the teacher who realised that provoking his students evokes negative feelings.

As I was co-operating with my colleagues and in our community on the Pestalozzi platform, I had the feeling of a "community in community". I had the chance to interact and exchange ideas and experiences in both spaces; this was a fruitful combination. Moreover, I grasped the importance of listening to others without prejudice and automatic evaluation, since listening involves being interested in others' thoughts, ideas and feelings, and recognising them as worthy of being expressed and heard rather than putting them down as wrong or inadequate. This is the essence of the democratic ethos that is my governing value.

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Action research approach to professional development in higher education: teaching a course on evaluation and assessment for prospective teachers

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Introduction

In line with the global changes in education in the past 10 years (Sahlberg 2012), and for the purpose of "harmonising" education in different countries, Croatia has embraced the Bologna Process. This has altered its education system considerably. The system itself is still strongly centralised, education in the classroom is micro-programmed and one often observes practitioners "teaching to the test". The forms of evaluation prevailing within the system are mostly summative, although formative assessment is recommended as well. We have accepted the rules of engagement set by external evaluation, e.g. PISA, TIMMS and PIRLS.[21] In 2009, the National Secondary School Leaving Exam (State Matura) was introduced as a measure of assessing student knowledge at the end of secondary school. The idea of a national primary school leaving exam (grade 8, age 14) is being discussed. This seems to be the prevailing approach to evaluation and we seem to be taking on the global education reform movement (GERM) with all its consequences:

> It is well documented that standardized test scores are used by school administrators and the public to evaluate schools, teachers, and educational programs. Further, test scores are used in making a variety of decisions which have important consequences for teachers and students, that is, student promotion, teacher promotion, and program funding. (Herman and Golan 1991: 5)

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21. Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA); Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS); Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS).

Croatia signed the Bologna Declaration at the Ministerial Conference in Prague in 2001, and since the implementation of the Bologna Process in the academic year 2005/06, one of the most obvious changes has been in initial teacher education. Teacher education advanced from a four-year higher professional education programme to an integrated single cycle at undergraduate and graduate university level which lasts for five years (10 semesters), on the completion of which students acquire a master's degree in education (Domović and Vizek Vidović 2011).

Pedagogical courses at the Faculty of Teacher Education are organised in the form of lectures and seminars, which are common methods of teaching at universities. Lecturing is a method accepted in higher education as part of the learning experience: large groups are conveniently brought together to motivate their subsequent learning by other means (Reece and Walker 2011). Besides the obvious economic rationale, organising teaching into lectures can have other positive outcomes: students can be inspired by the topic and identify with the professional competence of a lecturer – developing an interest in the skills and discipline of a lecturer. There are some problems as well. These can be classed into three categories: lecturers' subjective feelings of anxiety and alienation; problems of communication (there is rarely an opportunity for meaningful interaction with the individual student); and problems of preparation, organisation and presentation (Pletenac 1983). Lectures are usually organised as 45- to 90-minute long sessions during which the professor/lecturer presents content and reflects on the complex ideas of the subject, relating it to different disciplines. In spite of their shortcomings, lectures remain the dominant form of teaching in higher education (Apel 2003; Martin 2009).

Seminars, as a form of education at the university, aim to introduce and lead students into scientific and research techniques. The dominant form of communication is dialogue and problem-based learning with the help of methods such as debate and discussion. The aim of a seminar is to disseminate and explore different ideas, not to discover the truth (Mavrak 2005). The prevailing mode of seminars is having students present their individual work, prepared before the seminar, while the rest of the group listens, or discusses individual work on texts and scientific literature (analysis).

In my experience as a student at the university, I noticed that actual problem-solving activities and the exploration of ideas tend to be overlooked or left out. The prevailing philosophy emphasises transmission of knowledge and skills from "experts" to learners. It values the acquisition of facts and skills as the important outcome of learning, often disregarding emotion and action. Research shows that direct teaching is efficient in the transfer of knowledge, but is not sufficient for deeper learning, understanding, problem solving or creative work (Apel 2003; Terhart 2001; Vizek Vidović et al. 2003). Although learning at university level is beneficial when it is learner-centred, it is not always organised in such a way:

> In universities today the facultas or faculty – the professors – are the corner stone of the university structure. The colleges, schools, departments, institutes and academic areas are basically organised around the professors and the course contents which they themselves design, frequently in an individual and isolated manner. This means that the modern university is centered around the teaching person: a teacher-centered education. (Escotet 1995)

Context and research problem

I have been working at a university for eight years. My first qualification was that of a primary school teacher and I worked for a few years in a primary school in Croatia. The Croatian educational system is almost exclusively teacher-centred. Despite some examples of good practice, most teachers are not willing – or equipped with the skills – to change their educational practice. During my studies and later on in my professional practice as a teacher, the feeling that I had most often was that we underestimated the abilities of children in the classroom. Often the system does not respect students' needs, ideas or interests. Therefore, I explored the possibility of changing this situation and decided to go work at the Faculty of Teacher Education. I felt that through the education of prospective primary school teachers I could make a difference and perhaps prepare them better for the teaching profession. I started my educational practice at the university, working my way through the maze of research and teaching, always keeping in mind the benefits of what I was doing for teachers and pupils in primary education. I like to think of myself as a reformer and an agent of change. This shapes my research interest and teaching practice. I understand teaching as a process that enables learning – both mine and that of my students. According to Ramsden:

> Teaching is comprehended as a process of working cooperatively with learners to help them change their understanding. It is making student learning possible. Teaching involves finding out about students' misunderstandings, intervening to change them, and creating a context of learning which encourages students actively to engage with the subject matter. (Ramsden 2002: 114)

In the preface to *Cultural action for freedom*, da Veiga Coutinho lays out Freire's fundamental thesis: that there is no neutral education:

> Education is either for domestication or for freedom. Although it is customarily conceived as a conditioning process, education can equally be an instrument for deconditioning. An initial choice is required of the educator. (da Veiga Coutinho 1972: 9)

My own values, which shape my understanding of education, are democracy, emancipation and participation. My understanding of democracy in education is perhaps best described by John Dewey:

> A democracy is … primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own. (Dewey 1916/2009: 73)

My understanding of emancipation follows the "horizontal logic a topology that [precisely] does not presuppose [a] position of mastery" (Rancière 2006, in Biesta 2009: 176). Emancipation in education I perceive as "the emancipation of mind from devotion to customary purposes [that] makes possible the systematic pursuit of new ends. It is the agency of progress in action" (Dewey 1916/2009: 182). In relation to education I also see it as a chance to develop freedom of thought; while learning together in a community of equals. For these values to be met in education collaboration between teachers and students is a necessity. This is an interdependence between learner and teacher, as well as among learners.

One of the courses that I lectured on was "Evaluation in primary education", in the third year of a master's level teacher education programme. Lectures were organised for a large group of 86 students of the academic year 2013/14 (Figure 1) on Monday

mornings. After the lecture, students were divided into four seminar groups and I spent an hour with each group (Figure 2). During the course the students were introduced to the basic ideas of school docimology;[22] forms of assessment; and a comparative and historical approach was included to enable students to understand the history of and current trends in educational evaluation.

Figure 1: Students in a lecture

Figure 2: Students in a seminar

22. School docimology – the science of evaluation in the broad meaning of this word, with special emphasis on evaluation in school. It concerns everything that can influence school grades: the criteria of evaluation, the models of evaluation, and the impact of grades on student motivation (Matijević 2004).

I was experiencing myself as a living contradiction (Whitehead 1989), since my values and beliefs about education were being systematically denied in my own practice, organised as it was in a structure that made it almost impossible for me to live the values of democracy, emancipation and participation. Even worse, I was educating future generations of teachers according to the postulates of an education that was in direct conflict with my own. My understanding of evaluation and assessment as part of the curricula is to serve the purpose of the individual development of a child (the role it would have is prognostic, diagnostic and motivational), rather than her/his ranking according to a standard (normative role).

Although I have tried in previous years to place the focus of activities on formative assessment I felt considerable conflict in my personal values about what should be evaluated in the classroom, why, and how, within the system I was preparing prospective teachers for. My responsibility was to explain and present to students the current trends in evaluation and to enable them to develop the necessary skills, attitudes and knowledge to be competent teachers and competent evaluators. Still, I felt that I should also help students understand that there are other ways to evaluate, and that evaluation and assessment have other objectives. I believed that I should do more to improve my teaching in a way that was in accordance with my personal values. The only way to do so was to teach according to my values. The structure of the lessons, the limits to my autonomy in planning and organising lectures as a junior member of staff, as well as the overall trend in education, were all hindering me from fulfilling my values and left me feeling quite aggravated.

To be a good teacher, ideally, there should be a complete "alignment" of the teacher's behaviour, competencies, beliefs, identity and mission, together forming one coherent whole matching the environment – a situation that can take a lifetime to attain, if it can be attained at all (Korthagen 2004).

So when I learned of an opportunity for action research in the Pestalozzi Community of Practice, I decided to take it. I knew exactly what my "itch" was, or as Cain (2011) suggests as a good focus point – I could easily define what it was that "bugged" me in my practice.

Research methodology

The research approach adopted was action research, since the aim of the research was the improvement of practice through self-evaluation and development. I found action research to be the optimal form of research since it is a:

> critical (and self-critical) collaborative enquiry by reflective practitioners being accountable and making the results of their enquiry public, self-evaluating their practice and engaged in participative problem-solving and continuing professional development". (Zuber-Skerritt 1992: 15)

In traditional research, researchers enquire into people's lives – as research on people (McNiff 2010). Action research presumes collaboration, the involvement of the participants, in knowing what is being explored and why. This is what makes this approach optimal and in line with the values that my educational practice is based on.

Also, I found action research best served the purpose of my professional development since it enabled me to choose the focus of my professional development by encouraging me to ask questions: What is not working in my practice? What could be improved? What works well and why? Action research ensured me to become a responsible practitioner who holds herself accountable for her own ways of improving practice. In this project I followed McNiff's suggestion that:

> We need to show how we are practising what we preach, otherwise the ideas remain in the imagination and do not move into reality. One of the strengths of action research is that it begins in practice, and people generate their own theories out of their practice. (McNiff 2010: 35)

Action research plan

The whole process of my action research was focused around one question: how can I improve my teaching practice at the university according to my values?

I specified aims and activities according to my values of democracy, emancipation and participation. The activities were planned for my teaching practice during lectures and seminars. The aims I set for this research could be met in different settings, during lectures or seminars and during activities that took place in an online environment (the e-course on the Moodle platform that was created as a space for students on the course, and as a way of ensuring the use of different media and supporting different approaches to learning).

Table 1: Aims and activities of action research

Aims of the research	Activities
Aim 1: to promote democracy in teaching	☐ didactic contract: finding out about the interests of my students and the way they learn as well as their agreement on participation in action research ☐ critical friendship
Aim 2: to promote students' emancipation	☐ participation in creating rules and activities and in evaluation of teaching ☐ creating a safe learning space
Aim 3: to enable participation	☐ promoting face-to-face communication as well as online communication ☐ co-operative learning structures[23] ☐ ensuring time for discussion and reflection on activities ☐ changing micro-group members during each seminar so as to build group cohesion ☐ dynamic and engaging lectures ☐ encouraging students' questions during lectures and enabling their personal reflections on their previous experience of evaluation ☐ short revision of previous lectures at the beginning of each class ☐ jigsaw; pair-share; opinion line; Round Robin[24] ☐ guiding the students in the organisation of lectures conducted by them

Planned activities were implemented throughout the semester for the duration of the course. Some were happening simultaneously at all levels, while others were specific actions that happened only once.

Data collection was done via a research diary, critical friends (interviews) and a didactic contract, as well as summative evaluation at the end of the course. A strong emphasis was put on feedback by students as critical friends, since we were creating the learning/teaching process together. Worthy support to the research was provided by the action research group in the Pestalozzi Programme Community of Practice led by Branko Bognar. It was within this "support group", through regular communication online or via Skype calls, that I received reinforcement, during some of the more overwhelming moments of this action research project.

Process of conducting planned activities

To be able to improve my teaching I had to introduce students to what I planned to do and invite them to participate in action research. The first thing I did in the introductory lecture was to explain my educational values: democracy, participation and emancipation. It was a very unfamiliar situation for students but they were very supportive of the idea of action research. I handed out a didactic (learning) contract that included questions about their learning style/preferences, ideas on assessment and evaluation, expectations and concerns, and their opinion on participating in action research.[25] Students had to sign the contract and give it in so that I could sign it, collect data on them and give it back:

> I saw them lifting eyebrows in surprise when I asked for their approval and agreement with the research (now I am even happier I did it). It will make them think about their role here, and mine as well. (V. Rajić, personal communication, 7 October 2013)

When I got all the didactic contracts (n=86) signed by my students I found out that they differed in the way they liked to learn. I found that a majority wanted to have visual input (52%), and to be able to practise on concrete examples (46%), with 39% preferring to work individually as well as in small groups. Further, 37% felt that they learned by listening to lectures.

In response to an open-ended question on what they felt would enable them to be good evaluators in the classroom, students listed: being motivated for the course (32%), and being hard-working, understanding, just and objective (all less than 10%).

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23. Here is a short description of the activities: jigsaw is a co-operative structure of student work where students are divided into micro-groups and given a task, following which they change groups to share their learning; pair-share – students form pairs and discuss their opinions on a given topic; opinion line – students are asked to evaluate their understanding or agreement with a certain topic and form a line so that at the front of the line stand the students who most agree with the topic and at the end stand the students who find their knowledge or understanding of the topic unsatisfactory, or disagree with it. This can be a good starting point for group division if students from the end and beginning of the line are then grouped together; Round Robin – students take turns responding orally, although this can be modified to have students timed while they write their responses.

24. More information on co-operative structures can be found in Kagan (2010).

25. This was a modified version of the learning contract best explained in Knowles (1986).

They felt that they had knowledge and were persistent in dealing with tasks (10%). When talking about the issues they wanted to deal with I saw the biggest concern of the students was how to avoid being biased (72%). Also, students wanted to learn how to create a valid exam (10%), and be able to use formative assessment such as descriptive feedback (9%) and pupil monitoring (9%).

This gave me enough information to try and plan the activities for this course. I decided to include activities that would be practice related, and to make sure that we addressed, among other issues, what students felt strongly about and what competencies they felt they needed to develop. During the course I decided to involve them in activities that promoted formative assessment, peer feedback and self-assessment, and planned to discuss the creation of a valid student exam, so as to ensure that in their work they actually assessed and evaluated expected learning outcomes.

To be able to collect data about my practice and to promote participation, I invited students to act as critical friends. This concept was new to them but they eagerly agreed. I had my first feedback from critical friends through interviews at the end of the first month after the group seminars. At the end of the course 20 students were my critical friends. Every month two students (on a voluntary basis) stayed back after each seminar group to provide feedback and reflect on the activities that had been undertaken:

> I really appreciate the concept of a critical friend and that you asked us how we want for you to present the topic of assessment. (Student 1, personal communication, 28 October 2013)

Lectures

I decided to work on the structure of my lectures and seminars. I found that I should give solid attention to the construction of a lecture where students were not just passive "objects" in the classroom. I shortened the time normally used for lecturing by a few minutes and the introductory part of the lecture (the first five minutes) was spent in talking to students about their activities in the past week, as well as any news they wanted to share. The next task was to try and make the lectures more participatory, emancipatory and dynamic. I prepared PowerPoints without long, text-heavy slides, more often than not with the text replaced by an image. In thinking about how to make lectures more participatory, I decided to use two-way communication as much as possible. During the course of each lecture, I included opportunities for students to discuss their personal experiences. Also, within each lecture the students were asked a number of questions, and they were encouraged to express their opinions about, for instance, current issues in education and examples from everyday practice in which theory could be reflected. To summarise, the concrete actions undertaken were:

- ▶ a less formal and a more personal introduction to the lecture;
- ▶ opportunities to share experiences and reflect on current practice;
- ▶ questions for discussions with the students related to the theory presented.

When discussing these issues in the online Pestalozzi Community of Practice, my critical friend Branko Bognar commented on the situation regarding this way of organising courses in the university:

> This approach is common in Croatian universities, and it is very similar to *technical rationality* in which students are firstly taught the relevant basic science, then relevant applied science, and finally they could "apply classroom knowledge to the problems of everyday practice" in a practicum/seminar (Schön 1995). Instead of technical rationality he suggested *knowing in action*, *reflection-in-action*, *reflecting on reflection-in-action*, *Deweyan inquiry and action research*. (B. Bognar, personal communication, 16 November 2013)

This comment made me aware that although we are strongly limited by the context we work in, perhaps this action research project could be a good starting point to try out new things and see how the students reacted. Also, it made me realise that it would be difficult to make substantial changes since the structure of lectures and seminars is quite rooted in the tradition of university teaching and is not really questioned. I wondered how I could ensure this "knowing in action, reflection-in-action".

I started preparing lectures for students in accordance with my aim of making them more dynamic, participatory and emancipatory. The outcomes of the first month were quite positive:

> Student 1: I liked how you tried to modify it (your lecture) according to our expectations. Lectures are concrete, clear and I like them.
>
> Student 2: I like how you introduce the topic, are quite condensed during lectures and keep us interested…
>
> Student 3: Lectures can be a bit too quick for me to take notes. (Student critical friends, personal communication, 28 October 2013)

I noticed that the students were quite happy about the course and decided to try and give them more time during lectures for their notes, although I was not quite sure I wanted to teach a group of students who were not communicating but copying down notes from a PowerPoint or board. I disliked the idea of an authority figure in the classroom, an expert who knows it all and whose comments are noted and transcribed. I felt that I really wanted to keep the lectures dynamic and interactive, as far as possible. Communication during lectures tends to become one-way, with not enough opportunities to address students' individual issues, perceptions or needs. It is difficult to know if the lecturer is understood if all that is expected from a student is to look, listen and write (Pletenac 1983), as noted in my diary:

> Although I manage to get students to follow lectures and actively take part by giving comments and personal experience, by raising questions, I still feel that during lectures not all of the students are truly able or willing to join in and reply to questions. (V. Rajić, personal communication, 10 November 2013)

After a month, I began lectures by discussing student activities in the week since our last meeting. Then a summary revision of the past week's content was presented on a PowerPoint. Students were asked to explain the concepts, or I provided a short summary, following which we continued the lecture.

My student critical friends provided the following feedback:

> Student 10: I like that we start lectures with revision of what we have learned last time. I like it as well that you do not keep us for too long, for sometimes it can be difficult, and we lose track. You say what is important and give examples.

> Student 12: There is no need to go in more detail and learn definitions, I like the examples and then I can learn the definitions at home from the book. It is easier for me to learn when you give examples and I can remember when I learn at home. (Student critical friends, personal communication, 2 December 2013)

Although most of the feedback was positive there was a student whose comments made me rethink the concept of lectures:

> I think that the lectures are too short, and not too detailed as if they are made for those who are not interested, and that we who wanted to learn more cannot read them. When I come home I forget, for I did not have time to write down comments. Perhaps the lectures should be longer only for those who are interested, and not everyone should attend. (Student 11, personal communication, 2 December 2013)

This comment revealed a new perspective for me. In my efforts to make lectures dynamic, connected to real-life situations and participatory, I found that I was neglecting the needs of some students or was maybe pushing them out of their comfort zone too much. Higher education still approaches students as persons who need to be taught traditionally, and my students may have been approached in such a way from the very beginning of their studies. Many successful students are used to learning in such a way. The comment helped me reflect deeper on the issues of teacher/student communication and the factors that may have led to dissatisfaction that I could have an impact on – while staying true to my values and not compromising the quality of lectures.

> Lectures are meant to provide a scientific review of the theoretical input on the issues and themes dealt with in school docimology. They should enable students to build (or rebuild) conceptions of pedagogical approaches in contemporary education, and help explain the theoretical background of key aspects of evaluation that we can deal with practically during seminars! I think that all of this could be achieved by allowing more democracy and emancipation during the process. (V. Rajić, personal communication, 10 December 2013)

There are different kinds of lecturers and different kinds of students and they are not necessarily "complementary". The more similar the teacher and student are in attitudes, interests, values and abilities, the greater the possibility that their communication will be successful (Suzić, Dabić and Ćirković Miladinović 2013). Bush (1986) categorises different types of teachers and students, recognising the former as academic, advisory or creative types, complemented by students that are intellectual, emotional or creative, respectively. Although similar comments did not come up later on in interviews with my critical friends, I felt that this was a very important opportunity to find out what students feel and what their needs are. This was a topic that I kept coming back to in my reflection on my practice:

> I am not sure that I can meet the expectations of this student. I want to ensure deep approach to learning of students, and I do not feel that the best way to achieve this aim is by lecturing for a longer period of time. Going about it a bit slower could be a good start. I have gone through my notes and I do feel that they are detailed enough. At this moment I have mixed feelings about this issue. My ppts [PowerPoint presentations] are not and cannot be equivalent for the literature a student needs to go through to be able to fulfil their obligations for this course. Still, I feel that I should be able to try and resolve this issue. (V. Rajić, personal communication, 27 December 2014)

One of my aims was to ensure the emancipation of students. I wanted to break the concept of a lecturer as an authoritative figure, an expert and a controller of student behaviour (Pletenac 1983). Student autonomy was slowly developed during the course

through different activities that ensured student responsibility for their own learning. The last lecture was held by a group of students who had prepared short lectures on formative assessment using the online materials developed in Moodle by themselves and their colleagues. Within each group, the students could opt for a presentation of a different form of evaluation, which we elaborated on and practised during the semester (peer evaluation; self-evaluation; e-portfolios; and creation of valid exam questions). I supported students in preparing materials and the presentation of the data we collected during the course. In the end, a lecture was organised where students discussed with their colleagues their results and main findings. This was a difficult activity to organise since I did not want it to look like a presentation, without a real discussion or reflection. One of the student-lecturers gave an interview after the seminar:

> Oh, I was a part of that. That was good, it was really strange to stand up in front of the colleagues but it was fun. In that way we can research a topic more intensely, I would have probably not researched the topic so much and I had the opportunity to share it with the others. (Student 15, personal communication, 13 January 2014)

Seminars

Often, in a university setting, seminars are used for the presentation of students' individual work. I find this to be a missed opportunity for collaborative learning and developing social interactions among students. For my seminars, I decided to use co-operative work whenever possible, to develop cohesion within groups and to differentiate the activities in this course from most of the activities in other courses. I used jigsaw, pair-share, opinion line and Round Robin. I made a conscious effort to vary micro groups constantly to enable the development of social cohesion in the seminar groups. The concrete actions undertaken were:

- ► co-operative learning structures;
- ► guaranteed time for discussion and reflection on activities;
- ► changing micro-group composition in each seminar to build group cohesion.

My critical friends repeatedly commented on the positive effects that co-operative work had for the students and their group dynamics. The activities that took place during seminars were assessed by the students very positively. Perhaps due to the organisation of seminars in smaller groups (maximum 20 to 24 students), co-operative and collaborative learning was very beneficial for the students. My main idea was to implement and use as many forms of co-operative learning as I could to promote and develop collaboration, emancipation among students, and enable learning by doing, making the process of decision making more democratic and participatory:

> Student 1: Seminars I like because of cooperative work, we can have discussions (not arguments) and that is not the case in other courses where we argue it is not a problem to have your own point of view and do not have to change it.
>
> Student 2: Keep changing the micro groups since there are clans within our group and this is the best way to break them.
>
> Student 3: Seminars are organised in a great way, I find that I could work in such a way as a teacher … The atmosphere is relaxed and the climate is very positive.
> (Student critical friends, personal communication, 28 October 2013)

Also, it was important for me that the decision making was done in a democratic way, and that the co-operative structures of seminar work enabled equal participation. Since it was the first month of our learning together it was important to set common rules and criteria for peer and self-evaluation. I found that this was easily done within the co-operative setting. After the first month I concluded:

> I find that the seminars are quite successful. Students enjoy cooperative work, it gives them the opportunity to discuss and actively create new ideas and knowledge about the topics that we deal with. I find that they work well in groups and are willing to share their ideas and ask questions (see clip on YouTube videotaped at the seminar of the course "Evaluation in primary education": http://youtu.be/C7q3r6G1k58). (V. Rajić, personal communication, 19 November 2013)

Seminars provide the time and place to develop students' critical thinking, explore ideas and further develop co-operation. I continued to organise the content and structure of learning in a way that ensured student activity and participation. I introduced new co-operative activities, which were appreciated by the students:

> I like seminars a lot, group work and switching roles and groups, we are usually seated in small groups and this way we communicate and cooperate and I can hear different opinions. (Student 13, personal communication, 2 December 2013)

Moodle

One of the activities implemented during the second month was the use of a Moodle platform for communication. Students were asked to contribute on Moodle by further elaborating on issues we had discussed during lectures and seminars. This was a voluntary activity that did not lead to extra credits for the final evaluation. Concern arose over the voluntary basis for the online activities:

> We had Moodle activities in a course before. We were supposed to do activities and we had to do every activity if we wanted to get extra points. If we skipped only one there were no points for us. Perhaps you give us too much freedom … Since, my colleague was supposed to upload our work and did not do so, perhaps they did not take it seriously. (Student 9, personal communication, 25 November 2013)

This made me rethink the online activities during the course. I see many benefits of online learning. The way that I understand an online space, such as Moodle, is more as a space for a "learning community" than a repository of learning materials, PowerPoint presentations and other documents for individual learning. I interpret Moodle as a space where students and I can encourage and support each other in the construction of knowledge, together, based on our common experience during lectures and seminars.

My understanding of this space is greatly influenced by the values of emancipation, democracy and participation. This is the reason why I never considered the online activities to be obligatory or that they should be motivated by extra credit. My opinion about online collaboration is in line with the following ideas:

> Compulsory participation in discussions may be a useful tool for engagement for some learning situations, but using it as a pedagogical strategy requires greater awareness of power differences due to monitoring and judging learners against a tutor-defined process. (Gulati 2008: 188-9)

So despite the student's comment, I decided to keep the online space as a safe space for communication among motivated and interested students, and not make

it obligatory. In the activities that followed I tried to ensure topics that would be interesting to the students.

> Democratic and open learning may be encouraged through increased opportunities for learner groups to choose, negotiate and define discussion topics. Pre-defined discussions could take greater account of individual learner contexts, and integrate social learning opportunities within learners' real-life contexts. (Gulati 2008: 189)

We used seminars to discuss issues in education such as formative forms of assessment and, after beginning with face-to-face meetings, I would open discussions with their ideas, criteria for evaluation, or similar topics, with the aim to ensure participation and democracy in the educational process. Looking back, I feel that perhaps a chance to explain my aims in a bit more detail was missed. This will be done with the students who enrol on this course next year, so that they can take on the challenge and responsibility for individual learning in a collaborative space.

In the activities where one group representative was to upload the comments for the group, we had success, except in cases where it was not carried out on time and this was noted by the group members (and not appreciated, see student 9's comment). When it came to individual activities I noticed that 96% of students participated – despite the fact that it was voluntary.

During the last round of interviews, in January 2014, my personal process of reflection and rethinking my practice became obvious in some of the answers that my critical friends gave. It was very rewarding to observe how students were developing metacognitive skills and rethinking the process. The most encouraging example came from one of the students during our last interview:

> The lectures were clear and filled with information necessary that gave us insight to the content of the course. During seminars we practiced activities that were connected to the topic of the previous lecture. And when we got home we had the possibility to enrol in activities that would combine theoretical knowledge gained during lectures and skills acquired during seminars and help us develop clear view of assessment and evaluation … I liked the concept of cooperative learning that we could implement in the classroom and especially the classroom climate. (Student 16, personal communication, 13 January 2014)

As part of the evaluation activity at the end of the course, students were asked to fill in a questionnaire anonymously, and 71 students did so. Among other things, students were asked to state whether the values that I think are essential in any educational process were achieved during this course (through lectures, seminars or Moodle activities). The students were asked to provide a "yes" or "no" answer (Table 2).

Table 2: Percentage of students confirming that the values were achieved during lectures, seminars and online learning

Values	Lecture	Seminar	Moodle
Emancipation	91%	100%	100%
Democracy	98%	98%	95%
Participation	77%	98%	95%

The results show that all of the values were achieved during the course "Evaluation in primary education". This was a positive evaluation and it confirmed the data gath-ered

from the interviews. Seminars were evaluated as the best modes to achieve the values. Although the majority of students confirmed that the values were met even during the lectures, it is obvious these have limitations in promoting the values of emancipation and participation.

Further thoughts

This report presents an example of action research in higher education. The research sought to improve teaching practice in a higher education institution. Ramsden (2002) suggests that the answer to the question, "How can I improve my teaching?":

> lies in the connection between students' learning of particular content and the quality of our teaching of that content. Through listening to what students have said about their learning, we [teachers] have observed how real this connection is. Good teaching and good learning are linked through the students' experiences of what we do. (Ramsden 2002: 86)

For this reason, this action research was launched and students were invited to take on the role of critical friends. During the research a number of activities were implemented and their value and appropriateness was discussed with the students. All these activities were organised to enable students to fully engage in teaching and learning activities during the course of "Evaluation in primary education" and to experience a learning process that is democratic, as well as to experience different forms of evaluation that they can use later on in their own practice as teachers.

The action research had an impact on my everyday practice. It was a valuable experience that enabled me to conduct research on and improve my practice. It has confirmed that my efforts to foster democratic education in higher education are feasible. It made me reflect on my values of democracy, participation and emancipation in education and clarify which of these I am not willing to give up on. It opened up questions of teacher–student communication and relations and the role of the teacher, and had an impact on the planning and delivery of my everyday practice. Further, there are concrete actions that I plan to take in preparing for the course in the future to ensure students' deep learning in co-existence with the values necessary for a democratic educational process:

- ▶ prepare lectures in a dynamic way by reflecting on past experiences, trends and research implications for the development of assessment;
- ▶ take into account the fact that some students appreciate extra theoretical input and materials for learning (i.e. prepare a repository of materials for those who are willing to learn from different sources);
- ▶ acquire new knowledge on co-operative structures with large groups;
- ▶ keep seminars organised in a way that enables co-operation and collaboration among students;
- ▶ further develop activities in optional online spaces, giving students the choice to learn in silence (without active participation);
- ▶ develop co-operation with critical friends/students enrolled on the course.

Through the process of action research, I have developed a new sense of respect for my students as autonomous learners, willing to take on new challenges and capable of reflecting on educational practice while providing me with valuable feedback.

Although this action research project was planned as a process that would enable me to critically reflect on my practice, providing me with the opportunity for self-managed professional development, it has opened up many more issues than initially planned. It made me question my identity and my role as a teacher in higher education. In doing so I was considering the "identities" that Zukas and Malcolm (2002: 205) recognised, where the educator is:

- ▶ critical practitioner;
- ▶ psycho-diagnostician and facilitator of learning;
- ▶ reflective practitioner;
- ▶ situated learner within a community of practice;
- ▶ assurer of organisational quality and efficiency; deliverer of services to agreed or imposed standards.

In their writings, Zukas and Malcolm stressed the dichotomy in the understanding of the higher education teacher – educator as a critical practitioner and educator as psycho-diagnostician and facilitator of learning. This dichotomy can be related to the much broader context of crisis in the university today that many of us recognise as impacting our practice:

> the crisis in the relationship between the professor and the student, between members of the "academic ethos" and members of the "social ethos" – the crisis between the university and society. Is a change from the "academic ethos" to a "learning ethos" not necessary? If any member of society requires an ongoing or permanent learning process that is teachers, whose teaching should be subordinate to their constant process of learning and renewal. (Escotet 1995: 6)

The results of this research have implications for organisational development. Which way do we want to develop our teaching practice? Do we really want or need large group lectures numbering 80 to 150 students, which limit the potential of the learning/teaching experience? Which role should we, as educators of prospective teachers, take on and how should we overcome the crisis in the relationship between the professor and the student? It will be of great interest to me to further explore these issues.

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Positive orientation to education and critical friendship

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Philosophical and theoretical elaboration of our values

In psychology, there has been a shift of emphasis from neutral and negative to the positive aspects of individual and social development. Such an approach has had an impact on the education of children, which may be considered to constitute:

> vastly more than fixing what is wrong with them. It is about identifying and nurturing their strongest qualities, what they own and are best at, and helping them find niches in which they can best live out these strengths. (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000: 5)

We believe that nurturing students' strongest qualities is the very essence of learning and that they learn best when they freely create something. Learning based on creativity directs its influence towards that which still does not exist but could become, as a result of productive imagination and autonomous action on the part of creative individuals and groups. In creating our human world we start from autonomously defined values that are not universal in the sense of content, although their function is universal. Therefore, we differ from Aristotle and the positivist psychologists of today in (empirically) defining universal virtues. We consider that people should enjoy the freedom to continuously redefine their virtues as well as values and recreate their world, and not merely perpetuate the existing or "natural" way of life (Aristotle 350 BCE/1998). Therefore, an important aim of a positive orientation in education is to autonomously define and fulfil values in our lives. We believe that action research is particularly suited to this.

Certainly, people may have different values that they can communicate about to negotiate how to live together. Any attempt to define and impose a value system arbitrarily or empirically (which amounts to almost the same thing) neglects human freedom. This was clear to Kant:

> However, there are still many who think that they can explain this freedom on empirical principles, like any other physical faculty, and treat it as a psychological property, the explanation of which only requires a more exact study of the nature of the soul and of the motives of the will, and not as a transcendental predicate of the causality of a being that belongs to the world of sense (which is really the point). They thus deprive us of the grand revelation which we obtain through practical reason by means of the moral law, the revelation, namely, of a supersensible world by the realization of the otherwise transcendent concept of freedom, and by this deprive us also of the moral law itself, which admits no empirical principle of determination. (Kant 1788/2002: 120)

Kant considered that we, as intelligent and autonomous beings, could define our moral laws to allow us to actively create our "nature" (culture) and in that way, comprehend ourselves by creating our human world (Cassirer 1944).

Our approach is based on freedom and this freedom, according to Fromm (1986), has two sides: negative and positive. Negative freedom implies separation of the human being from nature and authorities and overcoming the limitations that emerge from societal influences. Positive freedom is the full realisation of individual potential, as well as one's capacity for active and spontaneous living. Only through spontaneous activity can human beings overcome fear of loneliness without sacrificing personal integrity. Love and creativity are integral parts of spontaneous activity, in which human beings again unite with the world, other human beings, nature and themselves (Fromm 1986).

We strongly advocate education that encourages students as well as teachers to live with freedom, love, spontaneity and creativity, and allows them to fulfil their positive potential. It is particularly important that students are able express their creativity, which is associated with:

> increased openness to experience, a willingness to accept and even relish change, the ability to improvise and adapt quickly to situations, and greater than average ability to think in unexpected directions. (Compton 2005: 142)

Positive emotions are the by-products of success in creating something that is valuable, for us and our social environment. They "can help broaden our thoughts and build resources in order to gain resilience" (Hefferon and Boniwell 2011: 25). A positive orientation to education presumes freedom of choice and defining educational values directed to future, personal and social development, and creating a positive self-image in all participants of the learning process.

This orientation is not possible without critical reflection that enables us to face the conditions and outcomes of our activities. Without critical reflection even well-intentioned efforts can result in the distorted representation of someone else's practice, which allows little or no learning.

Although it is possible and necessary to self-critically question our own practice, the support of critical friends could be particularly helpful. The main aim of critical friendship is to help someone to obtain positive changes, not merely to criticise her/his activity. On the contrary:

> a critical friendship requires trust and a formal process. Many people equate critique with judgment, and when someone offers criticism, they brace themselves for negative comments. (Costa and Kallick 1993: 50)

Action research is a way to conduct research on and address a positive orientation in education as well as critical friendship. It allows us to question our own educational practice, creating one's own identity and understanding the identities of others:

> Action researchers believe that people are able to create their own identities and allow other people to create theirs … Living together successfully requires hard work and considerable effort to understand the other's point of view; this means developing their potentials to care, and recognising and suspending their own prejudices. (McNiff and Whitehead 2002: 17)

Our understanding of action research includes considering the philosophical and theoretical backgrounds of postulated values. Therefore, before starting this action

research project we deliberated on our governing values. The result was a published account (Bognar and Simel 2013) in which we elaborated on the philosophical background of positive pedagogy. In accordance with these ideas, which were briefly presented in this chapter, we developed an initial action plan and started a process of creative co-operation including students and members of the Pestalozzi action research team.

Educational context

This study was conducted within the Pestalozzi action research project in which practitioners from different European countries participated. As critical friends, I (Sanja)[26] had Anastasija Akulenko, a psychologist from Belarus, and Višnja Rajić, a teacher at the Faculty of Teacher Education at the University of Zagreb, Croatia. All my critical friends are employed at higher education institutions, which contributed to mutual understanding and encouraging communication.

My research was conducted within a seminar on pedagogy, which I taught during the winter semester of the 2013/14 academic year (from October 2013 to January 2014). Second-year graduate students, future teachers of the Croatian language,[27] participated in the research. This course consists of lectures led by professors, and seminars led by assistants. My responsibility as an assistant was to lead seminars of pedagogy.

Because the seminar was held on Mondays in the afternoon (from 5.30 p.m. to 6.00 p.m.), students were often tired after attending classes. In the group were several students who lived outside Osijek and who often asked me to let them go earlier so that they could travel home. Classes were held in a room that allows co-operative and active learning. It is equipped with round tables and didactic and technical supplies (e.g. computers, overhead and LCD projectors, bookshelves, indoor whiteboards).

I started my professional career in 2012 as an assistant at the Department of Pedagogy, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, in Osijek, Croatia. I was and still am responsible for organising seminars in different courses such as pedagogy, education methods, methods in media pedagogy and school management. On the Pestalozzi web forum, I explained what teaching means to me, and how I feel while carrying out classes:

> [While I teach] all problems disappear, my body fills with energy and emotions, and I almost have the feeling of weightlessness; simply sense of easiness. I felt this way from the first time I held lectures; it was something natural, something that is already part of me; and I just needed to develop this feeling. Therefore, I often experience our classes pretty personally and highly emotionally, since it is not for me merely job which I would do and forget when I come out from a classroom, since THAT'S WHAT I AM. (S. Simel, personal communication, 16 January 2014)

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26. Although Branko was intensively engaged in writing all parts of this report, we agreed to write it from my point of view.
27. According to the Bologna system, our studies consist of an undergraduate level, lasting three years and ending with a qualification such as a bachelor's degree (BA), and graduate studies, lasting two years and ending with a master's degree (MA) in a particular field.

This was my second action research project, but Branko has dealt with action research for 15 years, trying to contribute to improving the quality of educational practice at different levels of the education system. Our previous collaborative action research was conducted at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences within the course Methods in Education, and we set up critical friendships with the students, mostly over a web forum. This experience motivated us to apply something similar in this project.

At the very beginning of the course, I explained to students the meaning of critical friendship and asked them to participate. Three students accepted. Our critical friendship unfolded mostly over online discussions on the Moodle system at http://pedagogija.net, which Branko installed and maintained for the purposes of his teaching. Discussions were used as the basis of my research diary.

Although my three critical friends had no previous experience with such co-operation, they decided to help me in conducting action research. They also associate privately in their free time and have had similar experiences at earlier stages of their education, which was mostly traditional and authoritarian. Despite their similarities, each of them brought into our critical friendship and co-operation something of their personalities.

N. R., for instance, has written several reviews of literary works. She is particularly interested in drama and its use in teaching. Regarding teaching, she emphasised that "the majority of students do not like to 'play school'".

She is a very successful student and has high levels of language proficiency. At the end of our research interview, she pointed out that she accepted to be my critical friend primarily to help me:

> Actually, I decided that I would like to help because I put myself in the position that I need help, and I know how many students are unwilling to accept something that is not obligatory, that is not for grade. So I mostly … to help you, and then when we started, it was interesting to check my power of perceptions and development of critical thinking. (N. R., personal communication, 21 January 2014)

While participating in online discussions, she offered mostly critical comments, but she also noted and emphasised the positive aspects of teaching. She was aware of the effect on people of negative comments, but claimed that as unpleasant as they were, they had a positive impact on her since they helped her to become better as someone who "insist[s] so much on my perfection".

I. B. also writes literature reviews. She has published several papers in journals and she has a distinctive inclination towards critical expression. In 2013, she was officially commended for her extracurricular activities. Although she chose to become a teacher, she is more interested in scientific research in the field of literature. During online discussions, she often mentioned the opportunity she had had to attend an international professional meeting, along with a professor from Zagreb, where she was able to "meet many scientists in the field of literature and language, from Croatia and abroad". She particularly enjoyed talking to experts who answered her questions and took into account her ideas. Although she had hoped for a while to go into research, she soon realised that it would not be possible:

> It bothers me very much since I do not believe that I would like to devote my whole life to teaching children; I am scared that it won't fulfil me and make me happy. However, I

am happy to see that this is not the case with my colleagues and friends who perceive themselves as teachers. (I. B., personal communication, 18 January 2014)

She generally considered herself a non-creative person and emphasised the importance of respecting rules in the educational process.

S. H. firstly enrolled in the study of mathematics as something natural for her, a pursuit that relaxes her and which she really understands. She considered that this field of study would make it easier to get employment. However, she was disappointed that some of her teachers could not answer her questions satisfactorily, forcing her to learn without understanding. She then enrolled in the study of Croatian language and literature:

Study of language, precisely Croatian language, appeared to be a logical second choice, since grammar is very related with mathematic … I had opportunity to learn English, German, Latin, and Greek and grammatical rules were something that always fascinated me since they apply in speaker's language without too much thinking, although they are very complex. However, until the second year of study I did not want to be a teacher, thereby, the study seemed a bit meaningless to me although I enjoyed in it. I do not know what happened then, but from the second year, I have good vision of myself as a teacher as well as to transmit what I have learned. (S. H., personal communication, 14 January 2013)

She prefers facts and logic over creativity:

If I have some facts, and if I see certain logic in it, then I could create something that could be considered creative, but I do not think that in essence I am creative. (S. H., personal communication, 14 January 2013)

Problem and plan of the action research

If we want future teachers to grasp the significance of a positive orientation in education and be able to use it in their classroom practice, we have to provide them with positive experiences in their pedagogical education. In the beginning, I intended to conduct research on the implementation of a positive orientation in education in my pedagogy seminars. But when we started our online correspondence I noticed that my three critical friends' comments were mostly negatively oriented. They were focused on problems, and they rarely provided constructive and encouraging suggestions.

The organisation of classes through workshops, held partly by students, seemed to my critical friends inappropriate, chaotic, too relaxed and unproductive. From the very beginning it was clear that we did not share the same values. This was the reason that Branko encouraged me to focus on my collaboration with critical friends:

Maybe you could reduce your expectations and put emphasis on your collaboration with three critical friends at the forum which I opened for you at my Moodle system (http://pedagogija.net). This collaboration could be the focus of your action research and through the communication with your critical friends you can follow changes in yourself, your critical friends and the whole group of students with which you work at the faculty. (B. Bognar, personal communication, 11 November 2013)

I accepted his suggestion to monitor changes in my critical friends. I also decided to challenge the mostly negative approach of my critical friends to critical friendship by using a positively oriented educational approach (Table 1).

Table 1: Research aims and criteria

Aims	Criteria
Freedom to express own opinion	▶ critical friends had the opportunity to express their values, beliefs, opinions and experiences; ▶ different values, beliefs and opinions were not transmitted or imposed, but communicated; ▶ participants of discussions freely expressed critical reflections on teaching practice.
Encouraging orientation on positive capabilities and creative potential in themselves and others	Participants of the critical friendship discussion: ▶ recognised their own talents and creative abilities, and in other students too; ▶ understood the importance of focusing on the positive potential of other students; ▶ understood the importance of teaching that promotes positive students' capabilities and creativity; ▶ suggested creative solutions for noted problems.
Encouraging positive emotions, empathy, humour and future orientation	Participants expressed and understood the importance of: ▶ positive emotions and humour in their comments; ▶ hope and optimism in their comments; ▶ empathy in their comments.

Critical friendship online discussions were the main source of data in this action research project. They were downloaded and saved in Word documents in order to conduct qualitative analysis with the freeware application QDA Miner Lite. Three simple codes were defined:

- ▶ "neutral messages" imply process descriptions, giving information, defining terms, citations and writing about literature;

- ▶ "positive messages" stand for a positive tone of discussion, wherein participants express their satisfaction, positive emotions and moods; try to find solutions to problems; write positively about themselves and others; and express empathy and future orientation;

- ▶ "negative messages" denote a negatively oriented discussion. Participants express their dissatisfaction, negative emotions and moods; accentuate problems; and criticise. This includes agreement with the negative messages of other participants.

All tabular outputs were converted to Excel documents and additionally analysed with the application. Data also included videos of almost all lessons and the final interviews with critical friends.

Description of critical friendship activities

Our discussions were very intensive, as Branko noted on the Pestalozzi forum:

> When you started critical friendship communication I was impressed with level of activity which occurred at the forum … I was amazed with your honest and lengthy critical-friendship communication. (B. Bognar, personal communication, 7 January 2014)

I was the most active of all participants since I responded to almost all the posts. The most active student was I. B., and the least was N. R. However, I. B. did not comment on two teaching topics, while N. R. and S. H. participated in all discussions. Branko decided to cease sending his comments after the first discussion. He explained on the Pestalozzi forum:

> I started to participate in your discussion but I soon realised that it could be counterproductive. Namely, those students do not know me at all and me as a stranger could hinder their activity and openness. Certainly, I will try to follow what is going on at Moodle and comment everything with you through our personal communication and over this forum. (B. Bognar, personal communication, 7 January 2014)

I tried to emphasise the positive aspects of teaching when writing on the forum, particularly concerning student activities, and documented my introductory reflections with videos that were previously uploaded on YouTube. This allowed us to analyse teaching situations, nonverbal communication and the learning environment. After each class, I introduced a new topic of positive orientation to education that was discussed in a workshop, and pointed out the problems observed during teaching. I also provided possible reasons why these problems might have occurred and proposed solutions with the aim of including my critical friends in problem solving.

Figure 1: Types of messages posted by student critical friends on the forum in the first discussion, "Education and values"
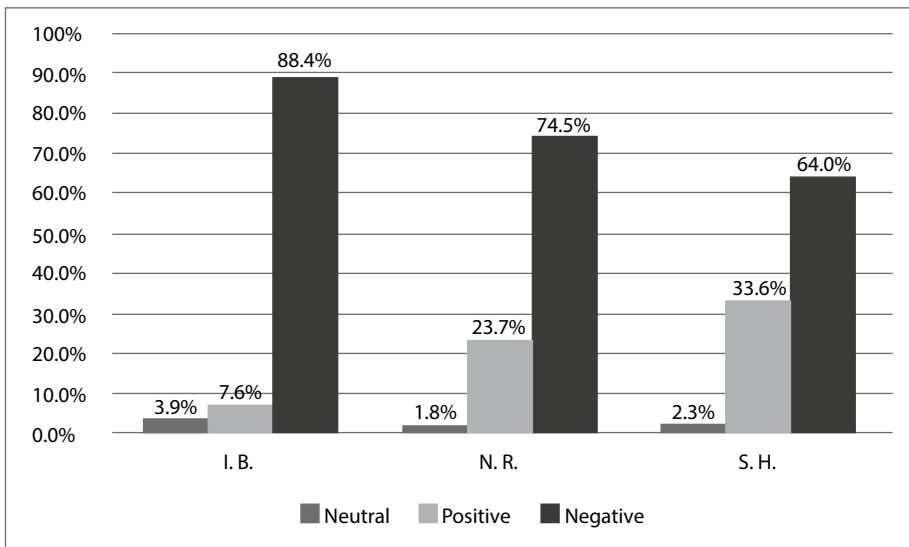
Although I expected that students would try to find solutions to the problems that I had pointed out, instead they emphasised the problems and posted mainly negative

comments (Figure 1), some of them very sharp, and even insulting towards other students:

> The group, which held the workshop, was pretty weak and unmotivated. Their guided fantasy was uninventive since the professor performed the same activity with us at the last meeting, and there are lots of procedures which could be used instead this, so I would conclude that group or individuals did not take enough responsible for their tasks. (N. R., personal communication, 5 November 2013)

Such comments made me sad, disappointed and discouraged. I wrote about those feelings in my research diary, which I shared with my critical friends on the Pestalozzi forum. Anastasija posted an encouraging comment:

> I believe that it is very interesting situation – when what we think should be critical FRIENDSHIP turns out to be about being CRITICAL and training their critical skills. Maybe they don't want to show you that YOU are wrong, but they are trying to show that EVERYTHING is wrong...

> As I perceive your situation – it is about different implicit human values about teaching … I'm really looking forward to seeing how your communication with critical friend would turn out. (A. Akulenko, personal communication, 9 January 2014)

Although it was not easy for me to face the negative comments of my critical friends, I accepted this situation as a "test" for the positive orientation that I wish to promote in my educational practice and as a challenge to realising the aims of this research.

Freedom of expression

The students with whom I set up critical friendship may have had different values from mine. I stand for education that emphasises a:

> positive, pleasant, relaxed atmosphere which is at the same time productive, and in which the aims of teaching are achieved and in which all students could distinguish themselves and fulfil their potentials. (S. Simel, personal communication, 5 November 2013)

However, I was aware that it would not be an easy task since I was dealing with a group of students who had studied together for five years, during which they had created particular relationships and attitudes that were difficult to change. S. H. agreed:

> Regarding a positive atmosphere, you have a really big challenge in front of you (and us too) since, in this group pretty unfriendly relationships prevail … the students mostly do not have a problem with trusting the professors, but they do not trust in the rest of the group (they trust only part of group). (S. H., personal communication, 6 November 2013)

On the other hand, N. R. also expressed satisfaction:

> that work in groups does not always go smoothly it is in this critical conversation and pursuit for removal of difficulties we could learn a lot and apply it in our future practice. (N. R., personal communication, 6 November 2013)

She also supported S. H.'s opinion that responsibility is a precondition for freedom:

> Some students are, unfortunately, insufficiently responsible, and as well as S. wrote, responsibility is precondition for freedom. I think it is necessary that everyone raise awareness about the purpose how teaching is held, repeat it several times, involve (even coercively – calling by name) all students in activities since only in that way all will be active and conceive own role in teaching process. (N. R., personal communication, 6 November 2013)

Although I did not agree with all their comments, my critical friends could freely express their values, beliefs, thoughts and experiences. This was confirmed by their responses to the final interview. Thus N. R., responding to the question "What would you emphasise as the key point in the critical friendship?" told me:

> What I would emphasise is the freedom we had to express our opinions and that sanctions did not exist. Because of that we could be free and could openly say everything we thought, that often is not the case at the faculty. (N. R., personal communication, 21 January 2014)

On my question about freedom of expression in critical friendship discussions S. H. and I. B. added:

> It [freedom] was big. We were absolutely free to say whatever was on our minds, what was in our hearts at a particular moment … Generally, we could comment whatever we wanted. (S. H., personal communication, 21 January 2014)

> Therefore, I also consider it was important you pointed out that we were completely free. I think, I do not know how much, I am not able to estimate since we did not have something like this with other professors, I cannot decide if whether someone else would resent some of our comments, but I think that you were sincere. At least I believed you. [I thought], ok, she won't mark [badly] my essay when I write it, even if I write something that she does not like. (I. B., personal communication, 21 January 2014)

From those responses, it is possible to conclude that the aim "freedom to express own opinion" was entirely fulfilled. Critical friends had the opportunity to express different values, opinions and experiences. Despite our differences, not one of us felt forced to accept someone else's values or opinions; these were a matter of open discussion. Likewise, everyone could criticise the teaching practice as well as other participants' comments during our discussions.

Interpretation

Although my critical friends' comments differed, sometimes significantly, from my opinions, I concluded that none had malicious intentions. I consider that the difference in our approaches were the result of different personalities, experiences and the values we stand for. In this situation, when it is necessary to co-operate with individuals who stand for different values, it is important to be non-judgmental and open to other people's points of view:

> The action of action research is always informed and purposeful. The action begins with a felt need to do something, which transforms into intent, which in turn transforms into action. Deciding to take action usually means actively deciding to question your own motives, and treating your findings and interpretations critically, suspending your judgements, and being open to other people's points of view. You need to accept that other people may be better informed than you are … Although we might passionately commit to our values, we always need to recognise that we may be mistaken (Polanyi 1958), and still have much to learn. Finding the balance between conviction and open-mindedness can be difficult and involves personal honesty. (McNiff and Whitehead 2010: 40)

Actually, it was an advantage to co-operate with critical friends who stood for different values since that meant they perceived the situation in the classroom differently. For example, those who preferred order, authority and responsibility over freedom immediately noticed and emphasised the problem of students leaving the classroom

earlier, which happened regularly. Without the open, critical comments of my critical friends, I probably would not become aware that such habits of some students disturbed others in the group.

However, my critical friends could learn from me to become more empathic and tolerant in such situations. Therefore, critical friendship does not mean that someone who is more "emancipated" should transmit his/her values to a "less conscious" person; rather, it implies an open discussion in which all sides can learn something. Such learning can happen only if all participants are free to express their values, beliefs, opinions and experiences.

In spite of the fact that our different value backgrounds and style of participation in discussions triggered negative emotions in me, I did not reach for my instruments of power, but always tried to present my arguments in responses to my critical friends. Ultimately, students who preferred an authoritarian style of education recognised freedom as the most important gain in their critical friendship experience. This means that the right way to advocate for certain values is to live them in one's own practice and life. Therefore, consistently arguing for freedom implies respecting the freedom of other people. We do not need to always agree with them, but we should listen to them in order to try and understand them. This represents empathic listening (Covey 1989), and it allows a person psychological freedom, giving interlocutors the opportunity to learn from each other. Therefore, in positive orientation in education it is important to discuss values openly, and not merely impose them on students.

Encouraging orientation towards positive capabilities and creative potential in ourselves and others

From the very beginning of our critical friendship, I encouraged the students to orient themselves towards recognising their own positive and productive potential and that of other students. I also made efforts to help them understand the importance of such an approach in education. My student critical friends mentioned critical thinking as something they were proud of, and that they would like to develop this potential through our co-operation:

> I am more and more conceived about how much I learnt through critical friendships about myself and my colleagues, as well as about the teaching process, education and about everything that is connected with school and students. I have to confess that I'm so glad you commended and recognised our critical thinking since it rarely happened at the faculty or in school too, and it could be necessary and could serve as a trigger for self-actualisation. (N. R., personal communication, 9 December 2013)

However, their critical comments on teaching activities were mostly neither constructive, nor oriented to the positive, productive potential of other students. As an explanation, N. R. pointed out the authoritarian environment they grew up in, which did not foster a positive approach. That made them sceptical regarding the implementation of a positive orientation in education in our teaching practice.

Under the influence of new experiences during our discussions and teaching activities, S. H. and N. R. started to orient themselves to their own productive abilities and that of others, although this process was not straightforward. An example of this was S. H.'s comment on the behaviour of student Ž., who used to interrupt teaching with heckling and jokes:

Colleague Z. is really a challenge. More and more I get the impression, as you pointed out at the beginning of our critical friendship, that this person has exceptional entertaining (acting) skills that are not always the most appropriate, and he certainly needs to work on them because his skills, if well directed, could be very useful. (S. H., personal communication, 10 December 2013)

Changes were also noticeable in I. B., who showed a tendency to avoid negative comments:

Although I always try to express my opinions, I try to make sure that they are not always negative which I have a tendency to do often. (I. B., personal communication, 9 December 2013)

This claim is substantiated by Figure 2, which shows that the number of words in negative messages were reduced during the semester, through discussions after each class about realisation of topics (content).

Figure 2: Changes in the type of messages that I. B. posted on the web forum
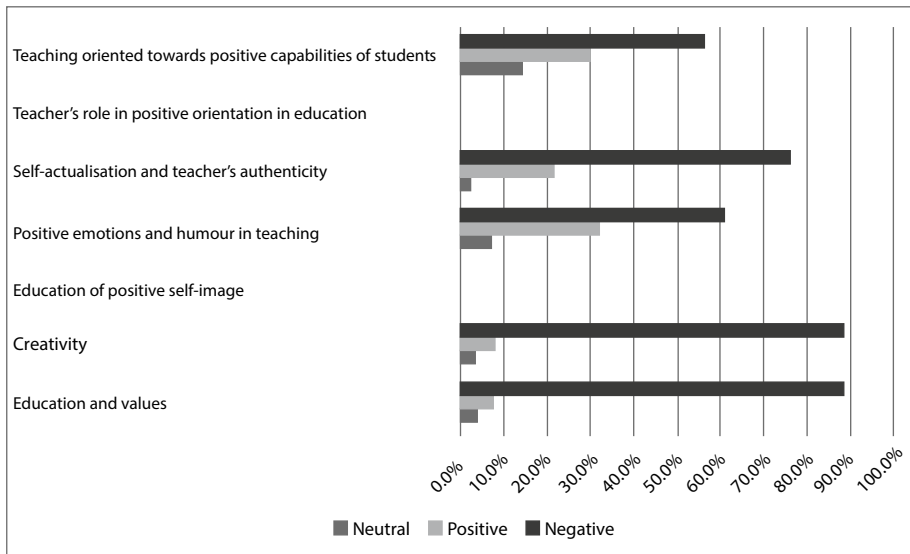
* I. B. did not attend these workshops.

Only at the end of our co-operation did I. B. feel ready to share with us her thoughts about what she would like to deal with, what made her happy and what bothered her. She explained that her real vocation had been scientific research in literature, not teaching, but that she had not been able to achieve her goals in that field.

In my comments, I expressed my understanding of her situation and tried to encourage her to find a satisfactory way of developing her potential:

Sometimes it is necessary to let things settle down, however, it is important to continue to deal with them, to not give up. (S. Simel, personal communication, 19 January 2014)

Branko took part in this last discussion on the forum since he considered it important to share some of his experiences and to provide support to I. B.:

Although at the moment some things seem impossible and unrealistic, I consider that you do not need to give up something that you are really interested in, and in which some professionals have recognised your strengths … This way is not easy, but it is

meaningful. If you succeed in discovering your real affinities and creative potentials, and fulfil them, it won't be just to your benefit, but other people around you will gain from that too. (B. Bognar, personal communication, 19 January 2014)

The discussion became particularly interesting when we started to think over our creative potential and its realisation. My critical friends considered themselves uncreative:

This opinion even led me to [the conclusion] that is unpedagogic to tell that someone is creative since in this case someone else who considers that is not [creative] could feel less worthy, and we do not like it in the classroom. Personally, it does not bother me since I will always believe that I am not creative person despite anything that someone tells. However, I could sometimes make something creatively. (I. B., personal communication, 18 January 2014)

S. H. and N. R. agreed, with the former emphasising that she considers herself creative only occasionally:

Certainly that I could make something creatively when it is required from me and when some occasion requires it, or in rare moments when I feel creative, but in most cases creativity does not come to me "naturally" like to persons who I consider creative, but it requires certain effort (not in the sense that it is tiring to me, but in the sense of increased activity). (S. H., personal communication, 18 January 2014)

Branko responded:

I hope you won't resent me that I would not agree with your statement stated at the classes that you are not creative. Certainly, anyone who decides to be uncreative could achieve this. It is enough to do nothing and just to wait that other people tell him/her what to do and how to behave in particular situation. Although I could imagine and find such persons, the most of us do not live in such way. In addition, such life has consequences. …

It is important to emphasise that creativity does not imply merely dealing with some kind of artistry, but "it is manifested in the intentions and motivation to transform the objective world into original interpretations, coupled with the ability to decide when this is useful and when it is not" (Runco 2004: 22). In addition, not only those people, who significantly contribute changing the world at the wider social and global level, are creative. Ordinary people could be and mostly are creative in everyday living situations. (B. Bognar, personal communication, 18 January 2014)

Meanwhile, the issue of students leaving classes earlier, connected with student K. in particular, provoked the growing dissatisfaction of my critical friends. I discussed this problem with all the students during class hoping that it would contribute to positive changes in their behaviour. In addition, following up on my idea to encourage orientation towards positive capabilities and creative potential rather than problems, I approached K. with a proposal that she sing a song during class. My intention, in doing so, was to divert our focus from the negative issue of her behaviour to the positive opportunity to share one of her talents with the group.

Following this, we discussed with the class how she might develop her talent. Although her communication was very inspiring to me, my critical friends commented on it rather negatively and expressed their disapproval of my decision to give K. an opportunity to make a presentation despite her frequent absence from class. N. R. wrote:

K. was not any surprise to me, and I believe neither to other students since we are already familiar with her singing. In this way, it seems to me that her earlier leaving from classes was awarded since you did a favour for her by giving her a space for singing. I do not know whether you talked about the problem of her earlier leaving, but it seems to me that she did not comprehend importance of that. Moreover, it is a bit contradictory to

talk about some responsibility in "singing part of life" when this academic side suffers. (N. R., personal communication, 17 January 2014)

S. H. agreed with this and I. B. emphasised that this situation hurt her:

> For sure, this is not motivating, at least it was not for me, on the contrary, it hit me since it shows that students are not aware of rules that we specified in groups, and which we repeated more times, but they only try to be praised and awarded by professor since we all the time talk about recognising and stimulating pupils' potentials. The same thing happens all the time at this faculty that those who deserve [it] get nothing, and professors only deal with those who are irresponsible, and at the end we all have the same marks. (I. B., personal communication, 18 January 2014)

Because of such comments I felt various negative emotions (e.g. sorrow, dissatisfaction, frustration). I discussed this with Branko. He helped me understand the frustration of my critical friends with my insistence on a positive orientation in education. I once again tried to explain my intentions and reasons behind focusing on student K.'s singing talent, but I also wrote about the disadvantages of that practice. I confessed that I should have "clashed with" K.'s inappropriate behaviour much earlier, clearly and firmly, before deciding to affirm her talent:

> No matter how much I theoretically think about that, something else appears in practice that helps us to raise awareness of how to deal with further practice. In accordance with all that I've written, I feel obligated to apologize to all of you if my proceeding hurt you since you had perception of rewarding "something that should not be rewarded". I would not like you to think that I intended to lessen your contribution to teaching, your diligence and dedication which I appreciate very much and which has helped me in my own development, and in development theory with which I deal. (S. Simel, personal communication, 19 January 2014)

Although there were no further comments upon my reflection and apology, with which I ended our critical friendship on the forum, I discussed this problem with my critical friends during the final interview and an informal meeting in a café. I got the impression that they accepted my excuse and tried to understand my point of view.

Interpretation

Through discussions, I succeeded in raising awareness about the difficulties that could hinder an orientation towards one's own positive, productive and creative potential, as well as that of others. One such difficulty was the fact that these students grew up in an authoritarian environment, because of which they had developed a fear of anarchy and entertainment in teaching that was stronger than a fear of authoritarian relationships and boredom in teaching. Therefore, teaching based on different values from theirs caused defensive reactions and instead of an orientation towards positive aspects, an orientation towards negative aspects dominated since it was closer to their experience.

Based on the cases of students S. H., who was the most positively oriented, and I. B., who posted the most negative comments, it is possible to make a connection between satisfaction with future vocation and orientation towards positive potential in themselves and others. S. H., who sees herself in the role of teacher and considers it her vocation, was more easily oriented towards the positive aspects of herself and others. On the other hand I. B., who is unsatisfied with the prospect of teaching in

the future, mostly emphasised problems and expressed her frustration freely. One may assume that satisfied and happy people who develop their positive productive potential will be better able to help others do the same. The accuracy of this assumption may be corroborated with existing evidence that suggests that:

> happier people do indeed help more in a variety of contexts. Studies using random assignment to experimentally induce positive mood have provided important evidence that happiness causes increased helping behavior. Supporting the external validity of these findings, naturally occurring positive moods have also been shown to facilitate prosocial behavior. (Anik et al. 2011: 5)

Dissatisfaction with certain important aspects of one's own life (like a future vocation) may have a significant impact on one's capacity to be positively oriented and creative. The opportunity to develop such a capacity may depend more on making necessary life changes than following courses or workshops on positive orientation and creative potential.

Our final discussion helped I. B. raise the issue of her future vocation more than all the teaching activities she did not approve of and which left her confused, dissatisfied and frustrated. Branko and I wrote about our personal experiences to show I. B. that other people also faced similar obstacles. Rogers describes teachers who take the following approach:

> He would want to let them [students] know of special experience and knowledge he has in the field, and to let them know they could call on this knowledge. Yet he would not want them to feel that they must use him in this way.
>
> He would want them to know that his own way of thinking about the held, and of organizing it, was available to them, even in lecture form, if they wished. Yet again he would want this to be perceived as an offer, which could as readily be refused as accepted …
>
> He would offer himself, and all the other resources he could discover, for use. (Rogers 1961: 287-9)

It is important to emphasise that the students' opinion about their non-creativity was probably the result of an insufficient understanding of this phenomena, namely, considering that artistic expression is the only way to express creativity. This significantly reduces the possibility of recognising our own creativity in fields like teaching. Certainly, we could agree with S. H. that creativity is not something "natural" but requires a certain effort and increased activity in producing something new and valuable. However, ideas or products do not need to be novel at a wider social level; they could be new at least for those who engage in their production:

> More recently, there has been a considerable amount of research on "everyday" creativity. Although they may not produce innovative or emergent creativity, a high proportion of adults engage in the production of (at least for them) new ideas or products, for instance in the course of "creative" hobbies, or simply in everyday life, as in the example of the cook given above. Thus, it is certainly possible, in the sense of everyday, minor, humble, small c creativity, to speak of creativity as a widely distributed characteristic seen in large numbers of people, although to a greater degree in some than in others. (Cropley 2011: 360)

Student capacity for orientation to someone else's positive, productive possibilities and creative potential is also determined or influenced by pre-existing group relationships. Behaviours and relations that have been formed over a longer period cannot be easily changed. To develop such an understanding, Brookfield (1995) suggests using a critically reflective approach:

> Critically reflective teachers who systematically investigate how their students are experiencing learning know that much students' resistance is socially and politically sculpted. Realizing that resistance to learning often has nothing to do with what they've done as teachers helps them make a healthier, more realistic appraisal of their own role in, or responsibility for, creating resistance. They learn to stop blaming themselves and they develop a more accurate understanding of the cultural and political limits to their ability to convert resistance into enthusiasm. (Brookfield 1995: 23-4)

In a critically reflective approach, it is important to raise awareness and face our own imperfections and mistakes, which could influence what we would like to achieve by our activity. An example of this is my inadequate response to the problem of the unjustified early departure of certain students from class. Through self-reflection and conversations with Branko, I became aware that I unconsciously worry about conflicts and unpleasant situations that might arise if ever I openly discuss such a problem with the student concerned. One cause of this is my education. This was mostly authoritarian, and the conflicts that I witnessed left an unpleasant impression on me. As I became aware of this, I felt exposed and vulnerable, but it helped me to understand my difficulty in facing up to negative experiences and emotions, and to grasp that avoidance of responsibility can cause even greater problems.

In critical friendship as well as in education, it is important to avoid a preponderance of critical comments, which could discourage collaborators or students rather than motivate them to continue further co-operation. I am particularly glad that my critical friend S. H. understood this and emphasised it in our discussion:

> I think that through our critical friendship I've become aware how important it is to give a suggestion for improvement and to slowly learn how to do it as well as possible. (S. H., personal communication, 11 December 2013)

The fact that this positive aspect of critical thinking was not often present in the students' discussions points to the need to include critical friendship as an important element of a teacher's professional competencies. Participation in such action research, online or in other forms, can help develop critical thinking in all participants.

Encouraging positive emotions, humour and future orientation

Since my student critical friends were more oriented to problems in teaching activities and with other students, they expressed negative emotions (e.g. frustration, disappointment, dissatisfaction) more often than positive emotions (e.g. satisfaction, happiness, enthusiasm). However, as the discussions unfolded they started to express positive feelings too. For example, N. R. commented on teaching activities (http://youtu.be/sepcnAouyel), connected with positive emotions and humour in a positive orientation in education. She especially liked an activity in which students had to express their (dis)agreement with a particular statement about a topic and explain their attitudes. This activity made a strong positive impact on her:

> Claims we discussed were stimulating and sometimes it was hard to decide which side we belong, which is, at least for me, encouraging for further reflection on these questions. I really do not know what to say more, other than it was great and I am very happy. (N. R., personal communication, 3 December 2013)

While participating in this activity S. H. tried to explain her understanding of positive emotions and emphasised that it is essential for a teacher to love her/his job:

> Those positive emotions do not imply only smile and support, in this matter we learn love, enthusiasm, etc. I consider it is very important and unavoidable.
> …
> Pupils and we students feel when some professor loves that he teaches and when someone teaches formally, because it is his job. It is surely different. (S. H., personal communication, 12 December 2013)

N. R. pointed out that emotions make teaching valuable and they could help us to change and even like certain subjects:

> It depends pretty much on the professor and those positive emotions which they express to students. (N. R., personal communication, 12 December 2013)

Branko noticed this shift in S. H.'s and N. R.'s understanding of the importance of positive emotions in teaching:

> It is an excellent evidence of their change that is, I believe, result of your cooperation. (B. Bognar, personal communication, 12 December 2013)

Although my student critical friends began to express more positive emotions, I did not notice any sign of humour in their online comments. The only exception was S. H.'s comment in which she recognised that humour "could be very productive if it is purposeful and well integrated in teaching" (S. H., personal communication, 17 December 2013).

However, all noted changes in the teaching environment:

> prevails positive atmosphere and it becomes obvious hour after hour and I feel more pleasantly in lessons even within group in which were problems at the beginning and in which were resistances. (S. H., personal communication, 9 December 2013)

The "happening" that I prepared during a lesson before Christmas was an example of creating a positive classroom atmosphere. I put a Santa Claus hat on, and with suitable music in the background, treated students with sweets. All the students smiled, pleasantly surprised. N. R. commented on this event:

> I would like to comment your small gifts; you really pleasantly surprised us and made us happy. In that way you showed, not only your teacher's personality, but your human, highly warm side which could help in creating pleasant atmosphere and promoting positive pedagogy in teaching. Thank you! (N. R., personal communication, 24 December 2013)

My critical friends showed that they were also capable of creating a very pleasant teaching atmosphere. When their team conducted a workshop about positive emotions and humour in teaching, again before Christmas, for the ice-breaking activity they choreographed a dance to the song "Merry Christmas everyone", in which all the students participated with happiness, laughter and joy (http://youtu.be/0vrRCMu5dvo).

When S. H. and N. R. started to be more oriented towards the positive aspects of teaching, they expressed more optimism and hope. My encouragement and support probably contributed to the change that N. R. commented on:

> Thank you for numerous encouraging and optimistic words that impel us to change our minds and to make effort to improve that what we've already dismissed as impossible. (N. R., personal communication, 6 November 2013)

Although I. B. rarely expressed optimism and hope, she did so in the final discussion, when she commented on a video which she had found on the Internet (http://youtu. be/h11u3vtcpaY):

> I would finish with one video which I watched yesterday ... I hope we will work more on those things in schools and faculties since it is definitely obvious from our seminars that is still possible to include them in teaching. (I. B., personal communication, 14 January 2014)

Figure 3: Oscillations between negative, positive and neutral messages among student critical friends during a discussion about classes on the web forum
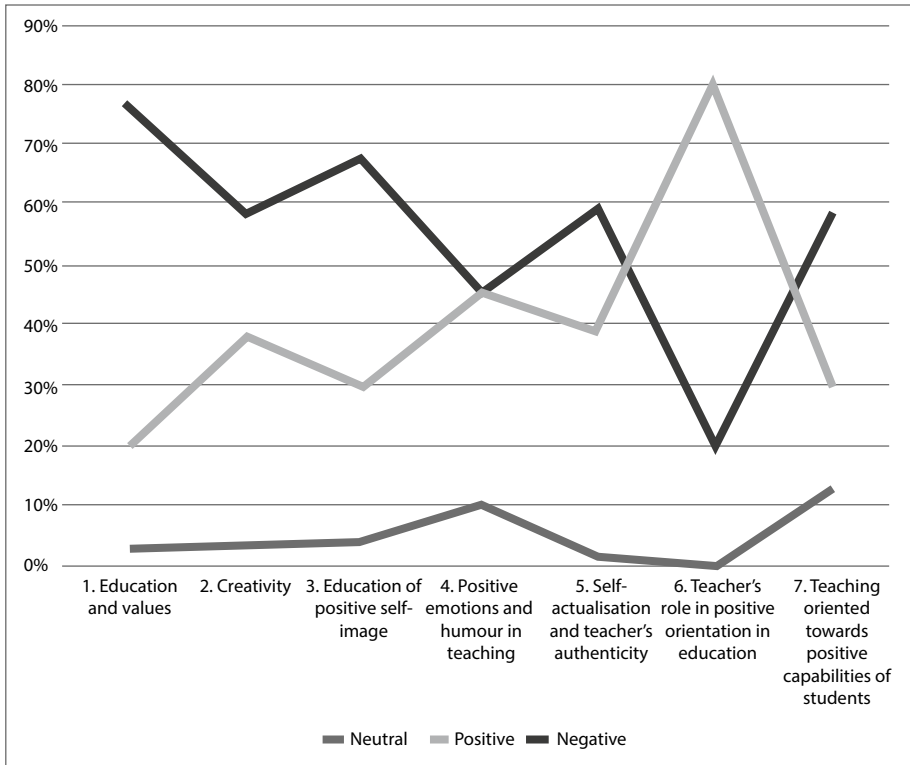
The process of change in my critical friends did not happen overnight. There were oscillations between negative, positive and neutral messages during the discussions (Figure 3). The first significant shift towards positively oriented messages happened during a discussion about the workshop "Positive emotions and humour in teaching", led by a team that my critical friends were members of. Following this, negative messages increased once more in relation to a discussion about self-actualisation and teachers' authenticity. When I noticed this tendency and lack of empathy in comments during an evaluation in the classroom at the end of a workshop that was organised by another group of students, I pointed out the problem:

> I would like to share with you one experience connected with this workshop and colleagues who carried out it. After each workshop, at the end of lessons, I have a talk with workshop leaders about their satisfaction, reflections regarding carrying out workshops etc. I have to mention that colleagues understood all critics which were addressed to them [from other teams] and from your team during the evaluation,

as well as mine, which were similar to yours. Therefore, they did not resist regarding this; in fact, they were very self-critical. At the same time, some colleagues were very sad and discouraged due to such situation, that is completely human and I was glad that they expressed their emotions. I've shared this with you since I would like to point out how important is that we as teachers are sensitive and to know how to give criticism, which is constructive, with suggestions for improvements, and at the end, that is very important, to encourage individuals to learn from such situations, to point out what was well done and positive, that we would not lose them. I consider that critical approach is very important, and it should be cultivated and developed since it is neglected in our schools and faculties; at the same time, it is necessary to be empathic and to encourage those people, whom critics are addressed to, and to continue to develop our own competences and skills. If we would finish with a negative tone and concentrate only on criticism, probably we will lose cooperation and hinder our relationships with this person. (S. Simel, personal communication, 11 December 2013)

N. R. and S. H. responded:

I completely agree with you … Even at the faculty, as you pointed out, we can notice the same, regardless we are already mostly grown-up persons who are more or less aware of their potentials and failures. Although we as a group already gave critical comment during evaluation, I believe that personally I would not say all of that I wrote here at the forum to colleagues. Actually, I would not tell them in that way since I think that my directness will hurt them and that they will feel apathetically and miserably. I am aware of this empathy, which is necessary if we negatively criticise someone. (N. R., personal communication, 11 December 2013)

I agree with you and we emphasised to colleagues in evaluation that it was very creatively envisaged and that we were sorry if it maybe did not unfold as they expected. I also observed that colleagues were sad and miserable and I agree with N. it is certainly good sign. That they did not care, they would not react in that way. On the other hand, I am glad that they were encouraged since, although we are already grown-up persons (as much as) it is easiest to shake [someone's] self-confidence. (S. H., personal communication, 11 December 2013)

I. B. did not respond and did not participate in the next discussion about the role of the teacher in a positive orientation in education, in which the number of negative messages was reduced to just 20%. From this it is possible to conclude that the aim of encouraging positive emotions, empathy, humour and future orientation was only partly achieved since the critical friends, in their discussions, rarely expressed positive emotions, empathy, optimism or hope, although S. H. and N. R. expressed an understanding of their importance in teaching. In addition, none of the critical friends made any jokes in their comments, although they understood the importance of humour in teaching!

Interpretation

On the basis of their own experiences in seminars of pedagogy and online discussions students S. H., N. R., and to a certain degree I. B. concluded that positive emotions are important in the educational process. This is an important conclusion since "emotions are at the heart of teaching":

They comprise its most dynamic qualities, literally, for emotions are fundamentally about movement … The Latin origin of emotion is emovere: to move out, to stir up. When people are emotional, they are moved by their feelings … Emotions are dynamic

parts of ourselves, and whether they are positive or negative, all organisations, including schools, are full of them. (Hargreaves 2005: 278-9)

Although the students realised that positive emotions could have great power in a teacher-student relationship, it was evident through our co-operation that significant learning could be followed by different, even ambivalent emotions. Therefore, significant learning does not produce only pleasant moods and emotions like satisfaction and enthusiasm; confusion and anger are equally likely. It is necessary that a teacher provide conditions in which students can express their emotions/moods and try to understand them. Particularly, it is important that students address their defensive responses when faced with new experiences.

Although it is necessary to be considerate towards students and their problems in dealing with new challenges, a teacher should not be only oriented towards their perceptions of their own needs. Brookfield (1995) points out that although meeting everyone's needs could sound "compassionate and student-centered, it is pedagogically unsound and psychologically demoralising" (1995: 21). Thus, openness to experiences is an important aspect of significant learning and the process which Rogers named "the good life" that:

appears to be a movement away from the pole of defensiveness toward the pole of openness to experience. The individual is … free to live his feelings subjectively, as they exist in him, and also free to be aware of these feelings. He is more able fully to live the experiences of his organism rather than shutting them out of awareness. (Rogers 1961: 188)

Openness to new experiences is closely connected with the ability of empathic listening which, according to Covey, implies listening with intent to understand:

Empathic (from empathy) listening gets inside another person's frame of reference. You look out through it, you see the world the way they see the world, you understand their paradigm, you understand how they feel … The essence of empathic listening is not that you agree with someone; it's that you fully, deeply, understand that person, emotionally as well as intellectually. (Covey 1989: 252)

When my critical friends wrote about their colleagues, empathy did not manifest itself often. Berman holds that "empathic listening is not easy in an 'argument culture,' in which everything is contested and often litigated, but it is essential if we are to learn more about others and ourselves" (2004: 111). I consider that the way in which students communicated online was a reflection of this "argument culture" that prevails in everyday life, media and the academic community. However, such an approach is not suitable for the teacher profession, which requires high levels of empathy:

Empathy is the center of a helpful relationship between human beings; it is beneficial and supporting for the one that is receiving empathy, but also for the one that is giving empathy. Both people are thereby in positive contact with each other and therefore are feeling connected. The ability to feel with another person is the prerequisite for developing a quality relationship. When empathy is missing, emotional injuries occur – people feel isolated and left out. (Tausch and Hüls 2013: 134-5)

In considering the importance of empathy for the quality of relationships in teaching, it is important to devote more attention to its development in future teachers' education. Since my critical friends were very successful students it is possible to conclude that empathy was not one of the criteria for assessing them. I suppose that with the exception of this course, empathy was not a topic on the curricula educating them

to be teachers. With certainty, I can claim that empathy was not one of the criteria for student enrolment in the faculty. This points to a deeper problem in the education of future teachers, in Croatia and elsewhere. The neglect of such an important competency could later influence the quality of teaching practice.

In a positive orientation in education, future orientation that includes hope and optimism has an important place:

> Optimism has been defined as a general expectation for good outcomes in the future, whereas hope has been defined as a set of cognitive processes that were directed at attaining specific goals. (Boman et al. 2009: 51)

Optimism does not mean naiveté, quite the contrary:

> optimism predicts active coping with stress (for example, planning, social support seeking), whereas pessimism predicts avoidant coping (for example, distraction, denial). These differences in coping then tend to predict changes in psychological/physical adjustment. (Hefferon and Boniwell 2011: 98)

Positive changes could hardly be achieved if someone were reconciled to a situation that is not favourable for her/his development. The inability to choose one's own path, in I. B.'s case, caused permanent dissatisfaction and a pessimistic attitude. We were not able to help her solve this problem through discussion on the web forum, but we succeeded in raising awareness of it. We suggested that she be persistent in searching for productive solutions. Hope is important, since it presumes defining and elaborating long-term aims.

Conclusion

Although positive psychology is already affirmed as a new area of psychology and is represented in the work of Croatian psychologists (Rijavec 1994; Rijavec, Miljković and Brdar 2008), discussions about a positive orientation in education are rare in pedagogy. This action research aimed to fill this gap in the field of education sciences.

As opposed to positivist psychologists, who intend to determine universal virtues and values, we would like to promote values like freedom, creativity, empathy, hope and optimism, which are not universal, but autonomously selected. The possibility of their fulfilment was monitored through a discussion of critical friends within an online forum.

At the very beginning of our co-operation, my student critical friends provided mostly negative input. To address this in a positive manner, it is recommended to give supportive feedback and initiate significant learning in all participants by addressing new challenging, as well as encouraging, experiences. In this matter, the enthusiasm of the teacher plays a key role in motivating students to learn.

Future teacher education is not just to prepare students to be teachers, but to help them to become teachers who are change agents. A teacher change agent shows:

> a sense of the moral purpose of education; a personal vision of their own roles as teachers and what is important in education; empathy for students of diverse backgrounds; a passion for and commitment to students, teaching, and social justice; hope and optimism that change is possible and a sense of self-efficacy and agency. Teachers who are change agents are knowledgeable of change process. They engage in ongoing

reflection on and critical analysis of their own practice and factors that impinge upon and influence their practice. They value and pursue collaboration with colleagues. (Villegas and Lucas 2002: 59)

Although empathy, creativity, optimism and hope could be enhanced in students through teaching activities, it is necessary to foster those features in the case of their enrolment in a programme of future teacher education. The inclusion of more pedagogical and psychological topics in the teacher education curriculum is needed if students are to develop these necessary competencies for their future practice.

Critical reflection is one of the key competencies of future teachers that could be developed through critical friendship and action research. For these reasons, we consider it crucial to urge students to deal with action research (e.g. for the purpose of their graduation thesis). This could contribute to the development of a positive orientation in education. We encourage students and teachers to publish their action research accounts in professional journals and other publications, and we hope that this report shows one way to do this.

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About the authors

Branko Bognar, Croatia

I started my professional career in the autumn of 1987 as a primary school teacher. After completing pedagogy study, I was hired as a pedagogue in primary school. As part of my postgraduate education I completed an MA and PhD at the University of Zagreb. In both dissertations, I explored the possibility of introducing the new professional role of action researcher in the Croatian school context. First, I tried to reach that aim by establishing a community of practice in the school I was a pedagogue at. Then I initiated a network of learning communities using the web application Moodle. I proved that teachers could become action researchers through e-learning.

Since 2005, I have been employed at the University of Josip Juraj Strossmayer in Osijek. I started as an assistant professor at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences and now I am a professor at the Faculty of Education. My main professional interest is connected with introducing changes in educational practice, with the aim of breaking away from the boundaries of traditional teaching. In this regard, I endeavour to affirm the idea of action research in the Croatian educational context by using web-based technologies and e-learning. In addition, I put emphasis on teachers' professional development. I am particularly interested in helping them develop their creativity in teaching.

In 2010, I began co-operating with representatives of the Pestalozzi Programme. I was interested in seeing if it would be possible to help teachers become action researchers at the international level as well, as I had worked on this in Croatia. The result of this co-operation is the project presented in this book.

Pascale Mompoint-Gaillard, France

I have worked for the past 25 years as a social psychologist in the area of intercultural communication, education and leadership training in France, Europe and the USA. My professional and activist work were for 15 years geared towards the development of leadership and capacity building, striving to give voice to and empower disenfranchised citizens, often from immigrant or refugee communities, so they could have their dignity restored through their own active democratic participation. Since 2006, I have been involved in teacher learning and educational leadership. I lead international teacher education programmes in Europe and offer consultancies on educational issues related to living together in mutual understanding and promoting education for democracy. I occasionally lecture at universities as well as at national training institutions for teachers and social workers. Presently, as the pedagogical consultant for the Pestalozzi Programme and a freelance consultant, I have the possibility to work in many diverse educational projects. In the recent past, I have worked on religious diversity and education in the Euro-Mediterranean region and the Middle East.

I met Branko in 2010, while leading a Pestalozzi trainer-training course, and since then have wanted to explore ways in which we could extend our co-operation. Because I see my mission as that of identifying talent and creating opportunities for partnerships, I am particularly fond, and proud, of this action research project. I hope that other practitioners will benefit from this publication and will be inspired to engage other educators in such an emancipatory practice.

Contributors

Claudia Lenz (Norway) currently works as Head of Research & Development at the European Wergeland Centre and as Associate Professor at the Norwegian University for Technology and Science. Her fields of research and publication are historical consciousness, memory cultures and memory politics, with regard to World War II and the Holocaust, as well as gender and intercultural perspectives in didactics of history and social sciences.

Irene Papadaki (Greece) currently works as a school advisor in secondary education and as a citizenship teachers' trainer. She carried on political studies and sociology in Athens and in the UK, she has published articles on citizenship education and on the use of social media in secondary education in Greek language. Her interest in citizenship education, education for change, convivencia and inclusion supports her belief in democracy and its values, co-operation and human creativity. Considering herself lucky of having been involved with the Pestalozzi Programme since 2012, she gets empowerment and inspiration from belonging to the Pestalozzi Community of Practice, which offers support and stimulation for overcoming difficulties that practitioners meet in their work context. At the same time, through the Pestalozzi Community, she appreciates the chance to experience the significant importance that community involvement can have in our life.

Višnja Rajić (Croatia) defines herself as a learner, teacher, teacher trainer, thinker and wonderer. She works at the Faculty of Teacher Education at the University of Zagreb

at the Department of Pedagogy and Didactics. Her fields of interest are in educational reform and curricular change. Her PhD thesis focused on the topic of "Elements of internal reform of primary education by implementing didactic-pedagogical elements of reform pedagogies". Her ideas about educational change greatly correspond to the ideas of progressive pedagogues; she is also strongly interested in andragogy and adult learning from the perspective of learner empowerment. She has been involved with the Pestalozzi Programme since 2009 as participant and facilitator, and gets inspiration from the opportunity it offers to develop common ideas, share and create knowledge; these have been the support and scaffold necessary for her to continue her efforts in implementing change in (higher) education.

Sanja Simel (Croatia) works as teaching and research assistant at the Department of Pedagogy, at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Osijek, Croatia. In 2010, she acquired her Masters in Pedagogy, and in Croatian language and literature. In 2012, she enrolled in postgraduate doctoral study of pedagogy. From May 2011 to February 2012 she worked as pedagogue apprentice in the Economic and Administrative School in Osijek. The main area of her scientific interest is in the field of positive education and higher education, but also in humanistic education, emotional pedagogy, action research and mixed-methods approaches. Her PhD dissertation focuses on "Positive orientation to education in teacher education curriculum". She is a member of the Croatian Pedagogical Society (HPD) and of the Council of Europe's Pestalozzi Programme and community of practice for the professional development of teachers and education actors.

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Marie Huxtable (United Kingdom) is a visiting research fellow at the University of Cumbria, UK. She contributes to educational conversations, web-spaces and opportunities for adults, children and young people to learn together and research, develop and offer their talents, expertise and knowledge as gifts. Her current interests include: supporting the development of researching communities such as the Educational Journal of Living Theories (http://ejolts.net), an international research group, and the young researchers initiative at the Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institute (www.brlsiyouthgallery.org). Marie Huxtable's book reviews and articles are published in The Educational Journal of Living Theories (http://ejolts.net/biblio?page=1).

Kari Flornes (Norway) is an associate professor at Bergen University College, Norway. She has worked for more than 20 years in teacher education and holds a PhD from the University of Birmingham, UK. She is an experienced action researcher whose work is mostly focused on the professional and personal development of teachers in a multicultural and changing society. Kari Flornes is the vice-president of GERFEC (Groupement Européen pour la recherce et la formation des enseignants chrétiens, croyants et de toutes convictions), an organisation with participative INGO status at the Council of Europe. She works closely with a group of European educators who develop new pedagogies for dialogue among individuals of all cultures and convictions in all areas of training whether for young people or adults. Education for democratic and global citizenship and human rights education are important issues

in this training. Kari Flornes is a member of The Pestalozzi Community of European Professionals and has organised two Pestalozzi workshops in Bergen, Norway in 2010 and 2014. She has also successfully completed the Pestalozzi Programme: Training for Trainers, in Strasbourg and Athens in 2009. Kari Flornes is a member of NOREFO, the Norwegian Research Association in Religious Education.

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The Council of Europe's Pestalozzi Programme promotes the message of the Organisation and its values – human rights, democracy and the rule of law – in the practice of education (formal, non-formal and informal) and aims to support member states in including these ideals in their education systems. Basing its approach to professional development firmly on social constructivism and social constructionism, it invests in educators who create new practices.

This book represents an example of a transformational enterprise in which several practitioners from different parts of Europe gather in the Pestalozzi Programme community of practice and set out to learn how to become action researchers. While many books focus on how to carry this out, this publication is action research in action. In addition, it features examples of how participants can use online social platforms and affordable web applications in their collaboration and learning practices.

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