‘ON NEW BEGINNINGS’: NATALITY AND (PARTICIPATORY) ACTION RESEARCH IN HIGHER EDUCATION

By

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## Acronyms

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<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AL</td>
<td>Action Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALARA</td>
<td>Action Learning and Action Research Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALARPM</td>
<td>Action Learning Action Research and Process Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AR</td>
<td>Action Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EAR</td>
<td>Educational Action Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CARN</td>
<td>Collaborative Action Research Network</td>
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<tr>
<td>CBPR</td>
<td>Community-based participatory research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDA</td>
<td>Critical Discourse Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNA</td>
<td>Consejo Nacional de Acreditación</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPAR</td>
<td>Critical Participatory Action Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICAE</td>
<td>International Council for Adult Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LASA</td>
<td>Latin American Studies Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EFL</td>
<td>English as a Foreign Language</td>
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<tr>
<td>EFLTP</td>
<td>English as a Foreign Language Teaching Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESL</td>
<td>English as a Second Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FFLTP</td>
<td>French as a Foreign Language Teaching Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAR</td>
<td>Participatory Action Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCGLE</td>
<td>General Curriculum Proposal for Foreign Language Teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR</td>
<td>Participatory Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSL</td>
<td>Spanish as a Second Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSLTP</td>
<td>Spanish as a Second Language Teaching Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YPAR</td>
<td>Youth Participatory Action Research</td>
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Certificate of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at Charles Sturt University or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgment is made in the thesis. Any contribution made to the research by colleagues with whom I have worked at Charles Sturt University or elsewhere during my candidature is fully acknowledged.

I agree that this thesis be accessible for the purpose of study and research in accordance with the normal conditions established by the Executive Director, Library Services or nominee, for the care, loan and reproduction of theses.

Signature: [Signature] Date: November 11 2012
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Finally, I want to dedicate this thesis with all my love to Alejandro, my family and friends, who have always been in my heart in this journey.
To whom this may concern

I acknowledge that I have helped Doris Santos to render the text of her PhD thesis into conventional academic English. In my view as an academic editor, the text was generally in excellent writing. It was occasionally marred in a few places by grammatical or other minor errors, for which I have suggested corrections. In no way have I changed the meanings Doris intended to convey.

Maureen Todhunter
19 June 2012

I certify that Maureen Todhunter has provided this assistance precisely in the manner indicated in her statement.

Professor Stephen Kemmis
June 20, 2012
Publications related to this thesis

Parts of the current study have been published as follows:

**Book chapter:**


**Journal article:**


**Conference papers:**


Abstract

Tensions generated from external and internal demands have led universities to establish different types of relationships with states and with wider societies, redefining academics’ identities permanently and compromising greatly the role of higher education to foster more humane conditions in contemporary societies. This situation has come about to such an extent that many academics, oriented by modern or post-modern frameworks, have agreed that the university itself has become one of the social sites that need to be re-humanised and renewed. Closely linked to this problematic situation in universities, (participatory) action research, (P)AR, has also been challenged to revise its contributions to the political realm.

In this thesis I aim to identify the sorts of political lives that we (P)AR practitioners have been promoting at this level of education. I do so through telling four stories about four (P)AR experiences that I led in three different university communities in Colombia. This storytelling of the ‘political’ of (P)AR is inspired by German thinker Hannah Arendt’s notion of natality. Her notion of natality concerns the human condition through which human beings, by virtue of being born, can bring about new beginnings through their actions and words. Arendt’s conception of political theory as storytelling overcomes the trap of historical continuity and seeks to engage its audience in critical thinking about an issue while ‘visiting’ different perspectives. To disentangle ‘the political’ in the (P)AR experiences selected for this study, I propose a multilayered approach to what is told and what is not told in (P)AR publications. To put together the pieces of the jigsaw of ‘the political’ of (P)AR in higher education, I present this story as a reflective journey from the ‘malaise’ linked to the signalling of some its practitioners as ‘trouble makers’ to recognition of them as ‘miracle workers’.

In so doing, I explore the coexistence of different, changing and contested notions of ‘social justice’, ‘democracy’, ‘citizenship’ and ‘higher education’. I argue that we (P)AR practitioners are promoting political lives in higher education that differ from one another as a result of our different approaches to both the ontological tension in the notion of ‘action’ embedded in (P)AR and the contesting (P)AR participants’ views of politics. I claim that in spite of their turbulent emergence,
the new beginnings that are brought about through (P)AR are mainly linked to the revelation of the distinctiveness of (P)AR participants.

I suggest that for universities to be re-humanised and renewed through (P)AR, politically speaking, it is necessary to resignify PAR’s three key components, namely, ‘participation’, ‘action’ and ‘research’, based on their importance in bringing about (P)AR participants’ revelation. Finally, I resort to Arendt’s suggestion that it is more plausible that the relevant and the meaningful in the world of appearances can be located precisely on the surface. I claim that the intermittent appearance in the literature of the ‘participation’ component in the (P)AR acronym indicates our need to renew our political commitment as practitioners to continue encouraging people to reveal their distinctiveness through (P)AR to renew the common world.
Synopsis

The history of higher education has been shaped by how it has responded to tensions generated between demands coming from the social contexts in which it is embedded, and the interests and needs of the academic community that brings higher education to life. These tensions have led universities to establish different types of relationships with states and with wider societies, redefining academics’ identities permanently and compromising greatly the role of higher education to foster more humane conditions in contemporary societies. This situation has come about to such an extent that many academics oriented by either modern or post-modern frameworks have agreed that the university itself has become one of the social sites that needs to be re-humanised and renewed.

The relationships of higher education with the state and with wider society throughout history have been analysed by theorists of curriculum development in higher education, sociologists of education and academics in the field of higher education policy studies, among others. Middlehurst and Barnett (1994), for example, identified four types of relationships: higher education as private interest, higher education as public interest, higher education as public direction, and higher education as market direction. The authors claim that although these models emerged in different periods of time, they prevail and overlap in contemporary universities. The fourth model seems to be dominant in the first decade of the twenty first century. This appreciation is sustained by educational post-structuralist sociologists such as Naidoo (2004) and education policy analysts such as Olseen & Peters (2005), who agree that the market approach has brought about dramatic changes in higher education (Brew, 2006; Lambert, 2009; Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005).

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1 In this thesis, higher education refers to that level of education in which academic degrees are granted in various disciplines. Specifically, it refers to one particular institution of higher education: the university. The main focus of this thesis is therefore the communities of teachers, students and administrative staff involved in the research and teaching activities that bring universities into life, and through them, the communities of the broader society they work with and for.

2 State is understood here as a political organisation for civil rule and government.
This ‘marketisation’/‘corporatisation’ of higher education has brought new intertwined discourses,\(^3\) which embody particular ways of understanding and representing the world. Grundy (2007), Apple (2005) and Freire (2004) claim that universities need to analyse such current discourses so that they will be able to restore their political commitment, especially in relation to the values of ‘social justice’ and ‘democratic citizenship’.

One starting point in this endeavour is analysis of one of the most frequently used terms in the field of education early in the twenty first century: *participation*. Analysts have used this term in *the field of higher education* to enhance proposals concerning the types of teaching, research and university governance needed in this century (Brew, 2006; David et al., 2010; Gibbons, 2004; Lambert, 2009; Marginson & Considine, 2000; Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005). Others have used it in *the field of educational research* to make sense of knowledge construction processes *with* the communities involved in them, while addressing social justice problems (Dick, 2004, 2006, 2009; Fals-Borda, 2006a, 2006b; Fals-Borda & Mora-Osejo, 2003; Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007; McIntyre, 2008; McKernan, 2007; McTaggart, 1997b; Noffke, 2009; Rahman, 2008; Reason & Bradbury, 2006, 2008).

A preliminary literature review in these two fields provides evidence that various understandings of the notion of ‘participation’ correspond to different concepts of ‘social justice’ and ‘democratic citizenship’. It is of special interest for this thesis to address this particular problematic situation in analysing one specific type of research used in higher education: *participatory action research*. Recognising such a diversity of understandings and subsequent practices, I use the acronym (P)AR to stand for (participatory) action research. First, I use parentheses to refer to the type of action research (AR) that recognises ‘participation’ as an important component, whether or not its practitioners identify their research as PAR.\(^4\) Second, because different ideologies inform (P)AR discourses and practices, I also use these parentheses to indicate that I regard ‘participation’ as a problematic

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\(^3\) German thinker Hannah Arendt observed, “wherever the relevance of speech is at stake, matters become political by definition, for speech is what makes man a political being.” (Arendt, 1998, p. 3)

\(^4\) The experiences of those who practice (P)AR, that is, (P)AR practitioners, are of special interest here.
term that presupposes (different) ideas of participation. From this perspective, six preliminary research questions which this thesis will address are:

1) What notions of ‘social justice’, ‘democracy’, ‘citizenship’ and ‘education’ underpin the different kinds of human actions that occur in (P)AR in higher education?
2) How might cases of (P)AR (to be presented in the thesis) be regarded as research practices?
3) How are ‘the social’ and ‘the political’ understood by different (P)AR practitioners in higher education?
4) What are the consequences of these understandings for (P)AR practitioners’ research practices?
5) How is participation linked to ‘the social’ and ‘the political’ by (P)AR practitioners?
6) How do (P)AR practitioners’ discourses and practices relate to the particular ideological positions they have adopted?

The six questions posed above are, in a sense, preliminary to the central and most important research question that this study addresses:

7) *What sorts of political lives are we (P)AR practitioners promoting in higher education?*

Here I argue that this call for a renewal of higher education through types of research such as (P)AR can find timely guidance in the political theory of German intellectual Hannah Arendt. As stated in Gordon (2001), Arendt’s political theory provides a unique perspective that can enhance the renewal of the field of education. Arendt’s contribution concerns not only a better understanding of contemporary societies but also the identification of new routes to approach the challenge we now have in our hands to renew our political commitment as educators and as (P)AR practitioners. Arendt’s contributions are clearly identified in various fields of scholarship in education (Boyles, 2005; Hurlock et al., 2008; Levinson, 2001; Masschelein, 2000, 2001; Norris, 2006; Phelan et al., 2006; Todd, 2007; Wilson, 2005). In the field of (P)AR in higher education, Arendt’s work has already been used for exploring new ways of approaching university life
Most of these academic works recognise Arendt’s notion of *natality* as crucial to the renewal of our common world.

In her quest to understand evildoing, Hannah Arendt (1998) reflected in the first place on the things we human beings normally do. She claimed that three fundamental activities are basic for us to live in this world: labour, work and action. While labour refers to all those activities we usually need to do since we are biologically determined beings, work is related to the activities we do to transcend this biological temporality. From her perspective, while eating and sleeping are activities we need to do to survive as biological organisms (labour), the making of spoons and blankets is work. The third type of activity is action, that is, all that we do in relation to the other human beings with whom we inhabit the world. The human conditions underlying labour and work, life itself and worldliness, differ, respectively, from the human condition that corresponds to action, namely, plurality; this is the condition by which we human beings are the same as each other yet also distinct at the same time. These fundamental human activities are closely connected to the most existential conditions of all: birth and death, natality and mortality.

German philosopher Martin Heidegger, formerly Arendt’s PhD supervisor, regarded mortality as the defining characteristic of the human being (Heidegger, 1962). Yet Arendt claimed that labour, work and action are based on *natality* since they preserve the world for the newcomers. For her, “the miracle that saves the world from its normal ‘natural’ ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, […] the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born” (1998, p. 247). Of the three fundamental activities, action is most closely connected to *natality*. That is, every time a newcomer acts, he or she makes a new beginning from such an action. Because of this, action is the political activity *par excellence*; it is *natality*, and not mortality, that is the central category for political thought. So political actions and political thinking are possible thanks to *natality*, though it does not guarantee them. In relation to this Arendt adds,

5 The use of the terms ‘Man’ and ‘men’ in Hannah Arendt’s work was common usage at the time she wrote. She used these terms to clarify that it is ‘men’ (humans in plural), and not ‘Man’ (a human being in singular), who live on the earth and inhabit the world (Arendt, 1998). In all Arendt’s quotations that I present in this thesis, we should understand the term ‘men’ to mean ‘people’, ‘humans’.

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“The political realm rises directly out of acting together, the ‘sharing of words and deeds’. Thus action not only has the most intimate relationship to the public part of the world common to all of us, but is the one activity which constitutes it” (Arendt, 1998, p. 198).

This thesis emerges from my experience of approximately 20 years facing many of the various problems described above as a (P)AR practitioner in Colombian higher education. This type of educational research appeared in my life as both a possible way to contribute to a solution to particular social problems, and a route by which I might grow as a citizen. However, there are many reasons other than personal interest in making sense of what I have been doing all these years, to consider this research worthy to share. Socially speaking, as stated earlier, there is a need to identify pathways to renew higher education so that it can respond meaningfully and in a timely way to the challenges it is facing politically. This thesis suggests a pathway related to one of the main activities universities have at hand: research.

As Appadurai (2006) points out, although research is normally seen as a technical activity, it is rarely seen as having capacity with democratic potential. From his perspective, research is associated with human beings’ capacity to aspire and achieve socially valuable goals. These include the celebration of diversity within universities. To achieve this through research, it is imperative to allow people to think and act in safe environments, where words and actions recover their value to construct the type of life to which we aspire as human beings. Knowledge construction processes through research make sense when people at universities feel they can ‘be’ and that they can ‘become’ while ‘acting’ with others when governing, researching, teaching, making policies, developing curricula, writing and so forth.

In theoretical terms, this thesis revises and resignifies overused terms in the fields of higher education and (P)AR. Rethinking the words we use such as ‘participation’, ‘democracy’, ‘citizenship’, ‘social justice’, among others, and the concepts they make reference to, allows us to understand the world we inhabit as a necessary condition to renew it. As Freire said in an interview with one of his close friends, it is important to understand ‘the diversity of syntaxes’ to recreate
language, and with it our world (Freire & Gadotti, 1995, p. 265). With the initial guidance of Arendt’s thought, and with a careful revision of (P)AR experiences, this thesis presents a new understanding of what ‘doing (P)AR’ means in the twenty-first century in higher education. Making sense of what is happening to universities in this century through (P)AR practices in a search for more democratic and just societies, this thesis is aligned with Appadurai’s (2006, p. 168) claim for academics to force ourselves to de-parochialise the idea of research itself. Based on Arendt’s notion of natality, this means revising traditional views of research, even in methodological terms, to find new ways to approach the challenges that higher education is facing.

I also adopt Arendt’s phenomenological approach recognising that a search for the ‘political lives’ we are promoting in higher education implies a search for the meaning of our lived experiences as (P)AR practitioners. In this sense, I address the research questions as a person of this kind. Particularly, in this thesis I explore Arendt’s proposal for storytelling to identify the extraordinary episodes linked to ‘the political’ of (P)AR in the four (P)AR experiences I have selected in Colombian higher education. This exploration results in my making a proposal to unfold the multiple layers of ‘the political’ of (P)AR through what we tell and do not tell in the ‘stories’ we publish in written documents such as journal articles, research books, research reports and the like.

After unfolding the multiple layers of ‘the political’ of these four (P)AR experiences in higher education, four new stories emerge. Based on the reflection process embedded in this new storytelling of (P)AR in higher education, I argue that the notions of ‘social justice’, ‘democracy’, ‘citizenship’ and ‘education’ that underpin (P)AR participants’ actions are different, contested and changing. This applies to (P)AR practitioners, who are considered in this study as a particular type of (P)AR participant. I also claim that (P)AR practitioners’ different and contested approaches are linked to a permanent existing tension between ‘the social’ and ‘the political’ in (P)AR. These approaches are strongly influenced by (P)AR practitioners’ theoretical alignments, the disciplinary traditions they are embedded in, as well as the organizational dynamics in which they attempt to fulfil their political commitment. I argue that participation in (P)AR is linked to overlapping understandings and practices of ‘the social’ and ‘the political’ in
university communities. I also contend that the main challenge for (P)AR practitioners is to keep on advancing social justice in ways that ensure their discourses and practices are not dislocated by undermining ideologies such as the neoliberal one.

These insights lead me to argue in this thesis that we (P)AR practitioners are promoting political lives in higher education that differ from one another as a result of our different approaches to both the ontological tension in the notion of ‘action’ embedded in (P)AR and contesting (P)AR participants’ views of politics. I claim that in spite of their turbulent emergence, the new beginnings that are brought about through (P)AR are mainly linked to the revelation of the distinctiveness of (P)AR participants. I suggest that for universities to be re-humanised and renewed through (P)AR, politically speaking, it is necessary to resignify PAR’s three key components, namely, ‘participation’, ‘action’ and ‘research’, based on their importance in bringing about (P)AR participants’ revelation. Based on Arendt’s suggestion that it is more plausible that the relevant and the meaningful in the world of appearances can be located precisely on the surface, I claim that the intermittent appearance in the literature of the ‘participation’ component in the (P)AR acronym indicates our need to renew our political commitment as practitioners to keep on encouraging people to reveal their distinctiveness through (P)AR to renew our common world.

My thesis is structured on this new storytelling of ‘the political’ of (P)AR as I have lived and reflected upon it myself as a (P)AR practitioner in higher education. The first part of the thesis, which is composed of three chapters, presents the origins of this new storytelling of ‘the political’ of (P)AR in higher education. This includes a more detailed discussion of the problem outlined above, as well as a literature review concerning ‘participation’ in the fields of higher education and (P)AR. Along with evaluating this literature, I propose the research sub-questions and the central research question of this thesis. I also present Arendt’s notion of natality, which is central to her political theory, together with her phenomenological approach to storytelling. This part concludes with a description of the conduct of the study, which contains a multilayered approach to ‘the political’ of (P)AR that I propose in this thesis to identify meaningful extraordinary episodes through what is told and not told in (P)AR.
publications. This part provides relevant information about the four (P)AR initiatives selected in this study.

The second part of the thesis consists of four chapters, each of which presents a (P)AR story as derived from the new storytelling process. These four new stories narrate some of the extraordinary episodes concerning ‘the political’ of (P)AR in higher education on the basis of a notion of historical discontinuity suggested in Arendt’s proposal for storytelling. I present a reflective process intertwined with the narrative flow of the stories. These reflections constitute a starting point in my search for meaning in this phenomenological research.

The third and last part of the thesis, which is composed of three chapters, presents answers to the research questions posed, as well as their implications for the field of (P)AR in higher education. These answers are drawn from the reflections made through the new stories told in the second part of the thesis. The answers to the research sub-questions address particular features of the existing world in higher education as I observe it through these (P)AR experiences. In relation to the central research question, in this third part I present two main claims, which I complement with a reflection on how the new beginnings in (P)AR might look. I end this final part of the thesis with a discussion of some of the implications of my (participatory) action research as a contribution to re-humanising higher education through (P)AR, and to the renewal of (P)AR itself.
PART I: ORIGINS OF THIS NEW STORY
Chapter 1 Where does this new story about PAR and higher education come from?

1.1. Higher education and participatory action research

1.1.1. Origins of a research idea

To ‘stop and think’ about what I have been doing as an educator during the last 28 years has been a challenge I have been invited to face by the ideas of German political theorist Hannah Arendt (1906-1975). More difficult than thinking, which is one of the faculties given to all human beings, has been ‘to stop’ doing the usual activities we university teachers do in current times.

Six years ago, I read for the first time some excerpts of Arendt’s report for The New Yorker magazine on the trial of the German officer in World War 2, Adolf Eichmann, who sent about a million people to the concentration camps, and therefore to the gas chambers and to their deaths.\(^6\) I have never been so moved as when I read the following lines she wrote about Eichmann:

Clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality, that is, against the claim on our thinking attention that all events and facts make by virtue of their existence (Arendt, 1978, p. 4).\(^7\)

She found an absence of thinking (‘thoughtlessness’ as she coined it) in most of the intellectuals in Germany at the time: brilliant academics who were trapped in their own ideas.\(^8\) It was incomprehensible to her that the absence of thinking could be accompanied by an amazing increase of knowledge. Thus, she added,

If, as I suggested before, the ability to tell right from wrong should turn out to have anything to do with the ability to think, then we must be able to ‘demand’ its exercise from every sane person, no matter how erudite or ignorant, intelligent or stupid, he may happen to be (Arendt, 1978, p. 13).

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\(^7\) These words are recalled in her posthumous 1978 publication, *The Life of the Mind*.

When I read this I agreed that there was nothing else to do but to respond to this ‘demand’.

I encountered Arendt’s work when I decided to approach philosophy in my personal search for some deeper reflection on the object of study I had been researching for quite some time: language. I had started this search a decade before when I received a Master degree in Spanish Linguistics. With a critical discourse analysis of an undergraduate evaluation process in a private university in Bogotá, Colombia, I came to appreciate how ideologically driven discourses could be. In 2006, as a member of the staff of the Department of Linguistics at Universidad Nacional de Colombia, I started a Master of Philosophy to continue my search for understanding. After some seminars in the philosophy of language, one seminar was announced that caught my attention: On evildoing.

Among the many texts about the Holocaust that we read and discussed in that seminar, Arendt’s were very timely in helping me to understand not only academic matters but life itself. I concluded then that I could no longer defer my responsibility as a common citizen to ‘think’ about one of the most terrifying social problems in my country: kidnapping. I followed the compass of Arendt’s advice not to start the search for meaning in theories but in the voices of the most fragile human beings who were and are the victims of these unthinkable crimes. Fortunately, changing the topic of my MPhil research in such a dramatic way was nothing but an achievement. On the one hand, stopping and thinking as a common citizen made me understand how far away I was from the social reality I claimed to be concerned about as an educator. I came to recognise that the stock phrases we usually use when we encounter these grim realities in Colombian life actually aim to protect us from aspects of these realities we do not want to confront. I cannot recall how many times I have expressed my concern about kidnapped people and their families as a habitual reaction to the latest news on their situation. However, my daily routine forced me to forget them again until the next

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9 Eagleton (1994) provides about 17 definitions of ideology, not all of which are compatible with one another. He also says that some are pejorative, and some are not, and some involve epistemological questions. The most important consideration, he states, is to accept that without preconceptions of some kind we would not even be able to identify an issue or situation (p. 3).

10 Government and non-government sources disagree, but it is said that in Colombia in 2011 approximately 3000 people were being held after having been kidnapped by guerrilla and paramilitary groups or by common criminal organisations.
time I heard such news. On the other hand, reading the diaries of the two kidnapped people who I chose to reflect upon was amazingly enlightening, giving me insight into the unbelievable worlds we human beings can construct.

These two victims\(^{11}\) and Hannah Arendt guided me in a revision of my understanding of events in my own life and helped me to make sense of what Arendt as political theorist said about actors not being the authors of their stories.\(^{12}\) Throughout my life I have been involved in activities aimed at fighting against social inequalities, though I was unsure about what I, and those who I worked with, had achieved in this enterprise. After a somewhat strained childhood in a middle class Latin American Catholic family with parents who divorced in my childhood, it was clear for me that something should be done to make social changes real. I started to explore possible ways when I worked as a volunteer with the Colombian Red Cross for about five years, helping to support abandoned children, prostitutes, beggars, and displaced people. This experience helped me not only to see my own personal story as almost trifling compared with the stories and sufferings of the people I met, but also to recognise that our own lives are inextricably interconnected with all other human beings on the planet. Then, the time to make a decision about my professional life came.

I could then only afford to study at a public university; unfortunately, due to the closure of the state university where I had been admitted to study economics, I needed to think of a different option. I enrolled elsewhere in a modern languages teacher education course. I had become convinced that mutual understanding between different worldviews is necessary to overcome modern social problems, and languages definitely play a very important role in this. Thus I started to study in a Jesuit university thanks to a government loan, which I re-paid by working part time while I studied.

\(^{11}\) Guillermo Gaviria, former Governor of the Province of Antioquia, Colombia, and his Counselor for Peace Affairs, Gilberto Echeverri, were murdered by a guerrilla group during an unsuccessful rescue attempt by the Army forces in 2003.

\(^{12}\) Arendt (1998) makes a distinction between being the actor and being the author of stories. This latter is, from her point of view, intangible in so far as every action takes place in a web of relationships (p. 184).
The Jesuits, who have worked with marginalised communities of Colombian peasants in various areas of the Colombian nation’s armed conflict, have also been acknowledged for their approach to education from critical perspectives and for using participatory action research to develop their social projects. Among various educational paradigms presented to me as a teacher apprentice by my Jesuit professors, I found Paulo Freire’s especially meaningful for confronting socially unjust situations. For me, however, socially unjust situations were not only an object of study but part of my daily life. By the end of the 1990s, I started to understand what it means to become an academic for a woman in a country like mine. I began to experience the inherent tensions, contradictions, struggles and difficulties associated with coping with motherhood, marriage, work and social life. Many situations led me to think that as a female academic I was expected to ‘hide’ my daily life concerns so as not to be disruptive in a still male-dominated academic world.

Being already an action research practitioner, in 2000 I became a member of the Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN), and applied for the first time for a place as a PhD student overseas. Although I was accepted by the University of East Anglia, I could not start my doctoral studies there due to lack of funding. With this first disappointment, I decided to continue my academic development by informal routes, and CARN played a crucial role in this process. However, in my journey to keep on learning and growing intellectually, a series of other events started to emerge, some of which demonstrate the unexpected nature of actions developed in action research projects.

From 1998 to 2002, I led three different participatory action research projects for the development of an emancipatory type of curriculum for the teaching of languages at the private university at which I was teaching. These projects resulted in substantial changes being made in the daily teaching and learning practices of Spanish, French and English at that university. Unfortunately, I was largely unaware of how the managerial practices of the university would be affected by those changes. University management began to consider as dangerous the more resistant argument-based attitude emerging among the teachers involved in the projects, to the point where some teachers’ contracts began to be cancelled. This chain of actions and reactions brought temporary
disruption to the network created by these action research projects, obliging the people remaining in the workplace to keep silent and compliant to retain their jobs.

These violent expressions of struggle for power reflect another dimension of the nature of actions, which some have called the ‘dangers of action’: the setting up of new processes that reach beyond the actor’s control (Canovan, 1998, p. xiii). The university overcame this tension as, one after another, members of the research group were fired. After applying for and obtaining positions in other universities, members of the research group re-established their activities from different sites but now with greater awareness of what management perceived to be the disruptive nature of action research processes in university communities. From that moment on, prudence, patience, sensitivity and caring would inform all my research work, both with disadvantaged and marginalised communities in higher education (deaf and Indigenous and Raizal13 undergraduates), and with my colleagues and managers of the university where I started to work after my own dismissal from the Jesuit university.

In 2003 I accepted a position at the largest public state university in Colombia.14 This proved to be an ideal place to continue my academic life. The change from a 14-year period of professional life in private universities to a position as a public servant meant that circumstances in my new workplace had two dimensions clearly favourable to my personal disposition and research interests. On the one hand, in this university all sectors of Colombian society were present, which enabled me to work on campus with the most deprived communities in the country (Indigenous people, deaf students and economically deprived students). Here academic merit, struggles for preserving human rights, and an authentic exercise of citizenship have always been precious priorities. On the other hand, this was an institution struggling every day in contest with external forces attempting to shape its values and goals. Not only has the university been

13 This is one of the 80 ethnic groups in Colombia, composed of natives of the Department of San Andrés y Providencia Islands in the Caribbean Sea.
14 The Universidad Nacional de Colombia was founded in 1867 by national Law 66 that was expedited by the Congress. It currently has about 49,000 students distributed across eight campuses nationwide. It is funded mainly with public money and linked to the Ministry of Education, two circumstances that sustain its place as a nationwide special regime. [Retrieved from http://www.unal.edu.co 23 May 2012]
permanently affected by reduction of its funding as national economic resources have been channelled to support the former government’s ‘democratic security policy’,, but it has also been inevitably affected by the accountability culture affecting higher education worldwide.

I was now working in a university where freedom of speech has been bravely preserved, but I was soon confronted by conditions that threatened and eroded academic freedom. One example of this was the imposition of rules about where, when, and how academics were expected to publish their research. Although I was appointed as an Associate Professor on the basis of my research and professional experience, academic practices resulting from the response of universities to the demands of the knowledge-based economy determined my initial salary in my new workplace. My wage was reduced to a third of what I had earned in the private sector because I had published my work in ‘unacknowledged serial journals’. As a consequence, I needed to take positions doing casual lecturing in several private universities to supplement my salary as an Associate Professor in the public sector.

Coping simultaneously with the demands from my several work contexts, I also became aware of the different trends under way in action research in the United Kingdom, Australia and more widely in Latin America. I could explore John Elliott’s action research approach to professional development, and then Shirley Grundy’s and Stephen Kemmis’ action research approach to the development of emancipatory curricula. However, it was not until 2006 that I met Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda. With this meeting, a cycle in my academic life was closed. Not only was Orlando the most renowned Latin American

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15 Former President of Colombia, Alvaro Uribe Velez (2001-2010), established as a priority of his administration a security policy aimed at providing the state with “the capacity to confront illegal armed groups by controlling progressively more territory with more troops and with newly created special military and police units. This strategy was complemented by a sharp jump in the eradication of illicit crops, mostly through aerial spraying, and proposed anti-terrorist and ‘veiled amnesty’ legislation that granted the military controversial policing powers. The government also agreed to open talks with the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC), the country’s largest rightwing paramilitary group, despite its only partial adherence to a ceasefire declared in December 2002 and its continued involvement in killings, kidnappings and drug trafficking” (Group, 2003). The financial crisis of public higher education in Colombia is one of the challenges current President of Colombia, Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2014) has to face. He has already had to withdraw from the Congress a reform project suggested by his government, due to a protest movement by about 30,000 public university students who refused to attend classes for two months during the second semester of 2011.
participatory action researcher, he was also a close friend and collaborator with Paulo Freire. I met Orlando as a scholar at Universidad Nacional de Colombia, the same university from which he had resigned at the end of the 1960s because of his colleagues’ resistance to accepting new paradigms in approaching social justice matters. I met him when I participated in organising a symposium to honour Orlando’s life and work. About 300 Latin American action researchers who participated in the event could hardly believe that the main promoters of the various trends in action research were coming together to Bogotá to collectively renew their commitment to fight against social inequalities. With their shared commitment, their differences about action research approaches came to appear as complementary efforts in pursuit of the same goal.

Together these extraordinary events made sense. I had applied for a place in another PhD course in Amsterdam as a result of a strategic decision I had made with the then Head of the Department of Linguistics of the university where I work. But this decision was overtaken by a more meaningful possibility that arose from an unexpected meeting with Australian action researcher Stephen Kemmis in a hotel in Amsterdam in November 2005 after we had both attended the annual CARN conference. Our discussion opened another window in my search for meaning in my life as a teacher and a teacher educator. When I met Stephen, the place I was applying for in a PhD course was in the argumentation research program at the University of Amsterdam, where I intended to continue my research on kidnapping in Colombia from a discourse perspective. However, after three years of e-mail exchanges about research projects and the symposium in Bogotá, during a visit to Wagga Wagga, Australia, in July 2008 I applied for a place in a PhD program at Charles Sturt University with Stephen’s supervision.

After exploring various ideas and lines of enquiry, the research proposal I submitted to this university was a synthesis of my academic life: one clearly connected to never-ending beginnings. On the one hand, and based on my initiation to Hannah Arendt’s political thought, the research proposal was one in which I could think more profoundly about ‘action’ as that which brings about new beginnings. Necessarily and more importantly, my thinking would concern one of the most powerful human conditions, that makes actions possible: natality.

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16 Keynote addresses in Santos and Todhunter (2007)
On the other hand, this research would be an exploration of the potentialities of participatory action research to foster democratic citizenship and social justice from and within higher education. It would be a way to continue contributing from Latin America to the field of action research, as Orlando Fals Borda did so magnificently throughout his life.

This thesis is mainly based on my reflection upon the knowledge built by participatory action research practitioners, including myself. My reflections are guided by Hannah Arendt’s political thought. In order to achieve this double-sided goal, my first task was to set up a clearer picture of the challenges faced by academics the fields of higher education and participatory action research during the last half of the twentieth century and the first decade of this century.

1.1.2. Has higher education lost its compass?

It is close to 20 years since Middlehurst and Barnett’s (1994) analysis of the history of the relationship between higher education, the state and the wider society. To explain these complex relationships that indelibly shape the creation of knowledge and learning, they identified four models that I discuss below. Over the years since their analysis, it seems that very little has changed. One of the models still seems to be dominant in the first decade of the twentieth first century. Before presenting these four models, however, it is important to consider some of Middlehurst and Barnett’s general views about higher education.

Their 1994 work argues that for several centuries academic life has revolved around the notion of ‘disciplines’, and that this notion has shaped the idea of a university, as well as the personal, professional and social identities of the people related to the university. They argue, however, that the disciplines are no longer the main characteristic of academic life and work. A change taking place since the end of the twentieth century has resulted from the influence of interrelated political, legislative, economic and cultural forces. Competition, the development of information technology, and changing patterns of both intellectual enquiry and purposes of knowledge frameworks have been among the pressures influencing academic life.
Middlehurst and Barnett (1994, pp. 55-59) identify four overlapping patterns characterising the historically changing relationship between higher education, the state and the wider society. They have created a model for each of these four patterns. The first prevailed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: *Higher Education as Private Interest*. They call it ‘private’ because the form and practices of higher education were subject to the internal interests of the academic community. The interactions of academics and their conceptions of the world largely determined the evolution of disciplines, while teaching and research were strongly interrelated. Academics had collective control of the curriculum, and the student experience resembled a rite of passage into particular forms of life. In short, the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake was the hallmark of academic and student engagement in higher learning.

The second model, *Higher Education as Public Interest*, appeared in the last quarter of the twentieth century as a result of closer attention by the state to the performance of higher education. In response to economic pressures, teaching and research were separated for accountability purposes. Although teaching and research programs were still anchored to the disciplines, they began to acquire public shapes rather than “simply being loosely floating intentions in the minds of lecturers” (p. 55). In this model, the disciplines still nurture professional identities, and the organisational unit of the university Department maintains a sense of community. Yet the student experience is no longer conceived as an apprenticeship for academic life and instead becomes more instrumental. As separation of funding was begun to maximise the now separated teaching and research performances, departments changed from being purely academic entities towards becoming controlled business units.

The third model, *Higher Education as Public Direction*, closely follows the second in time. It is characterised by the state’s active intervention in the internal character of academic life. The argument that resources need to be channelled for maximal strategic effect is used to justify the need for public classifications to distinguish research programs for funding purposes. These conditions change the character and even the direction of research programs. Research and teaching are increasingly oriented by strategic needs identified by the state. As a consequence,
curriculum is increasingly designed in response to an external agenda, affecting academics’ and students’ identities in several ways. Differentiating between academics who generate income and lead research projects and those who do not produces a normative ranking between them. The student experience was affected too when the practical application of knowledge and skills, and the economic return it would deliver, were positioned as the primary purposes for studying.

Middlehurst and Barnett’s fourth model, *Higher Education as Market Direction*, has emerged in the late twentieth century. Here the state relinquishes its close control over the curriculum, and allows the market to become the predominant force directing it. The authors identify this change of direction as “both an outcome of government policy and a consequence of the move from an elite to a mass higher education system” (p. 58). More resources began to be invested in teaching and learning, a move that commits academics’ time mainly to ‘orchestrating’ learning programs. This has led, in turn, to a decrease in resources available for research. It has also created the need for continuous learning to develop transferable skills among students since the early stages of higher education no longer provide what is considered necessary to ‘succeed’ in a market-driven system.

At the end of their analysis, Middlehurst and Barnett argue that the forces involved in the four models they identified have generated important changes in the traditional character and ordering of the university. The changes reach “from the conceptual (the idea and purposes of a university), through the operational (policy, structures, systems and activities) to the normative (values, attitudes, beliefs and culture)” (p. 59). The authors suggest strategies that universities can develop to approach change more constructively since universities still retain a degree of freedom in their organisation, management arrangements and academic practices. They recommend that universities 1) develop a shared interpretation of the nature and extent of the changes facing them; 2) enable individuals who are affected most directly by changes to shape their own response to these changes within an overall framework; 3) ensure that the reward systems of the institution and its messages and style of managerial communication are aligned with the changes – conceptual, operational or normative – at which the university aims;
and 4) manage mindfully, consistent with these aims, the transition from the present to the future state. (pp. 63-65).

This analysis leads me to two main conclusions concerning the current state of higher education. First, it appears there is now no new model but only developments of the existing models under the conditions of marketisation produced by government reduction of funding and other support for universities. Second, while there are overlaps between the four models, in the first decade of the twenty first century the fourth model, *Higher Education as Market Direction*, has been undermining the other three models. I believe so for these reasons.

In the first model, the internal interests of the academy are less clear every day. But while the transparency and ‘disclosure’ of the university has been interpreted as right and proper, not all share this view. Many academics claim that their contributions to the transmission of knowledge through teaching and creation of knowledge through research are now valued principally in reference to external demands and standards; their own needs and interests appear to be of little concern. Unfortunately for the transmission and creation of knowledge and for those who depend upon its richness and intrinsic value, this seems to be so. Government policies in many countries suggest that, for government at least, worth, validity and/or legitimation of academic work are mainly defined externally.

The knowledge-based economy is now widely accepted as the ultimate arbiter of the worth of both academic work and its outcomes from teaching and research. The knowledge that academics pass on and create is now regarded as a product for consumption for various purposes external to the higher education system. Database businesses trade academics’ ideas and research findings, transforming them into commodities. Universities have become increasingly concerned about their place in externally imposed rankings that in turn establish new social orders among academics as well as the universities where they work. A dominant view argues that the more information technology resources a university can afford, the more up to the minute the university’s activities and academic staff can be, and by extension the more competitive the university itself will be. This view makes it
clear that government and market practices have decisively undermined the first model of the university in contemporary times.

As to the second and third models, we see that interrelated economic, political and cultural forces now heavily inform government policymaking and its implementation. ‘Giving an account of what we do’ is the minimal responsibility of all citizens to the people with whom we live in this world. Yet the accountability culture in higher education has transformed the accountability of universities and academics into another piece of consumption. The accounts required of and provided by academics, and the judgments made of their quality on that basis, have become the milestones of success or failure in a competition to survive and strive in the ‘higher education marketplace’.

Quality is resignified to serve new purposes through reworking of an old discourse of excellence that now connotes success, reputation and market leadership, and rarely denotes wellbeing, happiness or justice. New answers to the questions of ‘why and for what do we create knowledge?’ serve to embed new norms. The good life has come to be understood primarily in terms of economic stability. ‘Pragmatism’, in its common meaning rather than in the sense of philosophical pragmatism, has been made the most effective tool at hand to achieve this ‘good life’. The metaphor put forward by Kemmis et al. (2009, p. 7), ‘dancing to the music being played’ well typifies the behaviour of many academics and students in response to present conditions within which universities operate. Grundy (2007) offers some strategies to escape from this trap.

Grundy (2007, p. 73) identifies a paradox in the Australian higher education system. Australia is a strong nation in economic terms, with a tradition of excellence and innovation in education. Nevertheless in contemporary times national government policies seek to privatise and corporatise state institutions thereby diminishing state support for the socio-cultural dimensions of human life and society. Grundy points out that the current state of affairs in this specific Australian context is an illustration of what the neo-liberal policies of more powerful nations are inspiring in nations around the world. She identifies competitiveness, private wellbeing and personal benefit, rather than mutual
support, local wellbeing and the public good, as the main principles now directing government policies. This interpretation is shared by Naidoo (2004, p. 469). Using Bourdieu’s social theory, she argues that the social and cultural underpinnings of the ‘social compact’ that evolved between higher education, the state and society over the last century have started to be eclipsed by government perceptions of higher education as a lucrative service to be sold in the global marketplace. Education policy analysts Olseen and Peters (2005) are looking in the same direction with their claim that governments now see universities as more important than before for the economies they manage, to the extent that “higher education has become the new star ship in the policy fleet for governments around the world” (p. 313). Two of the multiple dramatic changes brought about by these neo-liberal policies in higher education have been the hierarchical division of teaching and research (Brew, 2006; Lambert, 2009) and the negative construction of students as consumers (Lambert, 2009; Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005).

With this general picture of higher education in mind and before providing some ideas on how to work effectively within this system, Grundy positions herself as a leader and a manager. This is important because this crisis of higher education reaches beyond the identities of teachers and students as Middlehurst and Barnett (1994) suggest. Then the Dean of the Faculty of Education at Deakin University, Grundy presented first the values orienting her personal actions as a member of an academic community. She characterised her role and responsibilities as “creating and maintaining the conditions in which all members of the faculty can achieve personal fulfilment in their work and where academic staff, in particular, can shine in their teaching and research practices” (Grundy, 2007, p. 74). She accepts that this characterisation can sound altruistic, and complements it by exposing a concealed reality that shapes her own work and has implications for her colleagues. She notes,

As a leader and manager my work is characterised not only by responsibilities but also by accountability. Increasingly, it is the accountability framework within which I work that influences the way in which I discharge my responsibilities. Indeed, it is becoming

17 After leaving Deakin University, Shirley Grundy was the Dean of the Faculty of Education in the University of Hong Kong.
18 The original footnote in Grundy’s text reads: “By ‘shine’, I mean that I want my colleagues’ work to be appreciated, admired, recognized as making a difference and/or a contribution. I hope that the work of my colleagues (whether through teaching or research) will be enlightening for others, will show the way forward and will have a positive impact” (Grundy, 2007, p. 74).
increasingly difficult not to conflate ‘accountability’ and ‘responsibility’ (Grundy, 2007, p. 74).

She ends this reflection by calling what these accountability regimes represent ‘soft totalitarianism’. She concludes that these regimes are “slowly eroding the opportunities for, and disposition towards, participation in the work of Australian university faculties” (p. 74).

Grundy’s timely insights into the effects of the accountability culture on her identity as a university leader and manager highlight a perverse consequence of what she identifies as the corporatisation of the modern university, which Middlehurst and Barnett (1994) term Higher Education as Market Direction. The dominating metaphors in this paradigm generate the framework for understanding and interacting in the game that it is expected people will play in this view of the world. Apple (2005) describes it very well: “Rather than being a neutral description of the world of social motivation, this is actually a construction of the world around the valuative characteristics of an efficiently acquisitive class type” (p. 273). He points out that for neo-liberals the world is in essence a huge supermarket where ‘consumer choice’ is the guarantor of democracy. Thus, he explains, “democracy is turned into consumption practices. In these plans, the ideal of the citizen is that of the purchaser. The ideological effects of this are momentous. Rather than democracy being a political concept, it is transformed into a wholly economic concept” (p. 273).

The policies in education based on this view of the world turn out to be very attractive, Apple says, because they rest largely on major changes in our common understanding of what democracy is, whether people see themselves as possessive individuals (‘consumers’), and how people see the market working (p. 276). He observes the neo-liberals’ faith in markets:

> Underlying neo-liberal policies in education and their social policies in general is a faith in the essential fairness and justice of markets. Markets ultimately will distribute resources efficiently and fairly according to effort. They ultimately will create jobs for all

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20 As Arendt (1978) stated, “Analogies, metaphors, and emblems are the threads by which the mind holds on to the world even when, absentmindedly, it has lost direct contact with it, and they guarantee the unity of human experience” (p. 109).
who want them. They are the best possible mechanism to ensure a better future for all citizens (consumers) (p. 276).

Apple’s view of markets is much less sanguine than the neo-liberal view he describes. He warns that markets are as powerfully destructive as they are productive in people’s lives.

From my perspective, Grundy (2007) and Apple (2005) point to one of the main challenges that we who are educational practitioners (teachers, educational leaders and managers, policymakers in the field of education, educational researchers, and the like) need to face urgently: to disentangle the multiple meanings of the words now serving different types of discourses. Grundy (2007) argues for prudence to prevent people becoming confused by the modern management rhetoric that emphasises the importance of ‘engaging’ employees in the enterprise much like we ‘engage’ in participatory democracy. Apple (2005) similarly describes the ‘neo-liberalisation’ of political concepts such as ‘democracy’ and ‘citizenship’.

As Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire wisely claimed towards the end of his life, the pragmatic discourse we are exposed to during our life forces us to adapt to reality. This was one reason why he invited teachers to constantly reinvent language and, through it, the world. To a question asked by his close friend Moacir Gadotti about what was new in his Pedagogy of Hope and what remained from Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire responded that, besides the importance of belief and hope, he was profoundly convinced of the important role of subjectivity (Freire & Gadotti, 1995, p. 260). Critiquing the Marxian and neo-Marxian idea that superstructure conditions consciousness, Freire advocated recovering the individual’s likes, fears and pleasures; in short, recovering the individual’s presence. He also observed the need “to know how to reinvent language, to understand the diversity of syntaxes, to recreate language in a correct form” (Freire & Gadotti, 1995, p. 265). He insisted on the need to understand clearly the dialectical relationship between tactics and strategies. He warned that one tactic of the makers of social change is maintaining their own jobs to help dreams come

21 From a critical perspective in the field of discourse studies, discourse is not equivalent to the notion of ‘text’; it is a social practice, which has texts as traces of its production (Fairclough, 1989, 1992, 2003)
true, adding that “every day one has to recreate one’s tactics to overcome the exclusivism of a narrow cultural comprehension” (p. 265).

However, Freire also identified ‘hopelessness’ as the main reason why these re-inventions do not happen:

Hopelessness is but hope that has lost its bearings, and become a distortion of that ontological need. When it becomes a program, hopelessness paralyses us, immobilizes us. We succumb to fatalism, and then it becomes impossible to muster the strength we absolutely need for a fierce struggle that will re-create the world. […] The idea that hope alone will transform the world, and action undertaken in that kind of naïveté, is an excellent route to hopelessness, pessimism, and fatalism. But the attempt to do it without hope, in the struggle to improve the world, as if that struggle could be reduced to calculated acts alone, or a purely scientific approach, is a frivolous illusion. […] hope, as an ontological need, demands an anchoring in practice. As an ontological need, hope needs practice in order to become historical concreteness. (Freire, 2004, p. 2)

In regard to the crisis in higher education, fortunately, hope has not been lost. As Apple (2005) observes, many institutions have contested resiliently the ideological attacks and pressures created by neo-liberal forces and “many teachers, academics, community activists, and others have created and defended educational programs that are both pedagogically and politically emancipatory” (Apple, 2005, p. 287). Similarly, after critiquing schooling as part of the current problem in education, Kemmis (2006) acknowledges that many AR initiatives “have worked at the margins of schooling to create richer and more emancipatory forms of education” (p. 470).

The works mentioned above are consistent with the claim by Middlehurst and Barnett (1994) that the conceptual, operational and normative character of higher education has been transformed radically during the second half of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty first century. This transformation has dramatically affected the identities of academics, students and managers (Grundy, 2007; Middlehurst & Barnett, 1994). Today there are calls to further transform education to foster the values of social justice and democratic citizenship within and from universities. This will first require acknowledging the importance of gradually restoring the site of people’s identities in education. Such a process demands, simultaneously, an analysis of the various discourses used in higher education that embody contemporary views of the world. They are discourses in which the identities of these people have been embedded.
One example of what is problematic in this situation is the various meanings attached to ‘participation’ in higher education and educational research in this first decade of the twenty first century. ‘Participation’ has been associated with a range of other ideas that provide the former with different flavours. Accepting Freire’s (Freire, 2004; Freire & Gadotti, 1995) invitation to examine carefully the language we use in our common daily activities as a condition for any re-invention of our world, this thesis is based on my analysis of the current discourses that are being shaped by and themselves shape the convergence of the ‘marketisation/corporatisation’ process and higher education. In my analysis, ‘participation’ will serve as an initial commonality between higher education and a type of research that upholds ‘participation’ as one of its essentials: participatory action research (PAR).

1.1.3. Action Research and Participatory Action Research

The histories of PAR have been inextricably linked to the origins of action research (AR). This relationship has been characterised in different ways by different observers. Let us consider some of these historical accounts of PAR in relation to AR.

Although it is commonly thought that Kurt Lewin was the founder of AR, Altrichter and Gstettner (1997) argued instead for J.L. Moreno, for his work in 1913. They claim that although Moreno’s direct influence on AR was small, his ideas and research strategies might have indirectly influenced the development of the concept by Lewin, who knew Moreno. Gunz (1986, p. 34), cited by Altrichter and Gstettner (1997), saw Moreno and Lewin in polarity and, maybe, complementarity: “Moreno, the committed actionist filled with intuition and charisma, and Lewin, the reserved social researcher of traditional style interested in logics and precision but on the brink of a paradigm change” (Gunz, 1986, p. 35). These different interests, personalities, and abilities would in time define different types of approaches to AR.

Greenwood and Levin (2007) point out that the diversity of activities today identified as AR cannot be linked to each other in ways as obvious as people
might expect. Their genealogy of AR has great importance for my thesis, since they connect the developments of AR to various conceptualisations of democracy. Among other issues, they address the origins of AR, based on their concerns with “the political relationship between AR and conventional social research, the passive social role of universities, and the general lack of epistemological ambition and methodological attention in much AR writing” (p. xi). These authors celebrate, in this sense, the more ecumenical account of AR developments during the last two decades. Specifically, they refer to the efforts of academics such as Reason and Bradbury (2001), who gathered many strands of thinking in the field in The Handbook of Action Research. These efforts enable us to know more about shared references in the field of AR such as those to Karl Marx, John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Jürgen Habermas, Hans Georg Gadamer and Richard Rorty. However, these accounts have also helped Greenwood and Levin to identify what they regard as lacking in the Handbook: “a critical discourse between different conceptualizations of AR or a contrast between different practices and findings” (Greenwood & Levin, 2007, p. 13).

Greenwood and Levin claim that the creation of this critical discourse can provide a more meaningful map of the varieties and trends in AR. But they warn that this observation does not imply that AR activities lack the distinctive features that validate them being considered an intellectual and social movement. Recognising that their account of the developments of AR is mainly defined by their experience as part of the Northern tradition of industrial democracy, they highlight the need for a convergence of Northern and Southern AR traditions in times when democratic practices are being compromised everywhere in the world. Here they acknowledge the contribution of Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals-Borda to activating this convergence with the world conference he entitled ‘Convergence’ in Cartagena, Colombia, in 1977 and again in 1997.

According to Greenwood and Levin (2007), the industrial democracy tradition refers to the first systematic and reasonably large-scale AR effort in Western industrialised countries. Based on Kurt Lewin’s early work in the United States, this movement crossed the Atlantic and found resonances at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London. Greenwood and Levin clarify that the major source of large-scale AR projects was in Norway in the Industrial
Democracy Project, and these AR ideas were reinvented in Sweden and the United States as industrial management strategies. This widespread diffusion of AR has definitely been considered as an indicator of success in the history of AR. However, according to Greenwood and Levin (2007), this historicising is really a story about “the way fairly radical ideas for social change can be appropriated as management tools aimed at producing more efficient, rather than fairer organizations” (p. 15). For them, the concept of ‘industrial democracy’ has lost its initial meaning. They also see ‘the same domestication processes’ in two other AR approaches: the ‘Rapid Rural Appraisal’ and ‘Participatory Rural Appraisal’ or ‘Participatory Learning Analysis’. From their perspective, these two approaches “unintentionally made participation into a commodity that was built into development strategies as a technique instigated by the funding agencies. This process is quite parallel to the co-optation of industrial democracy” (p. 15).

The early work of Kurt Lewin, who was trained in social psychology, was a so-called natural experiment. In this type of research work, “the researchers in a real-life context invited or forced participants to take part in an experimental activity” (Greenwood & Levin, 2007, p. 16). Despite its patterns of authoritarian control and its aim to produce a desired social outcome, Greenwood and Levin (2007) claim that Lewin’s thinking about experimentation in natural settings became the main strategy for the Norwegian Industrial Democracy Project.

In the 1970s, as a result of some cooperative work between the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London and the Norwegian Confederation of Employers and the Trade Union Council, a European study of industrial democracy was conducted to discover whether representative or participative models of democracy were more suitable to produce a high degree of employee control over their work. As expected, the findings confirmed that participative approaches to work organisation could increase industrial democracy. Greenwood and Levin (2007) observe that the core ideas in industrial democracy were picked up quickly in Sweden, the United States and Japan. Three major conceptual schemes emerged from the Norwegian project: ‘sociotechnical thinking’, ‘psychological job demands’, and the idea of ‘semiautonomous groups’. These conceptual schemes were coopted to optimise the efficiency of technological and social systems. These authors say that this diffusion route was possible thanks to the role
played by research networks. However, they do not attribute its success to academic channels: “the ideas diffused because ‘they worked’ and met strongly felt social needs” (Greenwood & Levin, 2007, p. 16).

According to Greenwood and Levin (2007), in contrast with the Northern historical route of AR, the Southern development of AR was a combination of democratising efforts under conditions of overt oppression. These authors explain that most of the AR activities emerged in “some of the most undemocratic situations humans have created: massive colonial exploitation of Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia, the genocide/ethnocide of American Indians, the impoverishing of generations of Europeans who immigrated widely, and the enslaving of Africans in the West” (p. 29). They advise that many of the strands of this struggle against structural inequality came to be known as the Southern PAR, participatory research, and the civil rights movement. This appearance of PAR in the South is closely connected to interpretations of AR developments in other latitudes.

Kemmis and McTaggart (2005), for example, place PAR in the international setting as a contribution of a fourth generation of AR practitioners’ works. These Australian academics present H.G. Moreno and Kurt Lewin as forming the first AR generation, with the British tradition mentioned by Greenwood and Levin (2007) as the second. The third generation corresponds to a critical approach to AR made in works such as Carr and Kemmis (1986) and Brock-Utne (1980), as cited in Kemmis and McTaggart (2005). They consider PAR as the type of research being carried out by a fourth generation of scholars in the context of social movements in the developing world, including Paulo Freire, Orlando Fals-Borda, Rajesh Tandon, Anisur Rahman, and Marja-Liisa Swantz. These scholars have worked physically remote from but intellectually alongside North American and British workers in adult education and literacy, and community development studies such as those by Budd Hall, Myles Horton, Robert Chambers and John Gaventa. From this historical account, Kemmis and McTaggart (2005, p. 560) proceed to analyse PAR from a Habermasian perspective.

These two interpretations of the history of AR — by Greenwood and Levin and by Kemmis and McTaggart — both identify PAR as a particular type of AR
especially linked to social movements in particular deprived contexts. However, when action researchers began to theorise ‘participation’ as an integral component of any AR experience (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; McTaggart, 1997a), this important qualifier initially distinguishing PAR from other AR appears to have been dropped. Through this theoretical exercise, researchers identified particular types of PAR such as Critical PAR (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). This theoretical evolution began to blur the once-established distinctions between AR and PAR. We can see signs of this, from a different perspective, in some other recent accounts of AR developments.

Bob Dick’s three literature reviews (2004, 2006, 2009) reveal that after more than half a century struggling towards scientific legitimacy, the field of AR has moved into a stage characterised by the explosion of applications of its theoretical and methodological principles to try to solve various social problems. Work on issues in fields such as education, health and organisational development has resulted in the consolidation of AR subtypes with their own legitimacy, for example, educational action research, community-based participatory research, and organisational action research. In relation to this explosion of applications of AR, Dick (2009) found that the boundaries between AR and closely related methodologies are fuzzy and becoming fuzzier (p. 424). Dick advises that this can be seen easily, for example, in educational action research (EAR), which “ranges from quasi-experimentation (Sagor, 2000) through cyclic and participatory approaches (Mills, 2003) to the emancipatory approaches of people like Stephen Kemmis (e.g., 2001)” (Dick, 2004, p. 432). Dick also appears to see no difference between types of AR such as PAR and other proposals such as community-based participatory research (CBPR) (Dick, 2006, p. 444). By the end of his last literature review, he concludes: “My view is that good research is designed to fit the situation and the purpose. In a fast-changing world, that philosophy suits action research well” (Dick, 2009, p. 452). Positions such as his have been in the centre of recent debates about what AR, or any one of its subtypes, stands for (for example, Kemmis, 2006).

Dick’s (2004, 2006, 2009) three extensive literature reviews were aimed at identifying the various themes and trends emerging from the published material (paper and online) in the field of action research in three specific periods: 2000–2003, 2004–2006 and 2006–2008. All the materials reviewed were selected subjectively by the author, as he states at the outset, according to whether he considers the material useful, thought-provoking, or helpful for addressing present and future issues in the field (Dick, 2004, p. 426).
On the importance of ‘participation’ in the field of AR during the last decade, Dick notes “growing attention to the practical details of participation and involvement” (2004, p. 425), and highlights several AR experiences developed from various participatory approaches. Acknowledging Reason and Bradbury’s (2001) contribution to set AR as the umbrella term for participatory and action-oriented approaches, Dick provides evidence to support claims about the relationship of AR to issues such as participation, social action, and democracy. Here Dick offers an account of academic works on participation and the Scandinavian industrial democracy (Dick, 2004, p. 434); feminist participatory action research with an emphasis on social action, power, and collaboration (Dick, 2006, p. 440); the development of techniques applicable to community action research where public participation is one of the applications of democracy (Dick, 2006, p. 443); AR as a contributor to the shift from expert rule to shared governance through a more democratic approach to politics (Dick, 2009, p. 428); and Youth Participatory Action Research, YPAR (Dick, 2009, p. 429). Finally, throughout these literature reviews, he questions the absence of material on building theory from AR (Dick, 2004, p. 425).

After analysing these three interpretations of the appearance of PAR, two research questions emerge for my research study:

1) What notions of ‘social justice’, ‘democracy’, ‘citizenship’ and ‘education’ underpin the different kinds of human and social actions that occur in cases of PAR?

2) How might cases of PAR be regarded as research practices?

In order to critically review what has been said so far in relation to these questions, I believe we need to consider another perspective: that of a PAR practitioner of the South, who gained his perspective largely through a lifetime in the South.

Colombian Orlando Fals-Borda (2006a, pp. 353-354) claims the main motives for promoting PAR in the 1970s were not superfluous. One was to protest against “the sterile and futile university routine, colonized by western Euro-American
culture, and so subordinating as to impede us from discovering or valuing our own realities” (p. 353). The other was to right wrongs — as he says, “to improve the form and foundation of our crisis-ridden societies by fighting against their injustices and trying to eradicate poverty and other socioeconomic afflictions caused by the dominant systems” (p. 353). But by 2006, circumstances on both fronts had changed. On the first motive he could claim, after ten PAR World Congresses, that PAR is now taught or practiced in at least 2,500 universities in 61 countries, many of which have accepted research theses on PAR topics and introduced postgraduate programs in this field. On the second, he would observe that although hard and cruel times have not ended, there are signs of a new horizon: “a different world, perhaps a more acceptable one than our generation has suffered” (p. 353).

In spite of these changes, Fals-Borda (2006a) wonders if it is progress or regress to know that the proposal to “investigate reality in order to transform it” through praxis in Third World countries has begun to become institutionalised. His concern is that institutionalisation, although inevitable when ideas are widely accepted, “may lose something of its original cutting edges in the process” (p. 353). He thinks that universities and scientific institutions face a new challenge. In the first place, he cautions against reviving the right- or left-wing intellectual colonialism of either the North or the South (Fals-Borda, 2006a, p. 356).

In their 2003 study critiquing Eurocentrism, Fals-Borda (sociologist) with Luis E. Mora-Osejo (biologist) explain that although they were taught in the 1960s by prominent professors in the United States and Germany, respectively, they both had to relearn much of their disciplines back in Colombia due to the inadequacy of the very well-known frames of reference they had learned overseas for understanding and solving various problems in their home country. That is why, after 50 years of experience and study in tropical and violent areas in Colombia, they decided to ‘fly alone’ (Fals-Borda & Mora-Osejo, 2003, p. 30). In their 2003 Manifesto, they combine an open and systemic contextual hypothesis with the concept of ‘endogenesis’, a biological term that means ‘growth from within’.

They reason:
As European and North American scientific paradigms have been conceived in the contexts of temperate zones and their historical, cultural and material development, they are similarly conditioned by those contexts in the determination of collective thinking and action. Marx and his European followers should be understandably forgiven for their lack of knowledge of Latin American history and culture. (Fals-Borda & Mora-Osejo, 2003, pp. 32-33)

Having critiqued their own approach to Euro-American theories in their early years, Fals-Borda and Mora Osejo (2003) invite others to develop more endogenous paradigms rooted in every community’s realities and circumstances. The more the researcher becomes involved in the knowledge of local realities through life experience or ‘vivencia’, the richer and more useful this knowledge will be (pp. 32-33). PAR therefore emerged in these latitudes with a self-aware epistemic underlay, as a process of ‘knowledge accumulation’ or ‘convergence’;

“It is not the measurement of the space that is considered, but the harmonious reconstruction of the relationship of people and nature in our country implies a rediscovery of the peculiarities of our daily living and our socialization” (p. 35). While not pretending to ignore foreign knowledge, they invite formation of an alliance of North and South insofar as both are interested in similar problems and are motivated by convergent interests, two of which concern facing structural injustices and global defects of the modern world (p. 36). They conclude in this vein:

With such objectives in mind, we can stimulate combined research-and-teaching attitudes and practices within and outside educational institutions which are able to overcome discriminatory distinctions, such as those between the academic and the popular, between the scientific and the political, and to stimulate self-esteem among our peoples and in our academic communities. (Fals-Borda & Mora-Osejo, 2003, p. 36)

Consequently, Fals-Borda (2006a) interprets the origins of PAR in the so-called Third World as an endogenous proposal based on an examination of local social, cultural, historical and environmental roots in order to explain, describe, systematise, and transform contexts and existing conditions. This interpretation is shared by Rahman (2008), who presents an historical account of a South Asian trend in PAR that is closely connected to the articulation of people’s collective self-initiatives in the field of rural development in India, Sri Lanka, Philippines and Bangladesh. Rahman (2008, pp. 50-51) states that the first theoretical reflection on PAR can be found in the writings of Heinz Moser about a trend in Germany termed ‘emancipatory research’. Yet he also claims that the origins of participatory (action) research relate to recognition of the autonomy of these endogenous proposals by the International Network on Participatory Research
launched at a major conference on AR in Cartagena, Colombia, in April 1977. This network was the result of an initiative of Budd Hall of the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) based in Toronto, Canada, and some of his colleagues, who exchanged ideas with Fals-Borda and intellectuals from many parts of the world.

Through this international exchange of ideas, PAR practitioners have tried out “advanced as well as much-applied principles and techniques, but also propose concepts and intellectual inventions of their own, appropriate and relevant to the realities that inspired them” (Fals-Borda, 2006a, p. 356). Fals-Borda (2006a) advocates the importance of PAR for universities and scientific institutions as they face current challenges, especially responding to the crises presented by neoliberal modernity. After overcoming strong debates about PAR — its validity, scientific rigor, the rhythm of theory and practice, the balance between subject and object, and ethical dilemmas of science and conscience — Fals-Borda remains firm. He insists that

> as part of our scientific task, we have the political, objective and non-neutral duty of fostering the democratic and spiritual dimensions through more satisfying life systems. To this end, northern and southern scholars can converge and be soul fellows in the quest for meaning (Fals-Borda, 2006a, p. 357).

These four historical accounts deepen our understanding of why PAR has become relevant in education. First, while the origins of AR are clearly defined by some researchers’ interest in solving different social problems in different contexts of the world (Dick, 2004, 2006, 2009; Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005), the creation of PAR has been especially associated with some AR practitioners’ understanding of their practices as inextricably linked to their political duty (Fals-Borda & Mora-Osejo, 2003; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Fals-Borda, 2006a; Greenwood & Levin, 2007). Conceptually, this leads us to pose two further preliminary questions:

3) **How are ‘the social’ and ‘the political’ understood by different AR and PAR practitioners in higher education?**

4) **What are the consequences of these understandings for PAR practitioners’ research practices?**
A second conclusion that can be drawn from these histories of AR and PAR is that it appears AR practitioners, including practitioners of PAR, find in participation an essential element to deal with the social and political dimensions of their research practice (Dick, 2004, 2006, 2009; Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Kemmis, 2006; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Kemmis, et al., 2009). Sometimes an emphasis on the political dimension leads AR practitioners to describe their research practice as PAR. In conceptual terms, a subsequent research question to be explored in the thesis is:

5) How is participation linked to ‘the social’ and ‘the political’ by AR and PAR practitioners?

Finally, a third conclusion from these historical accounts of AR, and of PAR as one of its types, is that they provide evidence supporting the view that the practices of AR and PAR practitioners are informed by different ideologies associated with the social and political dimensions of their work (Dick, 2004, 2006, 2009; Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Kemmis, 2006; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Kemmis, et al., 2009). However, as observed of contemporary higher education (Apple, 2005; Grundy, 2007), discourses and practices in the field of AR and PAR serve ideologies that are expected to be contested by the academic community (Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Kemmis, 2006). Hence, a sixth research question that arises in this thesis is:

6) How do AR and PAR practitioners’ discourses and practices relate to the particular ideological positions they have adopted?

Considering these latter evaluations of literature and the research questions emerging from them, from now on in this thesis I use parentheses around the ‘P’ in the acronym (P)AR referencing the two problematic situations so far identified. First, the parentheses refer to the types of AR where participation is considered an essential component, whether or not the research is described as PAR by its practitioners. Second, because different ideologies inform (P)AR discourses and practices, these parentheses also indicate that participation is regarded as a problematic term that presupposes (different) ideas of participation.
Research questions 1 to 6 are, in a sense, preliminary questions that lead towards the central and most important research question this study aims to answer, namely:

7) **What sorts of political lives are (P)AR practitioners promoting in higher education?**

**1.2. Politics, (P)AR, higher education and the academic community**

To present what has been said so far in the academic community about the central research question of this thesis, it is necessary to define what is meant by the key term *politics*. This definition can serve to articulate other terms very frequently associated with politics in the fields of higher education and (P)AR. With this purpose in mind, I also consider in this thesis Hannah Arendt’s understanding of politics, which is based on her notion of *natality*. As Gordon (2001) claimed, Arendt’s unique perspective has been identified in recent times as one that enhances the liberal and critical traditions for transforming education, the main concern sustaining my research discussed in this thesis.

Based on Arendt’s definition of politics, I conducted an extensive literature review about the problematic situation linked to the notion of ‘participation’ in the fields of *higher education, (P)AR and political philosophy of education*. I also prepared three literature reviews in the absence of interpretative accounts on the political lives that *are being promoted* in higher education (P)AR by its practitioners and advocates. I organised results in relation to a diverse array of interpretations about how political lives *should* be lived in contemporary universities in the three fields mentioned. This section ends with the presentation of Arendt’s notion of *natality*, a notion that, as it is expressed in the literature, I argue can help (higher) education to renew its commitment to enhance democratic citizenship and social justice.
1.2.1. What is Politics for Hannah Arendt?

Arendt (1998) harks back to the ancient Greeks for origins. She says that the foundation of the *polis* was the Greek remedy for the fragility of boundless and non-tangible human relationships (p. 196).

The *polis*, as it grew out of and remained rooted in the Greek pre-*polis* experience and estimate of what makes it worthwhile for men to live together (*syzên*) namely, the “sharing of words and deeds,” had a twofold function. [...] The *polis* was supposed to multiply the occasions to win “immortal fame,” that is, to multiply the chances for everybody to distinguish himself, to show in deed and word who he was in his unique distinctness [...] The second function of the *polis*, again closely connected with the hazards of action as experienced before its coming into being, was to offer a remedy for the futility of action and speech. (Arendt, 1998, pp. 196-197)

Arendt (1998) therefore interprets the political realm as emerging directly out of acting together (p. 198). She states that, properly speaking, the *polis* is not the city-state in its physical location but the organisation of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, “and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be” (p. 198). From this perspective, action and speech create this space between the participants. This is a space, she says, “where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly” (pp. 198-199). However, she makes it clear that even though human beings are capable of actions and words, this space created by speech and action does not always exist; many people do not live in it.

Arendt (1998) says that the political realm is different from other spaces, that it “does not survive the actuality of the movement which brought it into being, but disappears not only with the dispersal of men—[…] but with the disappearance or arrest of the activities themselves” (p. 199). She argues that what kills political communities is their loss of power. For Arendt (1998), power is what keeps in existence the public realm, that is, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking people. “Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds are not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities.”
(Arendt, 1998, p. 200). She claims the only indispensable material factor in the generation of power is humans living together.

Power is thus the human ability not just to act but to act in concert (Arendt, 1970). It belongs to a group, not to an individual. Power therefore exists only as long as the group keeps together: “When we say of somebody that he is ‘in power’ we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name. The moment the group, from which the power originated to begin with…disappears, ‘his power’ also vanishes” (p. 44). So power is what keeps people together after the ephemeral moment of action has passed, and, she adds “whoever, for whatever reasons, isolates himself and does not partake in such being together, forfeits power and becomes impotent, no matter how great his strength and how valid his reasons” (Arendt, 1998, p. 201). From this perspective, participation is inherently connected, in fact it is intrinsic, to the political realm insofar as this taking part in a collective situation makes acting together possible. The only limitation on power, Arendt says, is the existence of other people, which cannot be taken as accidental. Human power corresponds to the human condition of plurality, the fact that “we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live” (Arendt, 1998, p. 8).

In Arendt’s view, the condition of human plurality is not only the condition sine qua non, but also the condition per quam of all political life (Arendt, 1998, p. 7). Because of this, she claims that politics deals with the coexistence and association of different human beings who organise themselves according to certain essential commonalities found ‘within or abstracted from’ an absolute chaos of differences (Arendt, 2005, p. 93). And she adds:

As long as political bodies are based on the family and conceived in the image of the family, kinship in all its degrees is credited on the one hand as being able to unite extreme individual differences, and, on the other hand, as a means by which groups resembling individuals can be isolated and contrasted. (Arendt, 2005, pp. 94-95)

According to Arendt (2005, pp. 94-95), our political lives, although resembling our family lives, are constructed on a different type of tie (kinship). This new type of relationship leads to the fundamental perversion of politics insofar as it abolishes the basic quality of plurality. Politics arises in what lies ‘between men’
(italics in original) and is established as relationships; this form of organisation eradicates the original differentiation of each human being. She emphasises that “politics organizes those who are absolutely different with a view to their relative equality and in contradistinction to their relative differences” (Arendt, 2005, p. 96).

In her reflection on what politics is, Arendt (2005) says that our individual prejudices are always present when we talk about politics, although our shared prejudices are political too. She states that we cannot ignore these prejudices, since they indicate that in political terms, we do not know, or do not yet know, how to function in situations into which we have stumbled. In the 1950s, Arendt identified the hope and fear underlying our prejudices against politics:

the fear that humanity could destroy itself through politics and through the means of force now at his disposal, and, linked with this fear, the hope that humanity will come to its senses and rid the world, not of humankind, but of politics. It could do so through a world government that transforms the state into an administrative machine, resolves political conflicts bureaucratically, and replaces armies with police forces […] If, however, we understand politics to mean a global dominion in which people appear primarily as active agents who lend human affairs a permanence they otherwise do not have, then this hope is not the least bit utopian (Arendt, 2005, p. 97).

But for Arendt the problem is not having prejudices; she recognises that we must have them since we cannot have original judgements about everything. In a broader sense, she identifies all prejudices that we share as political insofar as they are “something that constitutes an integral part of those human affairs that are the context in which we go about our daily lives” (Arendt, 2005, p. 99). Prejudices are different from personal idiosyncrasies since they exist outside of experience, which is why Arendt believes the task of politics is to dispel them. However, there is something that prejudices share with judgement: the way in which people recognise themselves and their commonalities. Someone with prejudices, Arendt (2005) says, can always be certain of having an effect on others. This is why prejudices play a major role in the social arena, while what is idiosyncratic hardly prevails in the public and political spheres.

Arendt sees that in every historical crisis prejudices begin to collapse because they can no longer be accepted. They become closed worldviews or ideologies with an explanation for everything, pretending to understand all historical and political
reality (Arendt, 2005, pp. 102-103). In this view, what distinguishes prejudice from ideology is precisely this claim of universality since prejudice is always partial in nature, while an ideology shields us from all experience by providing a complete view of the world confronting us. Ideologies state clearly that both our prejudices and our standards of judgment are inappropriate and, because of this, we should no longer rely on them.

In relation to the modern crisis, Arendt claims:

Regardless of how people respond to the question of whether it is man or the world that is in jeopardy in the present crisis, one thing is certain: any response that places man in the center of our current worries and suggests he must be changed before any relief is to be found is profoundly unpolitical. For at the center of politics lies concern for the world, not for man […] If we want to change an institution, an organization, some public body existing within the world, we can only revise its constitution, its laws, its statutes, and hope that all the rest will take care of itself. This is so because wherever human beings come together — be it in private or socially, be it in public or politically — a space is generated that simultaneously gathers them into it and separates them from one another […] Wherever people come together, the world thrusts itself between them, and it is in this in-between space that all human affairs are conducted. (Arendt, 2005, pp. 105-106)

From Arendt’s point of view, the only activity that goes on directly between human beings without the intermediary of things, and corresponds to the human condition of plurality, is action (Arendt, 1998, p. 7). She says that action is unique in that it “sets into motion processes that in their automatism look very much like natural processes, […] action also marks the start of something, begins something new, seizes the initiative” (Arendt, 2005, p. 113). She believes that action cannot be eliminated in spite of its instrumentalisation and the degradation of politics into a means for something else (Arendt, 1998). While frailty is the main feature of human relationships, uncertainty becomes the distinctive character of human affairs (p. 232). Only because human beings are capable of acting, of starting processes on their own, is it possible to conceive both nature and history as systems of processes.

Arendt therefore emphasises that “men never have been and never will be able to undo or even to control reliably any of the processes they start through action […] And this incapacity to undo what has been done is matched by an almost equally complete incapacity to foretell the consequences of any deed or even to have reliable knowledge of its motives” (Arendt, 1998, pp. 232-233). The remedy against this irreversibility and unpredictability of the process started by acting,
Arendt claims, is one of the potentialities of action itself. While the possible redemption from irreversibility is the faculty of forgiving, the remedy for unpredictability is the faculty of making and keeping promises (Arendt, 1998, pp. 236-237). Both faculties, she states, depend on plurality since forgiving and making and keeping promises need to take place in the presence and acting of others.

However, there is one form of living together that needs action not to happen; this is the main demand from the social realm. For Arendt (1998), historically speaking, the rise of the social coincided with the transformation of private care for private property into a public concern:

The emergence of society—the rise of housekeeping, its activities, problems, and organizational devices—from the shadowy interior of the household into the light of the public sphere, has not only blurred the old border line between private and political, it has also changed almost any recognition of the meaning of the two terms and their significance for the life of the individual and the citizen. (Arendt, 1998, p. 38)

In this perspective, society continually demands that its members act as if they belong to a big family, which has only one opinion and one interest; the most social form of government, in this sense, is bureaucracy (Arendt, 1998, p. 40). Society excludes the possibility of action on all its levels. “Instead, society expects from each of its members a certain kind of behavior, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to ‘normalize’ its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement” (p. 40). In modern times, she says, the social realm has conquered the public realm, making the social and the political realms much less distinct. Understanding ‘politics’ as a function of society, and action, speech, and thought as primarily ‘superstructures upon social interest’, have made it impossible to perceive any difference between ‘the social’ and ‘the political’.

Inherent in the human ability to make a beginning, which is in turn inherent in the fact of being born, is freedom, which is the meaning of politics. Arendt (2006) states that freedom becomes the direct aim of political action: “[t]he raison d’être of politics is freedom, and its field of experience is action” (p. 145). Arendt says that freedom is possible, politically speaking, when there is a common public space where human beings can meet, in other words,
a politically organized world into which each of the free men could insert himself by word and deed. [...] Without a politically guaranteed public realm, freedom lacks the worldly space to make its appearance [...] Freedom as a demonstrable fact and politics coincide and are related to each other like two sides of the same matter. (Arendt, 2006, p. 147)

Arendt (2005) emphasises that the principles of action that inform our thinking about politics have barely been questioned. Instead, questions have centered on identifying “which polities and forms of government represent the best of human communal life” (p. 197). Since the end of the 18th century, lively discussion has considered “the possible advantages and disadvantages of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy and/or some polity that could mix monarchic, aristocratic or democratic elements in a republic” (p. 197).

Arendt (2005) also provides an interesting interpretation of various attempts by the ancient Greeks to oppose the polis. One of these attempts was Plato’s foundation of the Academy:

This act stood in opposition to the polis because it set the Academy apart from the political arena, but at the same time it was also done in the spirit of this specifically Greco-Athenian political space –that is, insofar as its substance lay in men speaking with one another. And with that there arose alongside the realm of political freedom a new space of freedom that has survived down to our time as the freedom of the university and academic freedom. [...] The free space of the Academy was intended as a fully valid substitute for the marketplace, the agora, the central space for freedom in the polis. In order for their institution to succeed, the few had to demand that their activity, their speech with one another, be relieved of the activities of the polis in the same way the citizens of Athens were relieved of all activities that dealt with earning their daily bread. They had to be freed from politics in the Greek sense in order to be free for the space of academic freedom, just as the citizen had to be freed from earning the necessities of life in order to be free for politics. In order to enter the ‘academic’ space, they had to leave the space of real politics, just as citizens had to leave the privacy of their households to go to the marketplace. Just as liberation from work and the cares of life was a prerequisite for the freedom of the political man, liberation from politics was a prerequisite for the freedom of the academic. (Arendt, 2005, pp. 131-132)

Arendt’s understanding of the political realm as the space lying between people, and of politics concerning the organisation that emerges from their acting and speaking according to certain essential commonalities (Arendt, 1970, 1998, 2005, 2006), provides us with some more elements with which to analyse some of the most important developments in the field of (P)AR.

**1.2.2. Politics and participation in higher education**

In the following account I aim to provide an overview of the several proposals currently being discussed in the academy in relation to forms of organisations that
universities should adopt to address the many challenges they are facing. These initiatives are informed by different worldviews from which particular problems are identified as well as their solutions. Although many aspects could be analysed here, I have selected and organised the academic works based on relationships between ‘participation’ and three current concerns in higher education: governance, teaching and research.

Marginson and Considine (2000) state, for example, that university governance is “more fragmented, improvised and temporary than its protagonists might want” (p. 234). Based on a study to identify the academics’ engagement in what they called the ‘Enterprise University’, they found that all of the academics interviewed expressed the view that, stretched by the day-to-day demands of teaching, research and professional service, they had little time to be more involved in university concerns. In spite of the model informing the idea of the university they want to promote, the description of academics’ lives at the universities is very accurate. They conclude that one of the answers to overcome this situation is by combining “community building and participation in governance, releasing a diversity of contributions” (p. 253). This reference to ‘participation’ is related to what Grundy (2007) has called a reminiscence of participatory democracy to ‘engage employees in the enterprise’. Recognising that the modern university is a multi-million dollar business, Grundy (2007) proposes, instead, the university as a site of participation. She claims that universities are special communities in their own right and so they cannot be determined entirely managerially. And she adds “Accountability within a university context does not involve only assessment of the achievement of objectives. It also involves communicative considerations about purpose and legitimacy. Thus, participation, not just involvement, must remain at the heart of the university enterprise” (Grundy, 2007, p. 77).

In relation to research in higher education, Gibbons (2004), for instance says that “the research practices associated with mode 2 – particularly those that imply wider participation, enhanced social accountability, reflexivity, and expanded forms of quality control – could be used to establish in universities an ethos for
the production of socially robust knowledge” (p. 115). From his perspective, participation is a key element to cope with the tensions caused by globalisation between the traditional way of doing research in universities and the new emergent form of research. He concludes that “withdrawing into an ivory tower is no option, but by entering, more comprehensively and deliberatively, into the agora – those myriad public transaction spaces where issues are discussed and their research implications explored – universities can move not so much into, but beyond, the market” (Gibbons, 2004, p. 115). Although participation is relevant in strategic terms, it seems that ‘competition’ and ‘knowledge production’ are the ideas orienting Gibbon’s views about how university research activities should be organised.

However, there are other perspectives. Appadurai (2006) states, for example, that while research is normally seen as a high-end, technical activity that is available by training, it is rarely seen as a capacity with democratic potential. Based on his experience in developing research projects in India, his country of birth, he develops his line of argument based on a simple basic premise: we need to recognise research as a specialised name for a generalised capacity, that is, the capacity of human beings to make disciplined inquiries into those things we need to know but do not yet know. This capacity becomes especially relevant in a world of rapid changes, he says, “where markets, media, and migration have destabilised secure knowledge niches and have rapidly made it less possible for ordinary citizens to rely on knowledge drawn from traditional, customary or local sources” (Appadurai, 2006, pp. 167-168). But Appadurai goes further. He advocates recognising research as a right connected to our capacity to aspire to and achieve socially valuable goals:

Without aspiration, there is no pressure to know more. And without systematic tools for gaining relevant new knowledge, aspiration degenerates into fantasy or despair. Thus, asserting the relevance of the right to research, as a human right, is not a metaphor. It is an argument for how we might revive an old idea, namely, that taking part in democratic society requires one to be informed. One can hardly be informed unless one has some ability to conduct research, however humble the question or however quotidian its inspiration. This is doubly true in a world where rapid change, new technologies and rapid flows of information change the playing field for ordinary citizens every day of the week. (Appadurai, 2006, pp. 176-177)

24 Gibbons (2004, p. 96) uses the term ‘mode 2’ to denote the new research practices generated as a result of the alliances between industry and universities to produce knowledge solutions to be able to compete in a globalised world.
He justifies his unconventional rights-based definition of research first on the view that “full citizenship today requires the capacity to make strategic inquiries – and gain strategic knowledge – on a continuous basis” (Appadurai, 2006, p. 168), and second, on what he regards as the need to force academics to seek distance from the traditional view of research so that we will be able to ‘de-parochialise’ the idea of research itself. He says that research is so vital to our academic common sense that there is not a lot of direct reflection on it. This is directly linked to the growing gap Appadurai (2006) identifies between the globalisation of knowledge and the knowledge of globalisation. This gap is evidenced in the rush for vocational credentials, the struggle to get job-related credentials, the growth in educational mergers, ventures and collaborations world-wide, and the parallel decline in traditional university settings for teaching, research and higher education. [...] At the same time, even for modest jobs, businesses or careers of any kind, young people are faced with questions that transcend their own local experiences and are permeated by global forces and factors: call centers, specialised production techniques, new methods of borrowing and investing money, and new technologies for organising information and expressing opinion, all make it hard for people with strictly local knowledge to improve their circumstances. In a word, while knowledge of the world is increasingly important for everybody (from tourist guides to pharmaceutical researchers), the opportunities for gaining such knowledge are shrinking. (p. 176)

From this perspective, research is not only the production of original ideas and new knowledge as normally defined in academia and other knowledge-based institutions, but also, as Appadurai (2006, p. 176) says, the capacity to systematically increase the horizons of one’s current knowledge, in relation to some task, goal or aspiration.

Finally, Brew (2006) and David et al. (2010) point out the importance of promoting participation in higher education in order to build more inclusive scholarly knowledge building communities. Based on the notion of ‘the scholarship of teaching and learning’, Brew (2006), on the one hand, highlights the importance of collaborative work between teachers and students in higher education to overcome the divide between teaching and research created by the accountability culture. She claims that although many teachers in Western higher education institutions might consider respect for disciplinary knowledge and pursuit of truth as the most important values, they also adhere to the values of participatory democracy, respect for individual human life, for liberty, equality and justice as crucial overarching values. However, she warns that as soon as we examine our teaching and learning practices, conflicts emerge:
A key realisation is that mature young adults, who are well able to take important decisions in their lives, who can participate in democratic processes within their own country, are treated as a subclass of human beings when they enter higher education. They are kept on the fringes of decision making, often having little or no say in how courses are run or how they are going to be assessed. [...] Students most often inhabit separate domains of the university, with limited access to resources, including teachers. They are frequently diminished through the language of faculty academics who may refer to them as ‘kids’ – even when they include mature age adults. (Brew, 2006, p. 117)

She points out that in times of confusion and uncertainty, trust becomes crucial to teaching and learning relationships; students need to trust their teachers and teachers need to trust their students. Brew says that traditionally “pedagogies of mistrust of students have dominated higher education; witnessed in the over-use of summative assessment, the ‘covering’ of course material in lectures, and the pretence of certainty and truth of propositional knowledge in some subjects” (Brew, 2006, p. 119). After recognising that academics are trying to respond not only to the dominant economic model of higher education, but also to the shifts in power and questions of legitimacy of what counts as knowledge in society, she suggests that the key question to be answered is how autonomy and integrity in universities can be maintained. She proposes bringing research and teaching together again in a democratic environment in which students’ participation cannot be underestimated as it has been traditionally. She concludes that a prerequisite to start the changes universities need is, once again, a change in our discourses:

Academic communities share a common purpose, namely, to come to understand an aspect or aspects of the world better. As such, higher education becomes a participatory activity, where people are enabled to develop their identity through their particular contributions to the knowledge-building enterprise. [...] We noted earlier that students become research associates when they engage in summer research programmes, thus removing the connotations of subordination tied to the concept of ‘student’. This suggests that going beyond the divide between teaching and research may require changes to be made to the language we use to describe people and their relationships to each other. Changing the discourse, I suggest, is an important prerequisite to breaking down unhelpful distinctions. (Brew, 2006, pp. 178-179)

Finally, David et al. (2010) refer to some of the dilemmas higher education faces when trying to widen participation. Their main concern is with “widening participation to a diversity of individuals comprising the economically, educationally and socially disadvantaged, in terms of poverty or social class, and also age, ethnicity or race and by gender” (p. 3). Their research examined English policies, processes, pedagogies and practices in the second half of the twentieth
century. They were interested in identifying changes in both the individual identities and institutional circumstances, as well as changing forms of institutional and pedagogic practices within higher education to cope with new and diverse students. They focussed on the meanings of widening access to, or participation in, higher education for these types of students. The central core of their findings was that:

Educational or learning opportunities have been massively increased in the twentieth-first century, and for an increasingly diverse array of students, from diverse families and disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. However, *these policies have not led to fair or equal access to equal types of higher education or outcomes in the labour market*. For example, whilst more women and people from ethnic minorities now participate in some kinds of higher education, their opportunities and successes in the subsequent labour market are not necessarily equal to those of men from white and middle-class families. […] The projects also show that some UK policies have provided the opportunities for the development of potential new institutional practices and pedagogies to engage diverse students for the twentieth-first century. […] This potential could only be achieved however if the policies and practices that limit progressive developments were to be changed. If post-compulsory and higher education in *all* subjects and institutions is to be more equitable, we raise the questions about relevant national policy contexts, and institutional practices, as well as the appropriate pedagogies to ensure social justice across disadvantaged, gendered and ethnic minority students. (David, et al., 2010, pp. 4-5)

From these authors’ point of view, the implementation of policies aimed at widening participation in higher education in the twentieth century, especially that of disadvantaged members of contemporary societies, is still not straightforward. It is being counterbalanced by the slow pace of the corresponding changes that need to take place in social sites different from the university, as well as within the university itself. The participation of these disadvantaged communities in higher education is, in short, constrained by general current social practices outside and inside the university.

All these academic works find in ‘participation’ an essential aspect for establishing among the academic community members the types of relationships that allow them to cope with current challenges in higher education. These works provide more substantial evidence of not only a dominating ideology informing theoretical constructs and research-based accounts of ways of organising academic life in political terms, but also of contesting positions to such an ideology. The latter suggest that revision of the goals being pursued in higher education is a necessary condition to identify alternative ways of approaching political life. However, some critiques of these critical positions have emerged
(Clark, 2001); as well as self-critical accounts about the constraints of their work (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002).

After 20 years of being involved in critical theory and critical research in the field of education, Kincheloe and McLaren (2002) revised their thinking. Trying to answer the question of what critical theory is, they say that several considerations need to be to addressed: “(a) there are many critical theories not just one; (b) the critical tradition is always changing and evolving; and (c) critical theory attempts to avoid too much specificity since there is room for disagreement among critical theorists” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002, p. 89). They claim that laying out a set of fixed characteristics of the critical position is contrary to what these theorists try to avoid: “the production of blueprints of socio-political and epistemological beliefs” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002, p. 89). After presenting these considerations, they provide in the second part of their text what they called ‘one idiosyncratic take’ on the nature of critical theory and critical research at the beginning of this new century.

Taking into account the possible ‘idiosyncratic takes’ that critical theorists are to provide, an alternative approach can be identified from Arendt’s perspective about politics.

One of the problems critical theorists in education are now facing may be a problem already considered by Arendt in the 1950s. She noted then that an assumption prevailed in the academy that “in the crisis of the modern world it is not so much the world as it is man himself who has come unhinged” (Arendt, 2005, p. 104). From her viewpoint, a consequence of this was that “the historical disciplines dealing with the history of the world and of what happens in it were dissolved first into the social sciences and then into psychology” (p. 105). Unfortunately, she says, this brought about the abandonment of the study of a historically formed world ‘in its assumed layers’ “in favour of the study of, first, societal and, second, individual modes of behaviour” (p. 105). Arendt claims that modes of behaviour can be studied effectively only if man is not considered as an active agent, “the author of demonstrable events in the world”, and if the researcher “demotes him to a creature who merely behaves differently in different

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25 Arendt and critical theory will be more developed in the thesis.
situations, on whom [the researcher] can conduct experiments, and who, one may even hope, can ultimately be brought under control” (p. 105).

This can explain, in some way, the discomfort that critical theorists express in debates on the crisis in education. While advocates of critical positions informed by sociological theories question critical positions informed by psychological ones, advocates of the latter do the same thing with the former. Considering Arendt’s problematisation of academia, a ‘non-dichotomised multilayered’ approach to an understanding of the historical formation of the ‘common world’ in higher education is necessary. However, it is important to analyse, first, how ‘politics’ has been approached through the notion of ‘participation’ in the field of (P)AR

1.2.3. Politics and (P)AR: learning how to act together

A review of the most cited reference academic works in the field of (P)AR makes clear that its practitioners and advocates have certainly explored different ways of organising human beings’ acting together, in theoretical and practical terms, no matter the contexts and problems tackled and perspectives adopted. However, politically there are two problematic situations that are closely connected to the themes discussed above.

First, it seems that although the goals pursued through (P)AR concern the political realm, especially on social issues, the discussions and understandings about ‘the political’ are overshadowed, and sometimes misled, by analysis of ‘the social’. This problem is easily evidenced when revisiting the wide range of approaches to the notion of ‘participation’ in (P)AR. The second problematic situation deals with what some critiques of (P)AR have called a lack of internal and/or external coherence in this type of research. Specifically, the community of (P)AR continues to be challenged to know more about (P)AR practitioners’ and advocates’ ways of acting together with the communities to which we address our efforts, and among ourselves.

In tracking how participation has been theorised in the field of (P)AR, I have identified a variety of approaches and proposals. All of them turn out to be
‘readings’ of (P)AR from different theories in the fields of sociology, social psychology and philosophy. I have organised the results of this literature review to highlight particular contributions to an understanding of what could be called ‘the politics of (P)AR’. Below I discuss some of the problematic situations while addressing these contributions in relation to the notion of participation.

One of the most cited academic works in the field of (P)AR was written by Australian academic Robin McTaggart (1997a). This has become a classic since it was one of the first theorisations of (P)AR. McTaggart’s main concern was to define (P)AR – what it is and is not, and in particular what participation means in this type of research. As he noted five years later in a study with Herbert Altrichter, Stephen Kemmis and Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt, a definition of (P)AR enables practitioners and advocates to “move thoughtfully beyond the paradigm dominant in our research field and begin with our own questions” (Altrichter, Kemmis, McTaggart, & Zuber-Skerritt, 2002, p. 126). Certainly, McTaggart (1997a) and other (P)AR practitioners and advocates have helped the (P)AR community to establish some initial borders to start posing its own questions.

Before addressing some of these questions and their possible answers, it is important to highlight McTaggart’s warning about the problematic use of the term ‘participation’. He notes that the term has been used in a confusing way, specifically, “in situations where people with different power, status, influence, and facility with language come together to work on a thematic concern” (McTaggart, 1997a, p. 28). In my view, this problem also emerges as a result of the convergence within the (P)AR field of different worldviews, which include conflicting ideologies and theoretical frameworks.

Based on some standard dictionary definitions of the word ‘participation’ and Rajesh Tandon’s (1988) work on participation in research, McTaggart (1997a) suggests that making a distinction between ‘participation’ and ‘involvement’ can help to solve the confusing use of the term in the field of (P)AR. In doing this, he reflects on participation and its role in the process of interest here: research. From his perspective, participation “means ownership, that is, responsible agency in the production of knowledge and improvement of practice” (pp. 28-29); whereas mere involvement creates an illusion of participation (McTaggart, 1997a, p. 30).
Proposing eight guiding principles for any (P)AR process, McTaggart (1997a) defines (P)AR as “a political process because it involves people making changes together that also will affect others” (p. 36).

Eight years later, McTaggart with his colleague Stephen Kemmis provided an extended definition for (P)AR as “a social process of collaborative learning realised 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 & McTaggart, 2005, p. 563). Although the sense of the political in the first definition is maintained in the second, the language is not. In the second, the social is explicitly foregrounded in direct connection to the notion of the learning process that takes place in (P)AR. This change of emphasis in the new definition could infer that living and acting together needs to be learned and (P)AR serves in this goal too.

A contemporaneous academic work that has been used as a point of reference in the field of (P)AR and from which some important contributions can be drawn in relation to politics, is by another Australian academic, Yoland Wadsworth. She analyses each of the three components of the acronym (P)AR based on her story as a (P)AR practitioner. Besides reflecting on (P)AR as a cognitive process closely connected to processes of constructing knowledge for everyday life (the ‘R’ component of the acronym), she focuses on the action-effects of inquiry (Wadsworth, 1998, p. 5). In her paper, she analyses the participation element mainly as an issue related to the way groups of people can organise the conditions under which they carry out (P)AR (Wadsworth, 1998, p. 7). But for the present study, the most important part of her reflection on politics concerns her understanding of action as a ‘moving into the new’, a ‘creative moment of transformation’, which involves an “imaginative leap from a world of ‘as it is’ to a glimpse of a world ‘as it could be’” (Wadsworth, 1998, p. 6). She says,

Not only is research itself an action in and on existing situations, but it also always has consequences. Things inevitably change as a result of research –[...] Whether people then choose to continue as before or to change course means that the new situation will either be different from that before, or it will be the same. To ‘not change’ is nevertheless action: some might call it inaction! (Wadsworth, 1998, p. 6)
Wadsworth’s reflections on action as linked to people’s creative moments are subsumed by her insights into participation in terms of the roles to be performed by participants in (P)AR in order to achieve ‘creative change’ (Wadsworth, 1998, pp. 8-12). Again refracting through the political lens used for the present study, we see that Wadsworth’s reflections on the political dimension of action are overshadowed by her consideration of its social dimension. This can be the result of what Susan Noffke (2009) identifies as the power relations existing in social research (p. 7). In relation to these power relations in the sciences, Fals-Borda (2006b) rejects the academic tradition of using research mainly for career advancement. He says that (P)AR practitioners and advocates have to try “to theorize and obtain knowledge enriched through direct involvement, intervention or insertion in processes of social action” (p. 30). This entails not only ethical but also epistemological considerations.

Moving to more recent works that present reflections on participation in relation to politics, two types of contributions are relevant for the research proposed here. These are not the only academic works of this kind, but they could be considered as essential for reflections on: (1) (P)AR and the public sphere (Kemmis, 2006, 2007, 2008; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005); and (2) (P)AR and epistemology (Elliott, 2005, 2007, 2009; Fals-Borda, 2006a, 2006b; Fals-Borda & Mora-Osejo, 2003; Fals-Borda & Ordonez, 2007; Kindon, et al., 2007; Noffke, 2009; Reason & Bradbury, 2006; Wadsworth, 1998).

Regarding (P)AR and the public sphere, Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) from a critical perspective define (P)AR as a social – and educational – process insofar as it is directed towards studying, reframing and reconstructing social practices (p. 563). In their view, (P)AR is participatory, practical and collaborative, emancipatory, critical, reflexive, and transformative. Based on German social theorist Jürgen Habermas’s theories, Kemmis and McTaggart (2005, p. 578) claim that (P)AR opens communicative space between participants, projecting communicative action into both the field of action and the making of history. This type of research generates “not only a collaborative sense of agency but also a collaborative sense of legitimacy of the decisions people make, and the actions they take, together” (p. 578). The relationships of participation are therefore a central defining feature of (P)AR insofar as it
issues an invitation to previously or naturally uninvolved people, as well as a self-constituted action research group, to participate in a common process of communicative action for transformation. Not all will accept the invitation, but it is incumbent on those who do participate to take into account those others’ understandings, perspectives, and interests—even if the decision is to oppose them in the service of a broader public interest (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 579).

Their advocacy of a critical (P)AR is intended not only as an ‘antidote’ to avoid using this type of research to justify social programs, policies, and practices that maintain social inequalities. It is also to insist that “people can still have hope of knowing what they are doing and doing what they think is right and, more particularly, doing less of what they think will have untoward consequences for themselves and others” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 599). That is why, from this critical stance, (P)AR must be capable of telling ‘unwelcome truths’ (Kemmis, 2006). In Kemmis’s (2008) words, praxis or “this right conduct in response to a particular situation at a particular time, informed by the agent’s knowledge and by recourse to relevant theory and traditions” (pp. 131-132) leads participants to use a particular form of reason whenever they have to act in a complex situation (practical reason).

In relation to epistemology in (P)AR and its connection to politics, this has been another productive area in the field. Returning to Wadsworth’s (1998) thoughts, she links ‘the moving to the new’ of action with an exercise of imagination:

Where existing situations benefit or promote some but disadvantage or subordinate others, then creative change may be construed as ‘political’. As well, participatory action research does not conceptualise this as the development of predictive cause–effect theory (‘if this, then that’). Instead, as in the slogan: ‘the future is made, not predicted’, it is more like ‘what if we…, then maybe’. Possibility theory rather than predictive theory. That is, human actors are both wilful and capable of thwarting research prediction, and wilful and capable of selecting and implementing theories or probabilities they want to see manifested! Conventional science sees this as undesirable ‘contamination’ and ‘bias’. Participatory action research sees this as a goal, and the stuff of which ‘real life’ is made or enacted. (Wadsworth, 1998, p. 6)

From this perspective, one of the presuppositions about the type of knowledge created through (P)AR concerns an exercise of imagination so that possible worlds in the social realm can be envisaged through this type of research. This is something on which (P)AR practitioners and advocates agree. In fact, for Arendt (1978), imagination “prepares itself to ‘go further’ toward the understanding of things that are always absent, that cannot be remembered because they were never present to sense experience” (p. 77).
These reflections on the role of imagination in the creation of knowledge as a crucial aspect in the politics of (P)AR is closely connected to what has been addressed by Colombians Orlando Fals-Borda and Luis E. Mora-Osejo (2003). They claim knowledge that ‘grows from within’ each context (endogenous knowledge) opens the way for useful discoveries and initiatives. For a Southern reading of this principle, they point out:

We as insiders to the tropics are in a privileged position to produce, analyze and systematize this knowledge with the help and contribution of autochthonous peoples. [...] We know that environmental factors in the tropics are complex and clearly distinct from those of other world zones [...] extraneous and/or incompatible formulae are precisely the ones that in our zones have had negative environmental impact (Fals-Borda & Mora-Osejo, 2003, pp. 33-34).

However, Fals-Borda and Mora-Osejo emphasise that working to create knowledge that ‘grows from within’ must not be done while neglecting the knowledge coming from outside. Recognition of the plurality of knowledges in (P)AR needs to be understood not only as a convergence between popular thought and academic science (Fals-Borda, 2006b, p. 29), but also as an encounter between knowledge coming from the North and from the South (Fals-Borda, 2006a). From this perspective, it seems that participation is essential to (P)AR insofar as it allows the appearance of a plurality of knowledges among equals.

This invitation to recognise the plurality of knowledges in (P)AR has also been made by practitioners such as Kindon et al. (2007). They advocate convergence among disciplines as well as among institutions. This represents a major epistemological challenge to mainstream research traditions in the social and environmental sciences insofar as “the latter assume knowledge to reside in the formal institutions of academia and policy” (Kindon, et al., 2007, p. 9). To cope with this challenge, they suggest a participation continuum for (P)AR: from passive participation to self-mobilisation (Kindon, et al., 2007, p. 16).

As mentioned above, (P)AR is also challenged by mainstream ways to generate knowledge in the scientific world. On this, Fals-Borda (2007) emphasises that the most important aspect in (P)AR is empathy. As he expressed in his typical rational and emotional terms, “it seemed counterproductive for our work to regard the researcher and the researched, the ‘experts’ and the ‘clients’ or ‘targets’ as two
discrete, discordant or antagonistic poles. Rather, we had to consider them both as real ‘thinking–feeling persons’ (sentipensantes) whose diverse views on the shared life experience should be taken jointly into account” (Fals-Borda, 2006b, p. 30). This perspective cannot identify higher or lower roles in (P)AR because, through participation, what was considered ‘the object of study’ is now recognised as ‘the subject’, which brings about a relationship among equals (Fals-Borda & Ordonez, 2007, p. 11). Consequently, Fals-Borda (2006b) claims, (P)AR is not just a quest for knowledge. Values accompanying the dominant research paradigm, such as consistency, simplicity, scope, certitude, and productivity need to be together in (P)AR, along with values like altruism, sincerity of intent, trust, autonomy, and social responsibility (Fals-Borda, 2006b, p. 32).

Noffke (2009, p. 7), based on Sandra Harding’s (1987) depiction of epistemology, says that the varied forms of (P)AR address in quite distinctive ways questions of ‘who is the knower’, ‘what kind of things can be known’ and ‘what strategies count as means to be legitimated as knowledge’. Noffke’s (2009) exploration of these considerations has led her to identify three emphases in (P)AR practices that she believes correspond to three distinct but interconnected dimensions of (P)AR: the personal, the professional, and the political. She explains:

My primary concern in using the ‘dimensions’ construct was to find a way to explore the multiple layers of assumptions, purposes, and practices without creating an implicitly hierarchical set of categories which could be used to prioritize or even dismiss some forms of action research in comparison to others. Instead, I sought a way to see the complexities and interconnectedness across the dimensions. While all forms of action research (and indeed all research) embody the political, I felt that what was needed was a way to see the complexities of work in action research, rather than to find the form that is ‘just right’. (Noffke, 2009, p. 8)

Her interest in making distinctions between these layered dimensions of (P)AR is a useful resource to understand (P)AR practices, for example, in relation to ‘who is the knower’ (i.e., a person) and ‘what is to be known’ (i.e., a profession), among other possible interpretations. Although Noffke (2009) aligns her way of thinking to Appadurai’s (2006) understanding of research as connected to the human being’s capacity to aspire, and it illustrates a variety of manifestations of the political dimension of (P)AR, she provides very few clarifying elements to make a distinction between the political and the social in (P)AR.
As to ‘what strategies count as means to be legitimated as knowledge’, Noffke (2009) states that, no matter the variety of methods and methodologies used by (P)AR practitioners, all of the latter share an epistemology that sees knowledge as essentially connected to practice (p. 21). John Elliott (2009) agrees on this latter point, but has a different perspective on methods and methodologies. Addressing the relationship between knowledge of universals and knowledge of particulars in (P)AR, Elliott (2009) offers the critique that social sciences have tended to assume that these knowledges are discrete forms of knowledge with their own distinctive methods of inquiry. He expresses his disappointment about the way the methodological discourse of the social sciences has distorted (P)AR practical philosophy; this has generated, in turn, a battle between the qualitative and the quantitative paradigms (p. 37). Aligned with Rorty’s (1999) thought, Elliott (2009) states that all science is a form of practical reasoning and that this is what constitutes the democratic process of inquiry that characterises (P)AR. Elliott (2005, 2007, 2009) and Kemmis (Carr & Kemmis, 2009; Kemmis, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005), through different perspectives and routes, argue for the creation of spaces for inquirers to engage in conversation with each other, the material condition for the community of (P)AR to generate knowledge.

Finally, and on the relationship between knowledge and action, Elliott (2009) says that “our capacity to recognise the unique and novel features of a case that are nevertheless ethically significant depends on their use. Becoming capable of recognising the unanticipated when it occurs depends on the anticipations provided by universal rules of thumb, in Nussbaum’s words, or action hypothesis” (p. 34). He also emphasises that future action cannot be derived merely from a transformed consciousness (Elliott, 2005, p. 361). The space for exercising democratically informed agency comes from a political struggle to create material conditions for a free, open, and democratically constructed practical discourse to emerge as context for professional action (Elliott, 2005, p. 363). Referring to the field of education, he says he is convinced “that ‘critical self-reflection’ is an integral feature of action research, conceived as a systematic organisation of action that is aimed at the realisation of an educationally worthwhile and socially just learning process for students” (Elliott, 2005, p. 365). Like Fals-Borda and Ordoñez (2007), Elliott (2005) argues that (P)AR implies no specific methods of
inquiry since methods are context bound and will be operationally shaped in light of the problems that are presented in the context (p. 370).

One last contribution to an understanding of participation in (P)AR as related to the political realm is presented by Reason and Bradbury (2006). They define action research as “a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview which we believe is emerging at this historical moment” (p. 1). This is perhaps the definition that gives participation a central role in (P)AR. Reason and Bradbury (2006) find in the metaphor of participation a basis for a more creative and constructive worldview:

The emergent worldview has been described as systemic, holistic, relational, feminine, experiential, but its defining characteristic is that is participatory: our world does not consist of separate things but of relationships which we co-author. We participate in our world, so that the ‘reality’ we experience is a co-creation that involves the primal givenness of the cosmos and human feeling and construing. The participatory metaphor is particularly apt for action research, because as we participate in creating our world we are already embodied and breathing beings who are necessarily acting – and this draws us to consider how to judge the quality of our acting. (Reason & Bradbury, 2006, p. 7)

With this understanding of (P)AR, Reason and Bradbury (2006) sketch the characteristics of this participatory worldview as follows:

… the participatory nature of the given cosmos whose form is relational and ecological. Since we are part of the whole, we are already engaged in practical being and acting (Skolimowski, 1994). Thus our science is necessarily an action science, which draws on extended epistemologies and continually inquires into the meaning and purpose of our practice. (Reason & Bradbury, 2006, p. 7)

For these authors, the political imperative is not only that researchers consider their subjects in a different way or that they act ethically; it is also about the democratic foundations of inquiry and of society (Reason & Bradbury, 2006, p. 10). They conceive of (P)AR as an educative endeavour in so far as it is necessary for humans “to learn more about how to exercise power and position legitimately in the service of participative relationships, to find ways in which politicians, professionals, managers can exercise power in transforming ways, power with others rather than power over others” (p. 10). In similar spirit, Reason and Bradbury (2006) advocate that due to the condition of our times, human inquiry should not so much search for truth but seek to heal, especially “to heal the alienation, the split that characterizes modern experience” (p. 11).
New elements emerge from this review of (P)AR perspectives on participation. First is a wider perspective of ‘the whole’, in which human beings partake or participate. Second, and aligned with previous reflections, (P)AR is seen as a site for learning, but here to learn how to exercise power. Third is the need to understand (P)AR as healing. Reason and Bradbury’s (2006) ecological understanding about (P)AR inspires questions about the relationships between (P)AR practices and other types of social and political practices.

This account of what could be called ‘the politics of contemporary (P)AR’ leads us to conclude that in theory (P)AR is clearly defined in terms of its practitioners’ political commitment to the communities they work with and the broader society to which they belong. Yet the kinds of political lives that (P)AR practitioners promote are not sufficiently clear to enable firm understanding of this important – indeed, vital – dimension of (P)AR practice. Our understanding becomes even fuzzier if we consider the blurred relationship between ‘the social’ and ‘the political’ in (P)AR. As shown through my discussion, it appears that nowadays much more has been said about ‘the social’ than about ‘the political’ in (P)AR. This could be due to the stronger and more evident interest in understanding current social issues through theories of this kind, as well as to the constraints imposed upon (P)AR by the social realm itself.

Special attention to the social realm is closely connected to the second problematic situation in the field of (P)AR that I identify in this literature review. Some critiques are concerned at a lack of coherence between (P)AR discourse and practice and aspects of this incoherence are explicitly political. While (P)AR discourse has been mainly linked to fostering democratic citizenship, increasingly (P)AR has been used to achieve greater effectiveness in implementing government education policies that enhance technocratic bureaucracies (Adelman, 1997; Elliott, 2005; Groundwater-Smith, 2005; Grundy, 2007; Kemmis, 2006). Yet the ineluctable political consequences for higher education from this use of (P)AR to implement national policy are yet to reach our critical gaze. My final point in this review of the (P)AR literature concerns tensions around the roles of theory and practice in (P)AR, on which (Papastephanou, 2006) has advocated an intervention of philosophy to strengthen (P)AR’s critical power. In this light cast
by the (P)AR literatures, my guiding question about the contribution of (P)AR practices to the political realm in higher education remains.

1.3. Arendt, education and (P)AR

This thesis explores how Hannah Arendt’s political theory and central concept of natality can usefully underpin the theoretical and practical foundations of (P)AR by enabling clearer understanding of the political realm in the field of (P)AR, especially in higher education. As Gordon (2001) claims, Arendt’s political theory provides a unique perspective to enhance renewal in the field of education. Arendt’s potential contribution concerns not only better understanding of contemporary societies but also identification of new routes to approach our present challenge to renew our political commitment as educators and as (P)AR practitioners. Her contributions are clearly identified in works that reflect on, for example: the place of education within our ‘consumer’ society societies (Norris, 2006); the conflicts emerging in the encounter between humanistic beliefs and managerialism in schools (Hurlock, et al., 2008); the feelings of belatedness of newcomers entering the education profession (Phelan, et al., 2006); the importance of education as a site to rediscover the ‘lost treasure’ of political action (Levinson, 2001) and of schools as public spaces (Wilson, 2005); the potential of theory as performative pedagogy (Aaron Schutz, 2001); the discourse of the learning society (Masschelein, 2001); the normative dimension of scientific knowledge (Masschelein, 2000); the ethical terms of human rights education (Todd, 2007); the social in schools (Boyles, 2005); and education and courage for political action (Levinson, 2002). In all of these academic works, Arendt’s notion of natality is recognised as one of crucial relevance in the renewal of our common world.

Of special interest for this thesis are Coulter’s (2002) reflections about what he calls ‘Arendtian educational action research’. Based on Arendt’s distinction between labour, work and action, Coulter argues that “[e]ach of Arendt’s forms of human action [human activities] aims at different purposes and involves different relationships with research” (p. 203).\(^\text{26}\) Referring to the many types of ‘doings’

\(^\text{26}\) Coulter (2002) refers to Arendt’s three human activities as “three forms of human action” (p. 190).
that we do in teaching, Coulter proceeds to illustrate how teaching practices can be understood differently depending on the central human activity (or form of human action, in Coulter’s terms) informing them. Consequently, he talks about the coexistence of different types of educational action research, namely, educational ‘labour’ research, educational ‘work’ research and proper educational ‘action’ research. Coulter uses examples from several journal articles to illustrate them.

Coulter (2002) also highlights that although all Arendt’s work has relevance for education, “her concern for creating the possibility for democratic praxis in a hostile world is especially valuable for those interested in democratic education” (p. 193). He argues “Arendtian educational action research […] attempts to use research to understand how human freedom might be exercised in dialogue with others” (p. 189). Among several claims about Arendt’s works, Coulter says it “is particularly relevant for understanding the relationship between practice and reflection on practice, that is action and research” (p. 193). After highlighting Arendt’s conception of freedom and its linking to the human conditions of natality and plurality, Coulter states that schooling is a product of a Western tradition that tends to destroy such conditions (p. 200). He concludes that:

Arendtian action research […] aims at better understanding experience, creating consistency (however, limited) generating knowledge and understanding (which will always be in some ways inadequate). […] Arendt reminds us, however, of the limitations of research, of human knowledge and theory which can never replace being in the world with others, listening to them, engaging with them and making lives together by exercising: freedom. (Coulter, 2002, p. 203)

My study is aligned with Coulter (2002) on both the relevance of Arendt’s political theory in contemporary education and his invitation to deepen the notion of ‘action’ in (P)AR. But other claims I present here differ from Coulter’s work in several ways. First, the focus of this thesis is ‘action’ as linked to the human condition of natality; I do not develop in depth Arendt’s other two human activities, namely, labour and work. Second, although I consider Arendt’s ideas about knowledge and understanding in relation to ‘research’ as does Coulter, my interpretation of Arendt’s distinction between search for knowledge and search for understanding in (P)AR differs from Coulter’s interpretation. I will present my understanding of this distinction in Chapter 9.
Finally, in the field of (P)AR in higher education, Arendt’s work has started to contribute to the exploration of new ways of approaching university life. Grundy (2007) refers to Arendt’s work to highlight the importance of not seeing as problematic the uncertainties linked to action in universities. Contrary to the interest of the audit culture in higher education to eliminate uncertainties as they put pre-determined outcomes at risk, Grundy claims that the uncertainties of human action bring the communicative space into life in universities. Walker (2002), on the other hand, invites us to explore Arendt’s pedagogy in universities in practical terms. She says that Arendt’s pedagogy “requires that universities serve the public good through critical learning and notions of democratic freedom rather than serve the needs of a corporate consumerist future” (p. 50). (P)AR is put forward as helping to reform the audit culture in Grundy’s argument, and to enhance reflexive work in teaching in higher education in Walker’s.

To ‘stop and think’ about what I have been doing as a (P)AR practitioner in higher education during the last 20 years not only implies a deep understanding of what has been published about ‘the political’ of (P)AR in higher education. It also entails a deep reflection upon my lived experience, which has been inextricably linked to other (P)AR participants’ words and actions. To answer the research questions posed in this chapter, I follow Arendt’s phenomenological approach to storytelling, which allows me to explore through my lived experience as a lead researcher, the meaning as well as the knowledge about ‘the political’ in higher education as created through (P)AR.
Chapter 2 Approach: studying new beginnings in higher education created through (P)AR

2.1. Natality

Hannah Arendt’s contributions to the field of political philosophy unfortunately have been overshadowed by two aspects of her personal life. First, she was a ‘woman’ thinking, speaking and acting in a field historically dominated by ‘men’, that is, philosophy. Arendt claimed that philosophy did not have to remain a masculine occupation, but she did not consider herself a philosopher due to what she called ‘a vital tension between philosophy and politics’:

The expression ‘political philosophy’, which I avoid, is extremely burdened by tradition. When I talk about these things, academically and non-academically, I always mention that there is a vital tension between philosophy and politics. That is, between man as a thinking being and man as an acting being, there is a tension that does not exist in natural philosophy, for example. Like everyone else, the philosopher can be objective with regard to nature, and when he says what he thinks about it he speaks in the name of all mankind. But he cannot be objective or neutral with regards to politics. Not since Plato! (Arendt, 2003, p. 4)

Based on her understanding of this tension between political philosophy and politics, Arendt expressed her preference not to belong to the circle of philosophers, and rather to be called a ‘political theorist’ (Arendt, 2003, pp. 3-4). Closely connected to this is the second aspect of her personal life that has been a drawback for wider acknowledgement of her work: she had a sentimental relationship with one of the most acknowledged philosophers of the twentieth century, German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). He was her PhD supervisor until personal experiences during the Second World War led Arendt to distance herself and her work from Heidegger’s position on politics. Today Arendt is acknowledged in her own right in the field of political philosophy, but it is important to identify some of the coincidences and differences between her thought and Heidegger’s.

Jones (1998) sees enormous differences between their ways of thinking:

[T]o his ‘being-onto-death’ she answers with a philosophy of natality or birth; to his solipsistic ‘mineness’ she counters with a philosophy of plurality; to his critique of world ‘fallenness’ to the ‘they’ she replies with ‘amor mundi’; Heidegger’s ‘clearing’ [Lichtung], which occurs far from the maddening crowd, Arendt locates precisely in that ‘public’ space he abhors as the realm of the ‘They’. Moreover, Arendt’s first postwar publication to
However, their thoughts were also aligned in some ways. Jones (1998) points out, for example, that Heidegger and Arendt depended a great deal on defining and distinguishing concepts, often Greek ones, based on an etymological analysis, though with different resulting elaborations. This would be especially relevant for their understanding of a common evocation of the Greek *polis*; while Heidegger’s project on this matter was philosophical, Arendt’s was eminently political (pp. 176-177). Arendt could not agree on a concept of ‘historicity’ as understood by Heidegger. The *polis* in Heidegger’s *Being and Time* is conceived as “the historical place, the there in which, out of which, and for which history happens” (Jones, 1998, p. 180). In Heidegger’s words, the *polis*:

> is political, i.e. at the site of history, provided there be (for example) poets alone, but then really poets, priests alone, but then really priests, rulers alone, but then really rulers. Be, but this means: as violent men to use power, to become pre-eminent in historical being as creators … they themselves as creators must first create all this (IM 152-3). (Jones, 1998, p. 180)

Jones (1998) observes that against the chaos, Heidegger thought that the creators (poets and thinkers such as Holderlin and himself, as well as statesmen like Hitler) could show, appear and enter into the light, bringing about with each the glory, *doxa*. Thus, from Heidegger’s perspective, the ‘polis’ is not democratic; this concept of historicity linked to the notion of polis was that which led Heidegger to remain politically committed to the Nazi regime (Jones, 1998, p. 180). This struggle of the creators in the public arena is what embodies Heidegger’s definition of truth as unconcealment.

Whereas Arendt praises Heidegger’s ‘connectedness of thought and event’, she condemns the genuine political questions missing in his thought: “What is politics? Who is man as a political being? What is freedom?” (Jones, 1998, p. 180). However, Jones draws from Benhabib’s work on Arendt’s thought, to highlight that Heidegger’s concept of ‘being-in-the-world’ was an indispensable foundation for Arendt’s concept of plurality as ‘being-with-others’ (Jones, 1998, p. 183). Nevertheless, Jones sees that Arendt echoes Heidegger’s definition of Greek ‘*doxa*’ as meaning ‘splendour or fame’ but also ‘opinion’. Arendt’s
interpretation of the glory of the new beginnings brought about through speech and action would be the core of her book, *The Human Condition*.

### 2.1.1. The origins of the notion of Natality in Arendt’s work

Arendt first coined the term *Natality* in her doctoral dissertation on the concept of love in Saint Augustine, supervised by existential philosopher Karl Jaspers. Vecchiarelli and Stark (1995), identifying some of the key terms in Arendt’s dissertation, point to *natality* jointly with caritas, memory, foundations, free will, narrative, society and the world. They say that *Love and Saint Augustine* provides a provocative glimpse into the implied “context for Arendt’s phenomenology, especially, in relation to her reflections on the social source and moral ground for action in the public realm” (p. 116). Arendt’s interest in Christian theology reached back to her years at the University of Berlin, where she studied Greek and Latin and took classes on Christian existentialism with Romano Guardini. He led Arendt to Kierkegaard’s works, and with him, to her decision to enter the University to take a major in theology. By the age of 16, she had already read Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, and by 22, Karl Jaspers’s *Psychology of World Views*.

Arendt knew about Heidegger’s ‘fame’ for the first time in his lectures in Freiburg in 1919. Then, Husserl and Jaspers appeared in her intellectual life. Specifically, rebellion by Heidegger and Jaspers against the ‘schools’, ‘circles’, ‘worldviews’ and their ‘partisans’ invited her to begin a journey to bridge the gap of the broken tradition; in Heidegger’s perspective, the dark times had set in. Arendt’s rediscovery of Saint Augustine was part of this journey, although her path led her well beyond, to the issue of the relationship between thought and social life (Vecchiarelli & Stark, 1995, pp. 116-117). As for Husserl’s influence on Arendt, I discuss this later in my study.

Unfortunately, although Arendt was clear in her dissertation that theology was not the point of the exercise, her dissertation was marginalised by mainstream philosophy, which linked it mainly to Christian philosophy (p. 128). According to Vecchiarelli and Stark (1995), Arendt did not think of Augustine as a consistent or
dogmatic theologian. What interested her was his idea of *caritas* and its relevance to the modern world of public politics. They cite the central argument of Arendt’s dissertation:

> But this charity, though its worldlessness clearly corresponds to the general human experience of love, is at the same time clearly distinguished from it being something which, like the world, is between men. “Even robbers have between them (inner se) what they call charity” (Arendt 1958 a, 53) (Vecchiarelli & Stark, 1995, p. 129)

Vecchiarelli and Stark (1995, pp. 129-130) hold that Arendt’s dissertation is present throughout *The Human Condition* as a subtext for her phenomenology of public, private and social life. They argue that *caritas* functions under these particular Christian philosophical circumstances as the moral equivalent in civil society of *natality* in politics.

For these two authors, the themes and modes of discourse that Arendt introduces in her dissertation become major ‘thought trains’ in her work, and lead her beyond Heidegger’s phenomenology. These ‘thought trains’, with Augustine’s *caritas* as her primary conceptual ‘vehicle’, enable Arendt “to redefine Being as transcendent Creator and at the same time to engage Being directly in the human condition, thereby overcoming a fundamental tension in Heidegger’s work” (Vecchiarelli & Stark, 1995, p. 142). *Natality* appears as central not only to Arendt’s appropriation of Augustine but also to her understanding of the public realm: “Augustine’s emphasis on ‘entering the world through birth’ as the model of human creativity and the precondition for freedom enables Arendt to challenge Heidegger’s notion of ‘death or mortality’ as the spring of action” (Vecchiarelli & Stark, 1995, p. 146)

For Vecchiarelli and Stark (1995, p. 147), in *The Human Condition* the ‘Augustinian chord of natality’ strikes from the very beginning of the chapter on Action, “without freedom and its ground in natality, there is no human action in the world”. Subsequently the political realm disappears entirely, until Arendt’s final work on Willing, published after her death in *The Life of the Mind*. For the last time, in her reflections on Willing, Arendt cites Augustine’s God’s creation of man as the introduction of new beginnings in the world: “This very capacity [the will] for beginning is rooted in *natality*, and by no means in creativity, not in a gift but in a fact that human beings, new men, again and again appear in the world by
virtue of birth” (Vecchiarelli & Stark, 1995, p. 147). Arendt would work on what she thought was an opacity of Augustine’s reference of will by pointing out the existence of a certain type of enlightenment (judgement), which would be the third notion of the trilogy in The Life of the Mind (thinking, willing and judging27).

2.1.2. Natality and action

In her search to discern the conditions of possibility for ‘the political’ to happen, Arendt (1998) established a series of distinctions in relation to human activities. The result of this phenomenological exercise was one of her major works: The Human Condition, first published in 1958. In this book she claims three fundamental activities are basic for us to live in this world: labour, work and action. As I have noted above, while labour refers to all those activities we usually need to do since we are beings biologically determined, work refers to the activities we do to transcend such a biological temporality. From her perspective, whereas eating and sleeping, for instance, are activities we need to do cyclically in order to survive as biological organisms (labour), the making of objects such as spoons and blankets is related to work. The third type of activity is action, that is, all of what we do in relation to the other human beings with whom we inhabit the world, without the intermediary of things or matter. The human conditions underlying labour and work, life itself and worldliness, respectively, are different from the human condition that corresponds to action, that is, plurality. It is the condition by which we human beings are the same and distinct at the same time. These fundamental human activities are closely connected to the most existential conditions of all: birth and death, natality and mortality (Arendt, 1998, pp. 7-8).

27 Arendt (2005) clarified her understanding of the word ‘judgement’. First, she says, “judgement means organizing and subsuming the individual and particular under the general and universal, thereby making an orderly assessment by applying standards by which the concrete is identified, and according to which decisions are then made. […] Judgement can, however, mean something totally different, and indeed it always does when we are confronted with something which we have never seen before and for which there are no standards at our disposal. This judgement that knows no standards can appeal to nothing but the evidence of what is being judged, and its sole prerequisite is the faculty of judgement, which has far more to do with man’s ability to make distinctions than with his ability to organize and subsume”. (p. 102)
Arendt (1998) observes that the human condition corresponding to human actions, the human condition of plurality, has the twofold character of equality and distinction, which she describes as follows:

If men were not equal, they could neither understand each other and those who came before them nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will come after them. If men were not distinct, each human being distinguished from any other who is, was, or will ever be, they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood. Signs and sounds to communicate immediate, identical needs and wants would be enough. (Arendt, 1998, pp. 175-176)

Arendt claims this unique distinctness is revealed through speech and action. From her perspective, a life without speech and action is literally dead to the world since it is not longer lived among human beings (Arendt, 1998, p. 176). In her words,

The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is only possible because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world (Arendt, 1998, p. 178).

She says that action and speech contain the answer to the main question asked to every newcomer ‘Who are you?’. It is in these words and deeds that human beings disclose who they are. Without this disclosure of the agent in their act, action loses its specific character and becomes one form of achievement among others, and speech becomes ‘mere talk’ (Arendt, 1998, p. 180).

Arendt argues that

action and speech go on between men, as they are directed toward them, and they retain their agent-revealing capacity even if their content is exclusively ‘objective’, concerned with the matters of the world of things in which men move, which physically lies between them and out of which arise their specific, objective, worldly interests. These interests constitute, in the word’s most literal significance, something which inter-est, which lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together. Most action and speech is concerned with this in-between, which varies with each group of people, so that most words and deeds are about some worldly objective reality in addition to being a disclosure of the acting and speaking agent. (Arendt, 1998, p. 182)

This is why Arendt (1998, pp. 183-186) states that the realm of human affairs consists of the web of relationships that exists wherever human beings live together. Every disclosure of the ‘who’ through speech falls into an already existing web where the immediate consequences can be felt, she says. It is in this already existing web with its innumerable conflicting wills and intentions that action is real, although it almost never achieves its purpose. However, it is also
due to this web that every action produces stories with or without intention; these stories are then recorded in documents and monuments, which allow the stories to be told and retold. These stories tell us more about the heroes of these stories, says Arendt. “But the reason why each human life tells its story and why history ultimately becomes the storybook of mankind, with many actors and speakers and yet without any tangible authors, is that both are the outcome of action” (Arendt, 1998, p. 184).

From Arendt’s perspective, action is never possible in isolation since it is, as speech, always surrounded by and in constant contact with the web of the acts and words of other people:

Because the actor always moves among and in relation to other acting beings, he is never merely a ‘doer’ but always and at the same time a sufferer. To do and to suffer are like opposite sides of the same coin, and the story that an act starts is composed of its consequent deeds and sufferings. These consequences are boundless, because action, though it may proceed from nowhere, so to speak, acts into a medium where every reaction becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of new processes. (Arendt, 1998, p. 190)

It is this boundlessness of action, and not the will to power, that has a tremendous capacity to establish relationships in the political realm. (Arendt, 1998, p. 191) The will to power is among the vices of the weak, rather than a characteristic of the strong28, says Arendt (p. 203).

In short, Arendt states:

[w]ithout action to bring into the play of the world the new beginning of which each man is capable by virtue of being born, ‘there is no new thing under the sun’; without speech to materialize and memorialize, however tentatively, the ‘new things’ that appear and shine forth, ‘there is no remembrance’; without the enduring permanence of a human artifact, there cannot ‘be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after’. And without power, the space of appearance brought forth through action and speech in public will fade away as rapidly as the living deed and the living word. (Arendt, 1998, p. 204)

Arendt says that the reason why we are never able to foretell with certainty the outcome and end of any action is simply that action has no end. The process of a single action can endure throughout time “until mankind itself has come to an

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28 Strength, for Arendt, “unequivocally designates something in the singular, an individual entity; it is the property inherent in an object or person and belongs to its character, which may prove itself in relation to other things or persons, but is essentially independent of them” (Arendt, 1970, p. 44).
end” (Arendt, 1998, p. 233). Thus, from Arendt’s perspective, any philosophical or empirical work aimed at giving an account of ‘the new beginnings’ brought about by actions and words relies on the world of appearances.

2.1.3. Natality and Arendt’s phenomenological approach

Arendt’s understanding of the world of appearances was informed especially by the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), whose approach is based on the assumption that there is a tension between thought and life: while thought is focused on the objects of the spatiotemporal world, life pertains to duration (Schutz, 1967). For Husserl, this tension is of the essence of the ‘meaningfulness’ of experience, Schutz points out, insofar as it is not the experience that has meaning but it is the meaning of the experience which is grasped reflectively (p. 69). “The structure of our experience will vary according to whether we surrender ourselves to the flow of duration or stop to reflect upon it, trying to classify it into spatiotemporal concepts” (p. 45).

Husserl, as cited in Schutz (1967), says:

Either we consider the content of the flux with its flux-form – we consider then the series of primal lived experience, which is a series of intentional lived experiences, consciousness of …; or we direct our regard to intentional unities, to that of which we are intentionally conscious as homogenous in the streaming of the flux. In this case there is present to us an Objectivity in Objective time, the authentic temporal field as opposed to the temporal field of the stream of lived experience. (Schutz, 1967, p. 46)

Schutz states that when we are embedded in our streams of consciousness, we do not find any clearly differentiated experiences at all. For the concept of ‘lived experienced’ to be understood, Schutz cites Husserl again:

Even an experience is not, and never is, perceived in its completeness, it cannot be grasped adequately in its full unity. It is essentially something that flows, and starting from the present moment we can swim after it, our gaze reflectively turned towards it, whilst the stretches we leave in our wake are lost to perception. Only in the form of retention or in the form of retrospective [recollection] have we any consciousness of what has immediately flowed past us. […] We must, therefore, distinguish between the pre-empirical being of the lived experiences, their being prior to the reflective glance to attention directed toward them, and their being as phenomena. Through the attending directed glance of attention and comprehension, the lived experience acquires a new mode of being. It comes to be ‘differentiated’, ‘thrown into relief’, and this act of differentiation is nothing other than the act of comprehension, and the differentiation nothing other than being comprehended,
being the object of the direct glance of attention. (Husserl, *Zeitbewusstein*, p. 469) (Schutz, 1967, p.50)

Drawing from Husserl’s thoughts, Schutz (1967) began an exploration of a phenomenology of the social world. His starting point was Husserl’s characterisation of ‘action’: “In every action we know the goal in advance in the form of an anticipation that is ‘empty’, in the sense of vague, and lacking its proper ‘filling-in’, which will come with fulfilment. Nevertheless we strive toward such a goal and seek by our action to bring it step by step to concrete realization” (Husserl, *Logik*, pp. 149 f. quoted in Schutz, 1967, p. 58). Aligned with Husserl’s way of thinking, Schutz suggests that the analysis of action shows it is always carried out based on a plan ‘more or less implicitly preconceived’. He states that the goal of an action is the act that is brought into being by the former action (p. 60). This leads Schutz to observe that what differentiates action from behaviour is that action is the execution of a projected act (p. 61). Schutz (1967) adheres to Heidegger’s claim that an action always has the nature of a project (p. 59). The main problem in giving an account of action in the field of interpretive sociology is, for Schutz, “the distinction between subjective and objective likelihood or probability, between interpretive adequacy on the causal level and interpretive adequacy on the level of meaning” (p. 65). However, Schutz’s concern is based on a metaphysical fallacy, according to Arendt (1978).

Arendt (1978) says that traditional philosophy “has transformed the base from which something rises into the cause that produces it and has then assigned to this producing agent a higher rank of reality than is given to what merely meets the eye” (Arendt, 1978, p. 25). From Arendt’s point of view, researchers are not dealing with an arbitrary error, as stated by Schutz (1967, p. 62); the problem is of a different kind. To address it, Arendt (1978) warns first that the new mode of being of the lived experience (its meaningfulness) needs to be differentiated from truth. She continues that another basic fallacy is to interpret meaning through the model of truth (p. 15). While the former concerns thinking, the latter is related to knowing. To better understand this thinking, Arendt offers an account of what she calls the world’s phenomenal nature.
For Arendt (1978), the guiding notion of both philosophical and scientific efforts is always the same: appearances. Based on this, she develops her ideas about what she calls ‘the two-world theory’:

The world of appearances is prior to whatever region the philosopher may choose as his ‘true’ home but into which he was not born. […] In other words, when the philosopher takes leave of the world given to our senses and does a turnabout (Plato’s periagōgē) to the life of the mind, he takes his clue from the former, looking for something to be revealed to him that would explain its underlying truth. […] The scientist, too, depends on appearances, whether, in order to find out what lies beneath the surface, he cuts open the visible body to look at his interior or catches hidden objects by means of all sorts of sophisticated equipment that deprives them of the exterior properties through which they show themselves to our natural senses”. (Arendt, 1978, pp. 23-24)

In short, as in relation to the problem addressed by Schutz (1967), Arendt states that philosophers and scientists cannot escape from this primacy of appearance since it is a fact of everyday life. Moreover, she states that appearances not only never reveal what lies beneath them, but also they conceal: “No thing, no side of a thing, shows itself except by actively hiding the others” (p. 25). She thinks that this is a way not only of exposing but also of protecting from exposure.29 In a few words, she says, “the belief that a cause should be of a higher rank than the effect (so that an effect can easily be disparaged by being retraced to its cause) may belong to the oldest and most stubborn metaphysical fallacies” (Arendt, 1978, p. 25).

Based on this world of appearances, she wonders if it is not more plausible that the relevant and the meaningful should be located precisely on the surface (Arendt, 1978, p. 27). It is on this surface where she will locate action and speech. The two facts that she uses as arguments to affirm this refer to, first, the impressive phenomenal difference between ‘authentic’ and ‘unauthentic’ appearances, and, second, the impressive evidence for the existence of an innate impulse to ‘self-display’. On the one hand, she states that it is plausible that the outside shapes have the function to hide and protect the inside from the world of appearances; from this perspective, and using an analogy with the bodies of living beings, if their inside were to appear “we would all look alike” (Arendt, 1978, p. 29). On the other hand, Arendt thinks that no less than the instinct of preservation,

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29 Different from Arendt’s point of view, Heidegger defined truth as unconcealment; that is, truth as the Being-discovering different from the being-discovered (Jones, 1998, p. 181).
it seems there is an urge to appear, “to fit itself into the world of appearances by displaying and showing, not its ‘inner self’ but itself as an individual” (p. 29).

This inside–outside relationship leads to some more of Arendt’s reflections. Could it be plausible that the location of the meaningfulness of experiences is on the surface? Could it apply in the same way for the outside and as for our inner life? Arendt answers that what is true for the mind is that metaphorical language is the only way it has to make an ‘outward sensible appearance’. However, metaphorical language does not work for the life of the soul; this becomes manifest only when we speak about what we think about it (Arendt, 1978, p. 31). She emphasises that our mental activities are conceived in speech even before being communicated; our thought needs metaphors for it “to bridge the gap between the world given to sense experience and a realm where no such immediate apprehension of evidence can ever exist” (Arendt, 1978, p. 32).

Related to this urge to self-display, Arendt says that human beings also present themselves in deed and word, indicating how they wish to appear; that is, they present themselves based on a deliberate choice about what to show and what to hide (Arendt, 1978, p. 34). However, success and failure in this self-presentation can take place, and that depends on “the consistency and duration of the image thereby presented to the world. […] Since appearances always present themselves in the guise of seeming, pretense and wilful deception on the part of the performer, error and illusion on the part of the spectator are, inevitably, among the inherent potentialities” (p. 36). This statement goes against Heidegger’s idea that an action always has the nature of a project. Thus, she says, semblances are possible only in the world of appearances:

Semblance is inherent in a world ruled by the twofold law of appearing to a plurality of sensitive creatures each equipped with the faculties of perception. Nothing that appears manifests itself to a single viewer capable of perceiving it under all its inherent aspects. The world appears in the mode of it-seems-to-me, depending on particular perspectives determined by location in the world as well as by particular organs of perception. This mode only produces error, which I can correct by changing my location, drawing closer to what appears, or by improving my organs of perception with the help of tools and implements, or by using my imagination to take other perspectives into account; it also gives birth to true semblances, that is, to deceptive appearance, which I cannot correct like an error since they are caused by my permanent location on the earth and remain bound up with my own existence as one of the earth’s appearances (Arendt, 1978, p. 38).
All this brings about some considerations when carrying out a scientific enterprise. In the scientific research process, thinking plays the role of a means to an end; the end is cognition or knowledge, even though what is worth knowing cannot be a scientific decision (Arendt, 1978, p. 54). When this knowledge, which belongs to the world of appearances, is established as truth, it becomes part of the world. Science is, for Arendt,

but an enormously refined prolongation of common-sense reasoning in which sense illusions are constantly dissipated just as errors in science are corrected. The criterion in both cases is evidence, which as such is inherent in a world of appearances. And since it is in the very nature of appearances to reveal and to conceal, every correction and every disillusion ‘is the loss of one evidence only because it is the acquisition of another evidence’. (Arendt, 1978, p. 54)

She adds that, in the process of thinking, plurality is reduced to a duality (to know with myself) (Arendt, 1978, p. 74). When we are in this reflexive exercise, we need to withdraw from the world of appearances, ‘from the present and the urgencies of everyday life’ and thanks to our mind’s capacity for making present what is absent (re-presentation), “we can say ‘no more’ and constitute a past for ourselves, or say ‘no more’ and get ready for a future”(Arendt, 1978, p. 76). So, when Arendt claims for every human being ‘to stop and think’ to prevent evildoing, this involves not only a need to withdraw from the urgencies of everyday life as a condition ‘to know with myself’ about what I am doing but also to resort to remembrance and imagination to grasp the meaningfulness of my experience. This new mode of the lived experience, in Husserl’s words, is inherently linked to what appearances reveal but also what they conceal.

2.1.4. Arendt’s storytelling and natality

What, then, does giving an account of (P)AR – constructing and telling the research story - entail? Other reflections from Arendt are helpful:

… action reveals itself fully only to the storyteller, that is, to the backward glance of the historian, who indeed always knows better what it was all about than the participants. All accounts told by the actors themselves, though they may in rare cases give an entirely trustworthy statement of intentions, aims, and motives, become mere useful source material in the historian’s hands and can never match his story in significance and truthfulness. What the storyteller narrates must necessarily be hidden from the actor himself, at least as long as he is in the act or caught in its consequences, because to him the meaningfulness of his act is not in the story that follows. Even though stories are the inevitable results of action, it is not the actor but the storyteller who perceives and ‘makes’ the story. (Arendt, 1998, p. 192)
Here Arendt draws our attention to two points that are fundamental for this study. First, it is important that (P)AR practitioners are conscious and self-critical of their dual roles as actors in, as well as storytellers about, ‘the political’ of (P)AR processes. In epistemological terms, as tellers of stories, they need to shift their perspective from that of ‘actor’ to that of ‘spectator’. From this standpoint, they can understand much more and better the actions and words of all participants, including their own, i.e., the polis in which they are researching. Second, ‘storytelling’ as used by Arendt and featured here refers to two separable tasks of creating or constructing the story – Arendt speaks of ‘making’ it – and passing the story on to others through publication – making public – in print, oral or other forms. So (P)AR practitioners need to be aware that when they tell stories about their (P)AR experiences, just as when they live out these experiences through (P)AR and when they pass on these stories, they are doing politics. Creating and telling stories are intrinsic to constructing political life and understandings of it, with and for the audiences to whom the stories are addressed.

Arendt (1978) explained that the search to understand ‘the political’ requires allowing the mind to wander aimlessly so that the researcher’s lived experience acquires a new mode of being. For us, (P)AR practitioners, the search for ‘the political’ of (P)AR requires an analysis of our lived research experiences so that the research stories we create make clear sense of what we have been doing in a community through (P)AR, and passage of these stories conveys that clear sense to others.

Academics such as Benhabib (1990) and Disch (1993) have analysed Arendt’s political theory as storytelling, identifying its contributions to traditional ways of approaching the narrative genre. Benhabib (1990) says that Arendt objects to the trap of historical understanding that establishes “an inevitable continuity between the past and the present of such a nature that one has to view what happened as what had to happen” (p. 171). Arendt began this epistemological exploration when she tried to understand the phenomenon of totalitarianism. She refused to

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30 Arendt came to understand that the concentration camps in World War 2 Germany did not serve a ‘utilitarian’ purpose; rather they were living laboratories revealing “that ‘everything is possible’, that humans can create and inhabit a world where the distinction between life and death, truth and falsehood, appearance and reality, body and soul, and even victim and murderer are constantly
accept the thesis that this type of phenomena was just a consequence of a series of past events, as historians were attempting to argue at the time. Her response caused strong disruptions in the traditional understandings of historiography.

Arendt held that the future is radically undetermined due to *natality*. This is why, for Arendt, more significant than placing the present on an inevitable line of continuity into the past is appreciating the novelty that has taken place (Benhabib, 1990, p. 172). Arendt’s understanding of history’s links to action and natality is especially enlightening for (P)AR practitioners when we consider the relevance and urgency of giving an account of the new beginnings these practitioners are bringing about in their communities.

This connection between novelty and storytelling has been also recognised, particularly in relation to Arendt’s unusual approach to critical understanding. Disch (1993) highlights Arendt’s conception of storytelling as one “which implicitly redefines conventional understandings of objectivity and impartiality” (p. 666). Disch suggests that Arendt’s storytelling proposes an alternative to the model of impartiality defined as detached reasoning: “In Arendt’s terms, impartiality involves telling oneself the story of an event or situation from the plurality of perspectives that constitute it as a public phenomenon” (Disch, 1993, p. 666). In other words, the more perspectives I consider when I tell a story, the more impartial my story can become. In this sense, directly quoting voices in (P)AR stories can be useful, although (P)AR practitioners may amplify particular voices to support perspectives consistent with their own, especially in relation to the information they are seeking for knowledge creation. What matters in Arendt’s approach is that judgement-making processes of the story creator are informed by a plurality of perspectives.

Arendt’s approach to storytelling also redefines objectivity. For her, objectivity is not abstract neutral description but explicitly moral storytelling situated in the ‘personal experience’ of the theorist (Disch, 1993, p. 679). The more that thinking and acting are reunited in the stories told, the more objective the storytelling

blurred. This totally fabricated universe reflects the ideological impetus of totalitarian regimes to create a universe of meaning which is wholly self-consistent and also curiously devoid of reality and immune to proof by it” (Benhabib, 1990, pp. 174-175).
becomes. This is an important issue in the field of (P)AR where practitioners’ stories are usually judged as ‘morally charged language’ writings. This is actually desirable in Arendt’s approach as the main challenge is to analyse a phenomenon by crafting a story in a way that “does not compel assent, but, rather, stirs people to think about what they are doing” (Disch, 1993, p. 671).

In this sense, Arendt’s claim that political events, like aesthetic objects, cannot be judged with reference to an external purpose or principle, has been of critical epistemological importance (Disch, 1993, p. 683). Arendt creatively appropriates Kant’s reflections on judgement by suggesting a significantly different ground of validity for political judgement. This ground is ‘publicity’: “the testing that arises from contact with other people’s thinking” (Arendt, 1992, p. 42). The type of story Arendt suggests we tell is therefore one that invites “the reader to ‘go visiting’, asking how would the world look to you if you saw it from this perspective?” (Disch, 1993, p. 687). To serve their political task, (P)AR stories should “stir people to think about what they are doing” by inviting readers to try to figure out how the world would look if approached from perspectives different from their own.

2.2. Approaching ‘natality’ in higher education through (P)AR

2.2.1. Storytelling, politics, the social sciences and (P)AR

The relationship between storytelling and politics has been taken up in different ways in the social sciences. For example, it has been deployed in sociology to analyse the use of storytelling to mobilise social change (Polletta, 2006); in archaeology to reflect on the impact of different forms of narratives in the public appreciation of this discipline (Clarke, 2004); in urban studies to show the importance of communities’ storytelling and political tactics to succeed in urban projects (Pikholz, 1997); in law to highlight the value of storytelling to the practice and pedagogy of law (Foley, 2008); and in education research to use counter-storytelling to contest deficit storytelling about racism, sexism and classism (Delgado, 2002; Fernandez, 2002; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).
Some studies have offered theoretical insights into the role of storytelling in research processes aimed at social change. For instance, Kohler (2008) warns that “[r]esearch in the social sciences is guided by theory, and our theoretical commitments may or may not be compatible (or even meaningful) to research participants” (p. 197). Because of this, she says that many stories presented as ‘empowerment narratives’ do not necessarily mirror the immediate experience of participants in these settings (Kohler, 2008, p. 199). Aligned with Kohler but from a different perspective, Tierney (2003) claims of storytelling that the postmodern challenge is “in part for the researchers to come to terms with alternative realities different from his or her own, not to exoticise them […] but instead to help create the conditions for decolonization” (p. 310).

Although all of these academic works recognise the importance of ‘the political’, their approach to storytelling and politics is rooted in their belief about historical continuity between past and present that in turn leads to the future. Notwithstanding, Arendt’s approach to historical discontinuity has started to be considered in fields such as anthropology (Jackson, 2002), literature (Wilkinson, 2004) and education (Tamboukou, 2010).

Jackson (2002), for example, acknowledges Arendt’s The Human Condition for what he considers an outstanding contribution to understanding contemporary research in the field of anthropology. Specifically, he says, Arendt “gave me my first glimpse of how the questions of philosophy might be explored through the methods of ethnography, how a contemplative life might be integrated with a life of active and practical engagement in the world, and how ethnography and literature might be brought together in new and edifying ways” (Jackson, 2002, p. 10). One of his main conclusions is that Arendt’s understanding of storytelling is crucial because it provides not a means of changing that which we cannot change but a way of reimagining it (Jackson, 2002, pp. 257-258).

In the field of literature, Wilkinson (2004) analyses Arendt’s interest in Danish storyteller Isak Dinesen’s work. Wilkinson claims that Arendt found in Dinesen’s understanding of storytelling a resonance to her political thought. Wilkinson (2004) asserts that Dinesen’s conception of storytelling as a unique way to “capture the shape of an individual human life and to endow it with meaning” (p.
matches Arendt’s view of storytelling as political theory. Wilkinson (2004) concludes her comparison between Dinesen’s and Arendt’s views of storytelling by arguing that Arendt “was not only one of the great political theorists of our time but also one of the few who knew what she was doing when she told a story or wrote about storytelling” (Wilkinson, 2004, p. 97).

One last type of research work oriented by Arendt’s political theory is Tamboukou’s (2010) analysis of narratives in relation to the formation of historical discourses around gender and art education. Following Arendt’s conceptualisation of biographies within the political, Tamboukou researches the writing of genealogy of women artists. She argues that it is precisely in the creation of critical communities of remembrance that gender becomes a politically situated position for re-imagining women as historical subjects and thus for writing history. (Tamboukou, 2010, p. 115)

In the field of (P)AR, storytelling began to catch its practitioners’ attention during the first decade of the twenty-first century. However, it has been mainly approached from the notion of historical continuity (Feldman, 2007; Freund, 2009; Heikkinen, Huttunen, & Syrjala, 2007; Heikkinen, Huttunen, Syrjala, & Pesonen, 2012; Mazzei, 2007; Niemi, Heikkinen, & Kannas, 2010; Walker, 2007). One of the academic works that opened the debate about considering (P)AR as narrative from a notion of historical continuity is that of Heikkinen, Huttunen and Syrjala (2007). These authors propose five principles to judge AR reports from a narrative point of view: historical continuity, reflexivity, dialectics, workability and evocativeness. On the first principle, which is of special interest in this thesis, they claim that “good action research recognises the historical evolution of action both as a general macro-level phenomenon and as micro-level continuity of historical action” (Heikkinen, et al., 2007, p. 9).

These three authors also address the importance of judging in this type of report the action researcher’s awareness of his/her knowing (principle of reflexivity), especially in relation to the way he/she reflects upon the ontological and epistemological presumptions underlying his/her work. Interested in reaching the multiple voices of all the participant-storytellers involved in narrative action research, Niemi, Heikkenen and Kannas (2010) claim that the reflexivity emerged
from greater recognition of the relationship between the participant-storyteller. The researcher-listener has challenged them to be more fully conscious of their own language, culture and politics and those of participants and audiences (Niemi, et al., 2010, p. 138).

Reflexivity is also addressed by Walker (2007), who argues that “good stories help us to think well and more wisely about ourselves and our practice” (Walker, 2007, p. 295). Based on an historical story, she explores six methodological issues that emerge through the engagement of particular narratives such as the one she used in her article. Drawing from Martha Nussbaum, Walker claims that the potential of narrative and story in action research lies in our ethical task of acting with deep responsibility and enlarged moral imagination to get an intense scrutiny of particular. Walker (2007) questions if AR practitioners can write about AR in a non-storied way.

Mazzei (2007), from a poststructuralist view, considers that AR practitioners have failed to account for thoughts voiced silently. She therefore proposes to examine silence as a problematic terrain to allow the spoken silences to be present in the textual records of AR. This problematic of silence provides an entrée to what is possible, plausible, knowable, askable, thinkable, considerable, or hearable. It moves us beyond the current circumference of our consideration and invites us to enter that silence that, if listened for, listened to, heard, will lead to more inclusive understandings of a multiplicity of meanings (Mazzei, 2007, p. 640).

Based on Kemmis’s (2006) claim about the importance of narrative and parrhesia as truth-telling within AR, Freund (2009) analyses a story to interrogate teacher education and raises questions in regard to ‘regimes of truth’ within this field. Finally, and also about truth, Heikinnen, Huttunen and Syrjala (2007) suggest dialectics as a principle to assess AR reports. They claim that if an action researcher respects the complexity and stratification of social reality, the research report should aim to “reproduce the voices of different people as authentically as possible” (p. 13).

Although Arendt did not self identify with (P)AR, her approach to storytelling has found echo in a few of its practitioners, including myself. For example, Cotton and Griffiths (2007) consider stories in (P)AR as helpful in rethinking the
philosophical concept of public space. Taking into account Arendt’s political thought, they claim that although they had a clear idea of the importance of public spaces for social justice in education, they see the need to consider “how people learn to enter and participate in public spaces in the first place” (p. 557). Also from an Arendtian perspective, in a paper written as a tribute to Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda, the founder of the Latin American approach to (P)AR, I argue first that (P)AR is aimed at not only acknowledging the human condition of plurality but also enhancing respect towards such a condition (Santos, 2007a, p. 47). I also claim that it is precisely due to the efforts of (P)AR practitioners such as Fals Borda to preserve the public sphere that (P)AR has become a relevant political proposal in countries like Colombia where I come from (Santos, 2007a, p. 50).

2.2.2. The conduct of this study

2.2.2.1. A multilayered approach to the political of (P)AR

When Arendt (1998, p. 192) says that action reveals itself fully only to the storyteller, she draws our attention to two significant points. First, it is important that (P)AR practitioners are conscious and self critical of their dual roles as actors in, as well as storytellers about, ‘the political’ of (P)AR processes. In epistemological terms, as tellers of stories they need to shift their perspective from that of ‘actor’ to that of ‘spectator’. From this standpoint, they can understand much more and better the actions and words of all participants, including their own, i.e., the polis in which they are researching. Second, ‘storytelling’ as used by Arendt (1992, p. 37) and featured here refers to two separable tasks of creating or constructing the story – Arendt speaks of ‘making’ it – and passing the story on to others through publication – making public – in print, oral or other forms. So (P)AR practitioners need to be aware that when they tell stories about their (P)AR experiences, just as when they live out these experiences through (P)AR and when they pass on these stories, they are doing politics. Creating and telling stories are intrinsic to constructing political life and understandings of it, with and for the audiences to whom the stories are addressed.
As I noted earlier, Arendt (1978) states that the search for understanding of ‘the political’ requires allowing the mind to wander aimlessly so that the researcher’s lived experience acquires a new mode of being. Here I propose a three-layered approach to understanding the political of (P)AR, an approach that deals with three different layers that can be identified when re-reading (P)AR published texts.

First layer or what is in the foreground (the data)

Through my lens, while we read (P)AR publications such as journal articles, research books, research reports and the like, we can identify (P)AR participants’ words in the form of quotes from transcripts of audio or video recordings. These words correspond to what I call a first layer of the political realm. Though they have been selected by the (P)AR participant playing the role of a storyteller, this storyteller presents the words in a way that allows us to interact directly with some of the people who are involved in the (P)AR initiatives and are different from the storyteller. The more plural transcribed material we can find in a (P)AR publication, the more possibilities readers have to identify ‘who the (P)AR participants are’, their ways of appearing in the public space created by the (P)AR initiative, as well as their ways of relating to one another.

While trying to unfold this first layer, it is important to take into account that in the (P)AR researcher’s story (P)AR participants are appearing in a new public space different from that in which they spoke their words. This new public space is the space created by those involved in making the published material. Therefore, at this point we need to distinguish the material and immaterial conditions under which the (P)AR participants, including storytellers, are speaking and acting in our university communities, from the conditions under which they are speaking and acting in the research process, as well as the conditions under which they are speaking in publications. In a (P)AR process, as a participant I may or may not be asked about what I want to talk about; likewise what I say may or may not be selected by the storyteller for inclusion in her/his research story. Notwithstanding, under some given material and immaterial conditions, the (P)AR participants have clear choices about what to tell and what
not to tell the researcher in their stories. This deliberate choice also applies to the (P)AR participant/storyteller.

**Second layer or what lies between the lines**

The story that the (P)AR participant/storyteller tells in a publication constitutes a *second layer* of ‘the political’ of the research experience to be analysed. Most of what researchers publish in scientifically oriented academic publications presents, in fact, our own sense-making process of the data we collect. Except for the quotes of what other (P)AR participants said and the stories transcribed in (P)AR publications, we (P)AR practitioners insert this ‘political’ into another web of relationships different from those webs that the participants reference when they tell their stories. Through this action, we draw the researchers’ cultural and social ties and our own worldviews into the scene in a way that foregrounds the web of relationships concerning the scientific community in the stories we tell about ‘our research’.

When we appreciate academics’ perception of the expectations coming from editorial boards of scientific publications, and institutional imperatives upon academic staff to ‘get published’, we are right to question carefully how these may influence researchers’ choices about what they tell, how they tell it and where they tell it. So the potential for influence cuts both ways: the researcher shapes and influences the story s/he tells about the research while being influenced by other considerations such as those of the potential publisher. Researchers are conscious, then, of the *criterion of relevance* that they are expected to meet when making their research experiences public. Since what the storyteller identifies as the relevance and findings of their research is shaped by the research objectives and questions, much or all of the political life in a research project is unlikely to be told in the stories published in scientifically oriented publications. This may happen, however, when the research questions and objectives explicitly concern the political realm.

While the relationships between (P)AR participants and their communities shape participants’ storytelling (linguistically, socially, culturally and politically), our relationship as (P)AR practitioners with the scientific community leads us to
'shape' storytelling about the political life of the communities where we research, based on what we think is relevant for the scientific community. In this apparently tendentious landscape, could the researchers as well as the researched in (P)AR ‘leave out’ pertinent information because they are unfamiliar with, or oblivious to, its place in the research story? My answer is ‘Yes’.

**Third layer or making ‘the irrelevant’ relevant**

The *third layer* of ‘the political’ of research deals with what (P)AR participants have simultaneously concealed and revealed. This implies, following Arendt’s thought, the need ‘to stop and think’ in order to make relevant what is initially perceived to be ‘the irrelevant’ of (P)AR. To better understand this, it is helpful to consider more carefully what this ‘stop and think’ instruction implies.

The political realm that we construct as human beings is formed by fragmented bits and pieces of our personal lives. They can remain forgotten in our memories like parts of a puzzle that makes sense only when we remember and connect them to understand what lies within or arises from our relationships with other human beings in different times and spaces. However, different from puzzles belonging to the cultural or social realms, the puzzles of the political realm do not have identifiable patterns. The political realm is not formed by the patterns of thinking, feeling and acting that characterise and, simultaneously, make a group of people different from another group, nor is it formed by human behaviours in relation to each other according to norms and rules established by the members of a group.

Different from the approach to ‘publishability’ that Lincoln (2002, pp. 331-332) identified as an emerging criterion to judge the quality of qualitative and interpretive research, Arendt’s (1992, p. 42) validity ground of ‘publicity’ goes beyond the reviewers’ practical concern about what standards any piece of writing is expected to meet for publication purposes. ‘Going to visit’ the participants’ perspectives about an issue through storytelling without an attachment to a continuity between past and present can help us to untangle the various webs of relationships in which participants are embedded. Particularly, visiting the participants’ perspectives via their words and actions as provided to researchers (first layer), the researchers’ perspectives through their words and actions as
reported in publications (second layer) and the words and actions not reported in publications (third layer), among many other layers that can be unfolded, can assist not only the storytellers but also their audiences to make sense of their past, present and future words and actions.

2.2.2.2. My stories, politics, phenomenology and ethics

‘The political’ of (P)AR is about people’s stories. It is about how we relate to one another in order to live together well, while constructing our common world through (P)AR. Some of these stories are published, some are unpublished and some have not been told before. Some of the published stories are told through asymmetrical relationships of power structured by editorial gate-keeping. This is because we (P)AR storytellers, as members of the scientific community, have accepted the requirement to follow normative conduct in order to have our stories published. Most of us work in universities dominated by an academic climate where the ‘publish or perish’ aphorism is firmly in place for most academic staff. The latter reinforces the asymmetry of this relationship.

Internationally, the publication system, with editorial boards as publication gatekeepers, requires (P)AR storytellers to craft their stories according to standards. These standards are established by editorial boards whose members are appointed on behalf of the scientific community to which (P)AR practitioners belong. They are standards reinforced by the academic community’s compliance with them. Editorial boards define how high quality or at least publishable pieces of written work should look – what they should and should not convey and to some extent how they should do so. Guided by these considerations when seeking publication, (P)AR practitioners select what they will tell in their stories and how, and where they will try to publish these stories. Such is the asymmetrical relationship in which some members of the scientific community decide the ‘publishability’ of other members’ written texts. Little wonder, then, that (P)AR storytellers make their storytelling choices strategically, to maximise chances that the gate-keeping editorial board will accept their stories for publication. This is especially so since publication not only carries their stories to potentially wide
readerships, but can also enhance their chances of promotion or keeping hold of their jobs in the current university employment structure.

However, (P)AR practitioners also write stories for reasons other than publication in serial journals and books. We tell stories in research reports, research minutes, bulletins, conference papers and the like. Although still following particular standards, we tell these stories under different material and immaterial conditions that include their own ‘political’ and asymmetrical relationships. That is partly why in this thesis I want to reflect upon those stories that we as (P)AR practitioners do not tell – in public, at least – and why we do not tell them. I want to consider why we may find some stories difficult to tell, and especially the place of ‘the political’ in this self-censoring process.

Reflecting on what I have published during the last 20 years has given me a valuable chance to unfold the multiple layers of ‘the political’ of (P)AR, which have enfolded me while working in higher education through this time. By positioning me to reflect critically upon the stories I chose not to tell as a (P)AR practitioner, it has enabled me to more clearly understand the influence of ‘the political’ on how I have approached the publication process in my own (P)AR work. Through my reflections I realised that I deliberately excluded some stories or strands of them, because of my own compliance with the scientific community-based criterion of relevance – ‘suitability’ may be a more accurate term – for publishing. I had used it to conceal my dilemma over telling or not telling certain unexpected and painful episodes about conflict in the (P)AR projects I led.

I acknowledge that personal diplomacy may at times be a worthy or even valuable feature of this new storytelling; after all, I do not want to inflame conflicts or hurt people’s feelings. But I must also acknowledge our shared need to appreciate the importance of conflicts that took place, and perhaps may always take place in some form when people work together. In this light they are intrinsic to the (P)AR stories we need to tell. (P)AR practitioners’ lives are in this sense like everybody’s ordinary life. That we face the same kind of human troubles while conducting (P)AR bespeaks the humanist disposition of (P)AR in the processes of researching and publishing. It also tells a lot about how we live ‘the political’
while living together with others, as do our choices to effectively self-censor our (P)AR stories.

In re-telling the four (P)AR experiences that I lived while working as an academic in Colombian higher education, my main challenge was identifying how to not affect relationships in a negative way while attempting to tell these difficult episodes. I have tried to be careful about what I say in relation to the people involved in such events and how I say it. Notwithstanding, if I fail in this attempt, I ask for forgiveness. In this respect, Arendt’s understanding of the role of forgiveness in politics has helped me to overcome some painful episodes I have had while doing (P)AR in higher education. She says:

...trespassing is an everyday occurrence which is in the very nature of action’s constant establishment of new relationships within a web of relations, and it needs forgiving, dismissing, in order to make it possible for life to go on by constantly releasing men from what they have done unknowingly. Only through this constant mutual release from what they do can men remain free agents, only by constant willingness to change their minds and start again can they be trusted with so great a power as that to begin something new […] Forgiving, in other words, is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven (Arendt, 1998, pp. 240-241).

Thus, these stories I tell here are not to blame anybody. They concern recounting ordinary events that happened to open a window a little bit wider. In fact, this thesis is not about revealing ‘all’ but revealing ‘more’ about the life of ‘the political’ and the life of the social as they are actually lived by us in real (P)AR life.

At one point I thought of using fictitious names for people and university communities in my stories. However, I realised that I could hardly be fair with the people and university communities involved in the projects if I partly fictionalised them. Rather than reflecting upon ‘fiction’ in its relation to research and politics, from an Arendtian lens I decided to reflect on ‘imagination’ and its importance for research and politics. I present some first insights into this relationship in Chapter 9.

‘The political’ of (P)AR in higher education like in any other political domain is one in which we deal with real people, their choices, actions, words and feelings,
and real university communities and their interests. I believe that particularly in
the field of education, ‘the political’ is about people trying to do ‘good’, but some
times, as human beings and as human communities, making mistakes. In this
sense I tried to be honest about the mistakes that I think I made as a lead
researcher and as a person. As Arendt points out in relation to making and
keeping promises as a remedy for the unpredictability of our actions:

[we] mentioned before the power generated when people gather together and ‘act in
concert,’ which disappears the moment they depart. The force that keeps them together, as
distinguished from the space of appearances in which they gather and the power which
keeps this public space in existence, is the force of mutual promise or contract (Arendt,
1998, pp. 244-245).

This thesis embodies a promise I want to make and keep to the communities that
allow me to work with, as a person, a (P)AR practitioner and as a citizen: to
reflect deeply about ‘the political’ and try hard to draw new beginnings even from
the most difficult moments. I will try to act and speak to keep alive the public
space where we gather to construct our common world.

The stories I present in Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 are, in short, about the risks and real
dangers when doing (P)AR in higher education. These stories are about specific
people and university communities taking risks while attempting to fulfil their
social and political commitments; the conflicts that may occur while trying to do
things that happen everywhere. ‘The political’ of a (P)AR project is about those
conflicts too. This storytelling, in that sense, is aimed at highlighting the
importance of the real life tensions embedded in (P)AR and their relation with
bringing about not only ‘the new’ but also the understanding or knowledge we
have of it. In Chapter 8 I present some reflections about the double-sided
character of ‘the new’, drawing from these stories.

Since scientific publications are communicative and political spaces, I shall
continue to think about ‘publishing’ the untold stories behind the already
published stories of these (P)AR experiences in journals or books after the thesis
is finished. This is particularly relevant as these are self-censored stories not only
about me but also about these university communities. In the meantime, it is
important to acknowledge that although I took into account basic considerations
in any storytelling process (i.e. the provision of sufficient information for a reader
to understand the stories, as well as the structuring of each story the way a story must look), I am also aware that I tell these four stories from my perspective as the lead researcher of the four (P)AR processes selected. Considering that each participant could have told each story differently, I want to draw the readers’ attention to another dimension: one related to the ways in which human beings organise themselves through their words and actions and on the basis of their unique distinctiveness and their commonalities. In this sense, my new storytelling of ‘the political’ of (P)AR in higher education is political too.

The four (P)AR stories I will tell in Part II constitute the lived experience on which this Arendtian phenomenological study relies upon, namely, my own lived experience as a lead researcher in Colombian higher education. I reflect upon these stories to understand the essence of ‘the political’ of (P)AR the way it has appeared to me as one of the many (P)AR practitioners in contemporary university communities. In this condition, I address the research questions, my answers to them and other resulting insights in Chapters 7, 8 and 9 both in the first singular person and the first plural person. Although other participants of the (P)AR projects selected for this thesis can tell other stories based on their own experiences, the stories I will tell here are not susceptible to member check or consent as these stories concern my lived experience as the lead researcher of such (P)AR projects. Finally, in order not to cause harm, I do not use the names of the participants involved in the episodes selected to reflect upon ‘the political’ of (P)AR in higher education but the roles they performed in their university communities.

2.2.2.3. (P)AR projects selected to tell this new story

In this thesis I pursue an Aredntian phenomenological exercise based on my reflections upon four (P)AR projects I led in Colombian higher education from August 1998 to July 2009. I selected these four (P)AR projects based on three main criteria. First, they are the most recent (P)AR projects I have participated in. Second, these (P)AR experiences took place in public and private funded higher

31 Arendt’s *We Refugees* is of special importance here. In this essay, Arendt uses the first singular and plural persons in her condition of one of the many ‘newcomers’ or ‘immigrants’ to the United States during World War 2 (Arendt, 1996).
education settings in Colombia. Third, these (P)AR projects were aimed at encouraging university community members to become engaged in institutional curriculum development and evaluation initiatives.

Some of the stories I told about these four (P)AR program/projects\textsuperscript{32} were published or are undergoing review for publication as I write this thesis. Below I present a brief description of each program/project in terms of when each was carried out, the main research area to which each corresponds, and the type of higher education context and types of participants involved. For presentation in this section and for general reference purposes in Chapters 7, 8 and 9 I refer to these four (P)AR experiences as ‘(P)AR projects’. I also explain the specificities of each (P)AR experience, namely its particular composition in terms of (P)AR programs and projects, in each story.

\textbf{Table 1 (P)AR projects selected for the study}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(P)AR projects selected</th>
<th>Main research area</th>
<th>Type of higher education context and types of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Project 1</strong> (2007–2009) (Story 4)</td>
<td>The academic writing of Indigenous and Raizal undergraduates (curriculum development)</td>
<td>• One public state university (two campuses), one district public university and a private university. • Indigenous, Raizal and Afro-Colombian undergraduate students and lecturers of different courses, as well as university administrators.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Project 2</strong> (2008–2009) (Story 3)</td>
<td>A model to evaluate graduate courses (curriculum evaluation)</td>
<td>• One public state university (8 campuses). • Academic Vice-Rector, Director of Graduate Studies, academic directors of campuses, faculty deans, course coordinators and graduate students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Project 3</strong> (2005–2007) (Story 2)</td>
<td>Competency-based curriculum from a critical perspective (curriculum development)</td>
<td>• One private university. • Master degree students, lecturers, faculty curriculum boards and university directives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Project 4</strong> (1998–2002) (Story 1)</td>
<td>Emancipatory curriculum for the teaching and learning of foreign languages (curriculum development)</td>
<td>• One private university. • Students of different courses and lecturers of three different areas of an academic unit.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The result of this storytelling is a set of four written stories, each of which concerns one of the four (P)AR projects selected. I present these stories in a

\textsuperscript{32}In the stories told in Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6, I will refer to a ‘(P)AR program’ as composed of several research projects.
sequence that starts with the newest story about the most recent (P)AR project I was involved in. The main aim of starting the storytelling this way is not only to highlight that my current judgement process about (P)AR is linked to my previous experiences, but also to illustrate the discontinuity between past, present and future to which Arendt referred.

I have selected a cluster of publications for my reflection upon each one of the four (P)AR projects I discuss in this study. These publications range from research reports addressed to funding offices, to research books, chapters, journal articles and conference papers. Below I present the titles of each one of the personal publications included in the four clusters.


Cluster of publications about (P)AR project 1:


  [Santos, D. (forthcoming). *Let us talk about academic writing: A dialogue from an intercultural perspective at the university*. Bogotá DC: Faculty of Human Sciences, Universidad Nacional de Colombia.]


[Linguistics, Faculty of Human Sciences, Universidad Nacional de Colombia.]


  [Santos, D. (Unpublished work). Diversity and mimesis: A textual analysis of social representations in a higher education policy document in Latin America.]
Others:


**(P)AR project 2 (2008–2009): A model to evaluate graduate courses (curriculum evaluation).**

Cluster of publications about (P)AR project 2:


Others:

Minutes, bulletins and other documents in

http://www.autoevaluacion.unal.edu.co/index.html[^33]

[^33]: This website was created in the (P)AR project in Chapter 4. It is still the institutional website for self-evaluation of graduate courses.

Cluster of publications about (P)AR project 3:


[Santos, D. & Quintero, M. (2007). Ethical dilemmas in conflict resolution in and from citizenship education and action research, *Revista Internacional Magisterio*, 26, 26-29.]


• Santos, D. & Zuber-Skerritt, O. (2007b). Professional and leadership development in higher education through action learning and action research: An interview with Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt. ALAR action learning
and action research journal. Special pre-conference edition, 12(1), 113-141.


Cluster of publications about (P)AR project 4:


2.2.2.4. Visiting other (P)AR practitioners’ perspectives

For the purposes of my judgement making, and on the occasion of a return from Australia to my country from July 2011 to early January 2012, I had the opportunity to talk with some of the (P)AR participants in the four (P)AR projects I selected for this study. These informal talks were not aimed at achieving consensus on my views of what happened in these four (P)AR projects, as the stories I tell in this thesis are about what I lived in those (P)AR initiatives as the projects’ lead researcher. These talks were aimed to ‘visit’ their perspectives about these (P)AR initiatives to enlarge my understanding about ‘the political’ of (P)AR in higher education.

Each talk was based on my invitation to the participant to remember extraordinary/meaningful episodes related to ‘the political’ in the corresponding (P)AR project. I was able to talk with eight (P)AR participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Type of talk</th>
<th>Mode</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Group talk (6 co-researchers)</td>
<td>Face to face encounter 2 emails</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Individual talk (1 participant)</td>
<td>Face to face encounter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Individual talk (1 co-researcher)</td>
<td>Face to face encounter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Group talk (3 co-researchers)</td>
<td>Face to face encounter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I recorded but did not transcribe these informal conversations as this phenomenological study is not about their lived experiences but about my lived experience as the coordinator of these (P)AR projects. I analysed the content of each to identify complementary elements to enrich my reflective judgement process.
It is important to mention that two of the (P)AR practitioners of Project 1 (2007–2009) were also (P)AR practitioners of Project 4 (1998–2002). Unexpected events in this latter (P)AR project, which took place in a private university where as participants we worked together in 2002, led us to continue our research from different university communities. I discuss these events in the upcoming (P)AR stories about ‘the political’ of (P)AR in contemporary higher education.

2.2.2.5. Stages of the study

The phenomenological study of this thesis was carried out in four stages. The first stage concerned posing the research problem. This stage included four literature reviews about ‘the political’ in contemporary higher education and (P)AR. Based on them, the research proposal was elaborated. After receiving endorsement of my PhD candidature in July 2010, I prepared a more detailed elaboration of my research approach. I then selected the published material, on which the new storytelling of the four (P)AR projects would rely. Following the multilayered approach to ‘the political’ of (P)AR through published material, I proceeded with the preparation process of the storytelling, as well as the actual telling of each story.

While writing the stories, I had informal talks with some of the (P)AR participants back in Bogotá. I then searched for answers to the main research question as well as to each of the six research sub-questions, drawing from the new stories that the project participants told me. Finally, I identified implications of the projects from participants’ main claims while answering the central question. In sum, we can describe the stages of this study as follows:
Table 3 Stages in the storytelling process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I Posing of the research problem (July 2009 – Dec 2010)</td>
<td>• Four literature reviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Writing of the research proposal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Designing a specific research approach to ‘the political’ through published material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II Analysis of the already published material (Jan 2011 – March 2012)</td>
<td>• Forming clusters of publications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Unfolding the multiple layers of ‘the political’ in each cluster of publications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Selecting relevant information about each project as well as the extraordinary episodes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Informal talks with some of the (P)AR participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Structuring each story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III New storytelling (Jan 2011 – March 2012)</td>
<td>• Writing each story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reflection process through the storytelling itself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV Overarching interpretation (April – June 2012)</td>
<td>• Answering research questions based on new stories told</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Deriving implications from main claims</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Part II of the thesis is structured in four chapters, each of which corresponds to a new story told about each one of the four (P)AR projects selected. Each chapter contains a brief description of the corresponding (P)AR project and the narration of some of the most extraordinary episodes concerning ‘the political’. The identification of these episodes is the result of unfolding the multiple layers of ‘the political’ in each of the four clusters of (P)AR publications concerning each (P)AR project. This second part of the thesis ends with an Epilogue, in which some reflections about ‘managing (P)AR projects’ in higher education are made. Also some insights about the webs of relationships crossing the four (P)AR projects are presented.
PART II: FOUR (P)AR STORIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION
**About thinking and doing: the spectator**

From the Greek word for spectator, *theatai*, the later philosophical term ‘theory’ was derived, and the word ‘theoretical’ until a few hundred years ago meant ‘contemplating’, looking upon something from the outside, from a position implying a view that is hidden from those who take part in the spectacle and actualize it. The inference to be drawn from this early distinction between doing and understanding is obvious: as a spectator you may understand the ‘truth’ of what the spectacle is about; but the price you have to pay is withdrawal from participating in it. […]

The first datum underlying this estimate is that only the spectator occupies a position that enables him to see the whole play – as the philosopher is able to see the *kosmos* as a harmonious ordered whole. The actor, being part of the whole, must *enact* his part; not only is he a ‘part’ by definition, he is bound to the particular that finds its ultimate meaning and the justification of its existence solely as a constituent of a whole. Hence, withdrawal from direct involvement to a standpoint outside the game (the festival of life) is not only a condition for judging, for being the final arbiter in the ongoing competition, but also the condition for understanding the meaning of the play. Second: what the actor is concerned with is *doxa*, a word that signifies both fame and opinion, for it is through the opinion of the audience and the judge that fame comes about. It is decisive for the actor, but not for the spectator, how he appears to others; he depends on the spectator’s it-seems-to-me (his *dokei moi*, which gives the actor his *doxa*)

(Arendt, 1978, pp. 93-94)
Chapter 3 The invisible threads of (P)AR (Story 1)

‘[Serankwa, e]l primer hijo que tuvo la [M]adre [U]niversal, fue creando el mundo al moverse por todo el territorio ancestral en espiral, al igual que el caracol, regando sus hijos por todos los sitios donde transitó...’ así tejen los arhuacos sus mochilas. En cada punto del tejido se hila la vida cotidiana con las reflexiones más trascendentales. Los más mínimos detalles expresan una forma de ver y concebir el mundo, así como se teje una mochila, así se construyen las relaciones y se da sentido a la existencia. El tejido pinta formas geométricas que representan los elementos del mundo indígena, las llamadas kanas. Las manos que tejen tienen que cumplir con la memoria y leyes tradicionales. La tradición y el talento de entrelazar los hilos y crear las mochilas hacen parte de la sangre indígena, de las tradiciones y de los secretos que guardan los hilos, hilos que mantienen viva su raza. (La Mochila Arhuaca, p. 13)

[‘[Serankwa], the first child of the [U]niversal [M]other, was creating the world to move around the spiral ancestral territory, moving like the snail, watering her children for all places where Arhuacos transit ... ’ this is the way that Arhuacos weave their bags [mochilas]. Everyday life is woven into each point of the fabric with the weaver’s most significant reflections. Every detail expresses a way of seeing and understanding the world; the way a bag is woven is the way relationships are built and meaning is given to existence. The fabric paints geometric shapes that represent the elements of the Indigenous world called kanas. The hands that weave must comply with memory and traditional laws. The tradition and talent to weave the threads and create the bags are part of Indigenous blood and traditions and the secrets that keep the threads, threads that keep the race alive. (La Mochila Arhuaca, p. 13)

This is a story about a (Participatory) Action Research program concerned with expressing self in a language that is not one’s own. Hence, it is closely connected to what I am attempting to do at this moment: writing an academic text in English, which is not my mother tongue. I talk about struggling to find the exact words to express my way of thinking and feeling about the matter I want to talk about, as well as my experiences, learning and challenges. It is a story about the feelings of strangeness we usually have to face when leaving the boundaries of our own worldview to understand somebody else’s. However, this story is not exclusively about a journey of self-discovery; it is especially a story of the interconnectedness in which every (P)AR story is embedded.

3.1. A Mestiza doing (P)AR

I never had to – never needed, wanted or thought to – reflect on the ‘crossbreeding’ that produced me until I realised that in my new community in Wagga Wagga, in New South Wales, Australia, many people recognised me as a foreigner. In 2009 I moved to Wagga – a regional city that largely serves the surrounding rural population and army/air force facilities, to accept an international scholarship to do my PhD. Until then I recognised myself as a
'Mestiza’, with a blend of European and Indigenous blood, and as such just one of the ethnically mixed group that comprises more than half of the 45,000,000 people in Colombia.

As in many Latin American countries, in Colombia the search for genealogical connections is difficult since few historical documents recording family origins are available. Our history of crossbreeding is a history of more than five centuries of extermination of non-Western peoples’ ways of living for the sake of Western power and progress. In these terms, Australian history and Colombian history are not so different. During my first two years of living in Australia as a temporary migrant just a few people questioned me directly about my ethnicity. I responded simply: “I am a Mestiza” and provide a short explanation about what that means. It was only at the end of 2010 in a (P)AR conference I attended in Melbourne that I was compelled to answer that question in a more reflective way. The discussion concerned attendees’ positions on making the first/second person distinction when researching with Indigenous people from decolonising perspectives. After talking about difficulties of documenting genealogy for many of us in Latin America, I shared with attendees the only clues I had about my state of being as a Mestiza.

First, I explained that although my father’s family name (Santos) is Portuguese and my mother’s family name (Caicedo) is Spanish, I have never considered myself as mainly European. I know little more than that my family was among the first generation of Colombian peasants who left the rural areas in the 1930s and became the new middle class in Colombia’s capital, Bogotá, where I was born. Second, I talked about a recent discovery about myself thanks to my interaction with Indigenous people in the (P)AR program that this story is about. While I was interviewing one of the Indigenous academics who was part of the research, his gaze paused on my face. He then told me that I had the way of looking at another person that is characteristic of the Pijao people. This was an unexpected comment. I immediately asked why he said that. He told me that I looked into the eye, in the way the people of that Indigenous community do. In his words, the Pijao have a straight, deep glance, almost aggressive.

I apologised immediately as I did not want him to see me as being aggressive with him, but he just laughed away my apology. Very surprised and more relaxed, I
recalled that my father’s family was from the region inhabited by the Pijao people; that information was always clear to me but I had never connected it to a feeling of belonging to a particular ethnic group. Since then, I am more aware of my Pijao glance. It not only reminds me of my connection through blood to an Indigenous people recognised in my country as warriors, but also makes me think about what others can perceive of our being and behaviour – even just a glance – without being aware of this ourselves.

After sharing these two pieces of information about my Europeanity and Indigeneity as a Mestiza, I finished answering the question posed to me in that (P)AR conference. I said that, because of what I had previously described, distinguishing between first and second person to give an account of research with Indigenous people does not help me at all to understand my relationship with Indigenous people. Instead, I told them, I prefer to think of myself as a good blend of the many people involved in my unknown and unknowable personal history, whoever they were or still are. I told them that for me, being a Mestiza has meant having a chance to write my own story based on my relationships with many ethnic groups. I therefore feel I have found uncountable ways to connect with many other human beings in the world.

3.2. The (P)AR program this story is about

This way of understanding my being as a Mestiza was the basis for my actions and words when I led a (P)AR program with three universities in Colombia from 2006 to 2009. This program comprised several projects aimed to support Indigenous, Raizal34 and Afro-Colombian students to cope as best they could with academic writing.

Describing the Colombian population in terms of its ethnicity is difficult since many participants in national census surveys have not declared their linkage to any particular ethnic group. Self-recognition of belonging or linking to an ethnic group has increased in census findings over the past decade due mostly to two

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34 Raizal people, the natives of the Colombian Department of San Andrés y Providencia Islands in the Caribbean Sea, have African ancestry, but call themselves Raizales to distinguish themselves from other Afrodescendant groups in continental Colombia.
factors: 1) rising public acceptance that Colombia is a pluriethnic and plurilingual society as expressed in the National Constitution of 1991; and 2) subsequent inclusion of specific items about ethnicity in national census surveys (DANE, 2007, p. 33). Based on information provided in the 2005 census, for example, the government office in charge of statistics concluded that 3.43 per cent of people living in Colombia identified as Indigenous, 10.62 per cent identified as Afro-Colombians and 0.01 per cent identified as Rom people. In that census only 14.06 per cent of the 45,421,609 Colombian people who the census recorded self-recognised as being a member of one of these ethnic groups and the remaining 85.94 per cent did not (DANE, 2007, p. 37). This pluriethnic feature of Colombian society comes with a plurilingual reality: the Colombian people together speak 65 Indigenous languages and two Creoles, as well as Spanish, which is the official language (Landaburu, 1999). This makes for complex times in terms of national governance, as for example, distributing and then collating data on the multiplicity of census forms in so many languages attests.

Official recognition of the multiple ethnicities that comprise Colombian society was the victory of popular struggles after centuries of abusive marginalisation of most of Colombia’s non-Western minority communities by the dominant Spanish colonisers and their progeny. With this recognition, new policies were introduced, aiming to support these ethnic groups. An example that well illustrates this societal shift is a program under way in the university to which I am currently affiliated, the Universidad Nacional de Colombia. The nation’s largest national public university with about 45,200 students and 3,650 academic staff, it has eight campuses spread across the country (Lammoglia & Ruiz, 2011, p. 35). For over 15 years it has upheld a university policy to allocate 2 per cent of the places available in every course every time it is offered, to members of the Colombian Indigenous communities, irrespective of the students’ eligibility on academic grounds. The university took up this initiative five years before the new National Constitution was issued in 1991 (C. S. U. UNAL, 1986). In 2009, the university made a similar decision to guarantee offering the same percentage of places in

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35 Romani people, also known as Rom people, are an ethnic group living mainly in Europe. Their origins are traced to the Indian subcontinent. They are sometimes known in the English speaking world as Gypsies.
each course to members of Afro-Colombian, Raizal and Palenque\textsuperscript{36} peoples (C. S. U. UNAL, 2009). This means that minority students are guaranteed one tenth of all the university’s places.

The (P)AR program I discuss in this story aims to understand more deeply the situations that members of these ethnic minority groups have had to face when studying at the university. Of special interest have been the consequences for these students of the university’s request that the students be ‘sufficiently proficient’ in Spanish to cope with the academic requirements of Colombian higher education. This (P)AR program was created after I was invited to participate in an international collaborative agenda to reflect upon several contemporary issues that are compromised when doing (P)AR. One issue concerned the geopolitics of academic writing in contemporary societies. This notion was initiated by Suresh Canagarajah in 1992 as a result of his experience and reflections on writing his PhD thesis in England and his later attempts to communicate it in his homeland, Sri Lanka (Canagarajah, 2002). The notion of the geopolitics of academic writing mainly concerns the effects of the material and immaterial conditions for academic writing in developing countries (cast in the language of Wallerstein\textsuperscript{37} as the periphery) on meeting ‘satisfactorily’ the requirements to publish in the developed countries (cast as the centre).

Three universities participated in the first stage of this (P)AR program in Colombia. This stage was designed to give an account of the experiences of some Indigenous, Raizal and Afro-Colombian students and academic staff with Spanish language during their primary and secondary schooling and university life. An interview-based critical ethnographic study was carried out in each participating university to begin to identify the characteristics of these students as well as of their educational experiences. The second stage was a subsequent (P)AR project carried out with some of the participants in the first stage, aimed at identifying curriculum guidelines that would support such students in their academic writing.

\textsuperscript{36} The Palenque people are descendants of Africans who escaped from Spanish slavery during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. They settled in a hilly area close to the northern coast of Colombia. They speak one of the two Creole languages in Colombia, which is one of the world’s two Creoles with a Spanish lexis basis (Cuervo, 2008).

The third stage was conceptualised as a (P)AR project to design some teaching and learning resources to support these students and their lecturers. I coordinated this (P)AR program in the three universities in Colombia from September 2006 until I left for Australia to begin my PhD studies in July 2009. I had not at all considered that I might write a story in English about a (P)AR experience in Colombia closely connected to my new situation as a non-native speaker of English in Australia. Yet overnight this Spanish native Mestiza speaker became one of the millions of people belonging to various ethnic and linguistic minorities living in an English language dominant country. With my move to Australia, the geopolitics of academic writing would no longer be only a matter of concern and reflection about what Indigenous, Raizal and Afro-Colombian students have to pass through in my university in Colombia. The matter had quickly leaped to the heart of my life as a native Spanish speaker needing to write (and read and speak) in English to produce my own PhD thesis in Australia.

3.3. About weaving my Arhuaca mochila bag

When I was preparing my trip to Australia, and was considering what gift I might bring for my principal supervisor to express my gratitude at the start on my PhD journey, I did not hesitate about what it should be: an Arhuaca mochila bag. The Arhuacos are one of the several descendant peoples of the Tayrona Indigenous civilisation, which inhabited the world’s highest snow mountain chain closest to the sea. After Spanish conquerors arrived on the northern coast of Colombia in the fifteenth century, they forced the Arhuacos to live in the upmost areas of this mountain chain, where all possible climate zones in the tropics can be found. The 5,700 metres high Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta (the Snowy Mountain Range of Saint Martha) represents the entire spiritual world for the Arhuacos.

I always wanted to have an Arhuaca mochila bag but I could never afford it. Not long before leaving for Australia in 2009 I was given one by my younger sister, who had been in the region the Arhuacos inhabit. She bought one of these bags for herself but learning how much I appreciate them, she did not hesitate to give it to me so I could take it with me to Australia, to use myself. Arhuaca mochila bags are one of the most acknowledged handicrafts a tourist can buy when visiting my homeland. However, very few tourists really understand the wisdom they are
taking with them; they do not know how to read the knowledge woven into these beautiful objects. This was one of the main concerns of one of my former Indigenous students who was also a participant in the (P)AR program. He does not belong to the Arhuacos but to the Wayúu people, and he has been really saddened by the inability of the Wayúu people attending universities in Bogotá to read their own Wayúu mochila bags. He laments that many of the new generation of Wayúu people can hardly recognise their own knowledge even when they have the Wayúu mochila bags with them.

The Arhuacos say that they weave each bag based on their most profound thoughts and feelings about their daily life relationships with all that surrounds them: other human beings, nature and the spiritual world. Each mochila bag is unique in this sense; it deals with a particular human being’s way of understanding and living in the world. That is why each Arhuaca mochila bag is so valuable and so much appreciated in my homeland, especially by those who know about this woven knowledge. Each Arhuaco keeps all the personal mochila bags that they make throughout their lives as a treasure.

This notion of woven knowledge was not an explicit guiding principle when I started leading the (P)AR program on the geopolitics of academic writing with Indigenous and Raizal students and academic staff in 2006. Nevertheless, the importance of weaving relationships continued to inform my actions as long as I was actively participating in the project. Perhaps this is part of the Indigenous knowledge that has passed on to the Mestizos in my country. Perhaps that is why for Colombians, how we connect with other human beings is so important for our understanding of a happy life.

3.4. The spiral weaving of the political in (P)AR

The first image that comes to my mind to describe my weaving experience in the (P)AR program on academic writing is a spiral; this image can represent my weaving experience as a (P)AR practitioner in general terms. However, it is not the same spiral that (P)AR practitioners are accustomed to talking about. It is not one of the many spirals concerning the epistemology of (P)AR. The spiral I am
thinking about is one mainly connected to the Arhuaca mochila bag cosmogony: a spiral that exists because of our relationships with those with whom we inhabit this world, and that brings about new realities with these relationships.

According to Barragan (1999), the spiral weaving of the Arhuaca mochila bags is a reference to the creation of the Arhuaco cosmos, that is, the physical and spiritual world that the Arhuacos have inhabited for many centuries. Because this weaving is nurtured with their cultural knowledge, which is represented by one or several of the geometric figures forming their cosmos, it entails a profound reflection of their interrelationships with people and nature. For the Arhuaco people, the mochila bag is the freest symbol of the creation of life, namely, the Universal Mother’s womb. This is why the image of a female weaving mochilas is endowed with the power and spirit of fertility in the Arhuaco community. The colours and designs of each mochila bag among the Arhuaco people are the means of introducing each of them to the community – a way for each Arhuaco person to express their identity, and their belonging to the community at the same time. Nowadays the mochilas are also woven for sale but even as saleable items they are still woven in keeping with this cosmogony. Weaving each bag takes time. It is time that the weaver takes to renew their commitment to preserving their relationships with all that surrounds them and, in this way, to renewing Arhuaco spiritual life.

The spiral of (P)AR I refer to below concerns this non-Western view of permanently weaving our relationships with the world, and all the creatures that inhabit it with us. But it also deals with the challenges that emerge when different worldviews come together in searching for the common good. In our academic writing project, the (P)AR practitioners in particular introduced themselves as a politically committed, action oriented group of researchers, seeking to help solve problems of injustice derived from colliding contemporary perspectives about what it means to live together well. Being the beneficiary of a blend of non-Western and Western heritages, I have found the commonalities of these two traditions quite encouraging. The Arhuacos’ understanding of the importance of relationships in the world that human beings inhabit seems to me especially aligned with the thought of German political theorist Hannah Arendt introduced above. Particularly interesting for this (P)AR story is her coincidental view of the

Based on my understanding of encounters between traditions, in political terms I can describe my (P)AR experience of the geopolitics of academic writing as one spiral in a set of interconnected spirals (i.e., the other (P)AR projects and programs in which I have been engaged). Like all the other spirals, this particular spiral has a living centre (the community in which the (P)AR practitioner is engaged), which is woven with threads from a variety of sources. Like the starting point of the spiral weaving of the base of the Arhuaca mochila bag, the living centre of the spiral of (P)AR is a reminder of the creative power of those who weave their actions, ideas and stories. This living centre in (P)AR needs to be strong enough to keep safe everything that is valuable. It needs to be formed by tight ties, whose forms can be as different as the threads and stitches that constitute them. The power coming from this creative living centre allows the spiral weaving to broaden its scope to form the base of the bag – a scope determined by the weaver. From that moment on, the base of the bag defines the second stage of the spiral weaving: one that is aimed at defining the capacity of the Arhuaca mochila bag. It is at this stage when the Arhuaco weaver creates the geometric figures that contain Arhuaco knowledge. This spiral weaving ends when the weaver finishes the geometric figures. The weaver has then determined the capacity of the bag and so attaches the woven rope to ready the bag for carrying.

However, the political spiral of (P)AR has some other elements concerning the weaving of relationships. These are relations among people who have different worldviews, different interests and different ideas about what the common good can or should be.

3.5. New beginnings from broken threads and ties

As I noted above, this (P)AR program was created in response to an invitation to participate in an international collaborative agenda reflecting on several issues, one of which was the geopolitics of academic writing. This invitation came to me
through an email from one of the scholars leading that agenda. With my interest inspired by this invitation, I started writing a (P)AR proposal to research the different types of situations university students from ethnic minority groups have to face when asked to write their academic texts in the official language of the academy in Colombia, Spanish. I recognised that a better understanding of this could enable us as academics to support these students in a more appropriate, timely and therefore effective way. I presented a three-stage (P)AR program proposal to a research group that I belong to whose members work in three different universities. After discussion and analysis of the proposal, the group members agreed to carry out this initiative as a collaborative project among our universities.

When a final version of the (P)AR proposal was ready, I contacted the academic in Europe who is in charge of the international group conducting this research. This was not the academic who invited me to participate in the international agenda. I wanted to give her the good news about our research group’s endorsement of the proposal we had discussed to be carried out in three universities in Colombia. Her reply to my email was a very cold closure of our very incipient collaborative relationship. She told me that additional initiatives could not be included in the program. With some sadness, but understanding her response, I replied that our Colombian research group had decided to work on this social problem not to seek European funding but because of the importance of the matter as a research issue for Colombian universities. I clarified that the inter-university research group’s endorsement of the proposal implied that group members would apply for funding from our own universities. Sending best wishes for the funding application process in Europe, we said farewell, indicating we would be in contact when we had more to report. No further emails came from anyone organising the international agenda to ask about our projects. I therefore focused my attention on what needed to be done in Colombia.

As I revised my publications about this (P)AR program (Santos, 2009b, 2010, forthcoming), I continued to present the proposal to begin the program as an initiative that started with an invitation to participate in an international agenda, which was true. What I felt I could not say was that our explicit interest in accepting this invitation was rejected because those making the funding
application in Europe saw our proposal as unnecessary to the broader research project they conceptualised. Their credibility in relation to authentic interest in this international collaborative research project was at stake. It seems that the web of relationships sustaining collaborative research were also being defined by financial interests within the (P)AR community.

Despite this broken thread with the international research group in Europe, the discussion in our Colombian research group led to a new beginning. In this proposal on Indigenous academic writing, our inter-university research group had designed a program that could lead us to work together on an important issue that had been neglected in our country, with unfortunate but reparable consequences. This spiral of (P)AR initiated by a European thread had served to start us in the process of weaving our own living centre. The first sign of our own power came from the endorsement of the (P)AR program proposal by the members of the inter-university research group.

We were five Mestizo academics agreeing on the basics of the proposal: the problem, the research objectives, the stages and the outcomes. The theoretical perspective informing the (P)AR proposal (a critical theory of education) was the main issue under discussion in our group. Three of us who had worked together in other (P)AR projects before, could find immediate affinity with one of the other two researchers who had done research with an approach based on a different critical theory. The four of us aligned easily with critical perspectives. However, this was not so with the fifth researcher. The incompatibility between our critical theories in education and his poststructuralist ones became evident from the beginning. We tried hard to overcome this difference in our theoretical perspectives so that it would not harm our relationships or our projects. But in time it did.

At differing paces, three research groups were formed in each university under the guidance of three official lead researchers. Besides leading the inter-university (P)AR program, I was leading the research group in my university. The incompatibility between the theoretical perspectives in the research group was just one of the challenges we had to face. Having obtained funding from my university to run the first stage of the (P)AR program, I designed a strategy to build up a
research team there. But quickly the poststructuralist co-researcher, who worked in my university, had more than doubts about the legitimacy of the critical theoretical perspective informing the (P)AR program. He also had conflict of interests, after his appointment to a management position in the academic unit in which we worked. He allocated time in his work schedule to do some specific activities for the (P)AR program in our university for a year. However, he did not fulfil his commitments. As group leader I inherited the work he had not done, which overloaded my own university work. It also led to the deterioration of our relationship as members of the inter-university group in charge of the project in our university. This knot of the weaving had unravelled.

During the first year of research work while the conflict with my co-researcher intensified, one way that I tried to draw more people into the (P)AR project in my university was to invite undergraduate and postgraduate students to participate with their research proposals, under my supervision. As the lecturer in charge of the Bilingual Education subject in a Master by coursework program, I made a proposal to the Head of the Department to link the (P)AR project to the Master degree curriculum. He agreed. Seven Master students accepted the invitation, as well as three undergraduate students who were interested in joining the group. I met with this group of students fortnightly for six months to inform them about the (P)AR program (objectives, theoretical and methodological frameworks) and to explore possible research projects to be linked to the program as final assignments for their respective courses. Alongside these meetings, I ran fortnightly meetings with the inter-university research teams. I remember those long days of hard work.

When the due date to submit the students’ research proposals was almost upon us, there was an unexpected turn. Another staff member asked the Master degree students to write their research proposals in relation to another research program she was leading. This program was a new commitment achieved with a governmental institute; endorsement of this change was given by the course coordinator, who was the co-researcher in conflict with me on our (P)AR project. All the work I had done with these students over six months was suddenly no longer a priority. In the end, only the three undergraduate students could carry out their research projects linked to the (P)AR program, so the research by students
concerned only three ethnic minorities. One Master degree student insisted on continuing to work with us, but he had many troubles. After his requests to the Master degree committee to accept his research proposal, he was permitted to develop it further. All of the six other Master degree students changed their minds about staying in the (P)AR program. Intra-classroom conflicts with the lead researcher of the new research program were undermining their autonomy to continue with the initial idea to work with us. From this exhausting work for them and for me, some important connections were woven – and one was certainly torn apart.

In spite of my disagreements with the course coordinator and the Master course advisory board about the way the Master degree students and I had been treated, a Department committee decided to give priority to the new research program to which the course coordinator was then committed. Now the differences between theoretical perspectives in the inter-university research group were supplanted by conflicts of interest and clear instances where the exercise of power was harming real people. As lead researcher at my university, I discussed these situations with the co-researcher (also course coordinator). By mutual agreement, the co-researcher in my university quit the program. The work done with the postgraduate students was not lost; three of them worked with the team as research assistants. They made important contributions to analyses of relevant education policy documents, our description of the Indigenous and Raizal student population, and to identifying teaching and research projects to support the academic writing of these populations at the university. I think this experience was meaningful for them as they tried hard not to succumb to the difficult circumstances in which they were embedded in the Master degree course. We looked for ways to continue working together.

These two last two episodes – the unexpected break with my co-researcher and with the group of Master degree students – were different from each other in relation to the spiral weaving experience. The original tie between my friend, colleague and co-researcher was being broken due to some of differences between us; the new ties between the ten postgraduate students and I were forced apart by the circumstances of other people to benefit other interests. No matter why these ties were broken, the breakage affected the web of relationships we were weaving.
to address the social problem that had brought us together for research. Even so, these broken threads and ties brought about new beginnings; the breaking of threads and ties, though not desirable, provides an opportunity for unexpected events to happen.

The course coordinator, oriented by his own perspective and interests, accepted my invitation to convene and organise a seminar with an Indigenous co-researcher I had invited to join the team at my university. This was one of our initiatives in the second stage of the (P)AR program: a seminar on the academic writing of Indigenous and Raizal students in Colombian higher education. The broken thread and ties started to turn different, brighter colours as we recovered the main focus of our efforts: the Indigenous and Raizal students. This seminar, which was held in June 2009, reached further than we originally thought since deaf students also wanted to participate and we enabled them to do so through engaging a person to perform sign language. This stray thread then became part of the weaving experience. Academics from several universities in Colombia, representatives of several government offices, Indigenous students from different ethnic communities and deaf students, all told their stories. These stories helped participants to understand much better the complexity of the matter under discussion. One of the academics who shared her experience was a participant in the first project of the (P)AR program. She would become the academic who I invited to lead this research program in my university when I left for Australia to start my PhD studies.

Also on a positive note, the postgraduate students who had worked as research assistants kept on working on the research problem; one directly and the other two indirectly. The Master degree student from a European country confirmed his interest in researching the use and learning of writing in Spanish and Portuguese in a specific Indigenous community in the Amazon region, while the two Colombian students researched lexical interferences and writing and a bilingual immersion course, respectively. Their interest in the research problem and their commitment to do something about it were certainly threads that became part of this spiral of (P)AR, as well as the start of new realities that they could weave through their own lives.
3.6. Weaving with more stray and loose threads

In my endeavour to weave relationships to address the social problem of interest for this (P)AR program, and being aware of the importance of involving academics in it, I presented the initiative to the Director of one of the most highly awarded research institutes in the Spanish-speaking world. The Institute Caro y Cuervo is attached to the Ministry of Culture in Colombia, and is in charge of research, teaching and promotion of the languages spoken in our country. It provides advice to the Colombian government in formulating policies aimed at strengthening and preserving this non-material patrimony of Colombia. In my meeting with the Institute Director I was offered an appointment on behalf of my university to work with that Institute to support some initiatives related to the teaching of Spanish as a second language. As I had just started this (P)AR program, I had to decline this very attractive offer. However, I noted to the Director that our main concerns were closely related. When I described the (P)AR program about academic writing and Indigenous students in higher education, she agreed we had found a common cause to work on. As soon as she received more information about the inter-university research initiative I was leading, she expressed an interest in involving the Institute in the program. She would allocate a part-time researcher and some funding to support the program. We agreed to prepare an agreement between my university and the Institute to make this happen.

After six months of preliminary talks with potential researchers and several drafts of the agreement, this attempt at collaboration was aborted. When I was writing the final details of the agreement, my Faculty would not agree to co-author the book that would be published about this research. The Academic Sub-Dean thought that since the main intellectual contributions would come from only one of the academics affiliated to the Faculty (me), the book should have just me as principal author, with acknowledgements to the Institute. During this stage of the talks, my own position was never taken into account. What I found even more discouraging was the Department’s lack of acknowledgment to any other types of contributions required to solve the research problem. Fortunately, this way of approaching co-authorship in the Faculty changed one year later with change of the academic in charge of Faculty. Ironically, it was only two years later in
August 2009 that I submitted the final version of the research book to my academic unit for peer review. Yet I needed to ask this unit to stop the evaluation since I recognised a new need had emerged to update this book in demographic terms. Today the relationship woven with the Institute is intact, despite the failure of senior management to reach a bilateral agreement between the two institutions. This is a stray thread in the weaving experience I was committed to.

This type of struggle for academic territories and public reputation was not new for me. I had a similar experience in 2003 with a proposal I was asked to write for a Master course for teaching Spanish as a second/foreign language in my university. Academics from two departments, who knew about my work, had asked me to write the proposal as soon as I was appointed as a part-time lecturer there. When the proposal was almost ready, a change in the heads of school in the Faculty revived a historical confrontation between the two academic units concerned. The proposal was filed and, I think, forgotten. This is another loose thread: one that several academics in these two units still see and would like to attempt to weave once again.

This failed attempt to work collaboratively with academics of the Institute because of institutional policies and managerial styles was not the only one in the history of the (P)AR program on the geopolitics of academic writing. When all five members of the inter-university research group agreed to carry out this program in their universities, more surprises appeared in the weaving of relationships for this common cause. While the funding application process in my university took one semester to process, in the private university it took a year, and in the public district university it took two years. We had to learn how to cope with three different institutional policies for funding applications, for approving and allocating the academics’ research work, and, more importantly, for assessments of collaborative research work in our universities.

When we began to encounter difficulties in meeting due dates in our initial common timetable, we decided to establish a type of collaborative work that could deal with three different timetables for the three stages of the program in each university. In this way, we could keep a general timetable to work on the guiding principles of the (P)AR program while letting each research team proceed at its
own pace. We agreed that this course of action would cause us the least stress. As a result of this agreement, while I was finishing the first stage of the (P)AR program in my university, the research team in the private university was starting it, and the research proposal in the public district university was still under evaluation. We then had three different spirals rotating at their own pace, although all remained linked to the group’s main initiative. These appeared to be stray threads of the main spiral but in fact they were strong and integrated in their own autonomous spirals.

Other threads directly concerned bureaucratic structures. These threads are reminders of the constantly increasing number of participants in our (P)AR processes, with participants whose main commitment and engagement were not necessarily connected to solving the social problems we were seeking to address. We found one of these loose threads at the very beginning of the first stage of the (P)AR program in my university. I knew there was an office in the university in charge of funding programs to support Indigenous students, among other students coming from the nation’s most deprived communities. I knew that this office, based in the Bogotá campus, would certainly be the first I would need to approach in my goal of weaving the spiral within my own university.

I asked for an appointment with the Director of the office to present this (P)AR program. In our meeting, this academic said she was pleased to know my Department was becoming involved more directly and clearly in supporting this particular student population’s academic writing in Spanish. I then asked for her consent to use the database kept by her office to contact the Indigenous students and invite them to participate. She agreed and offered the support of one of her assistants to establish this first communication. Based on the outcomes of this talk, I asked one of the research assistants in the (P)AR program to contact the person from that office who would provide the database and prepare our first communication with the Indigenous students.

After requests for this database from September 2007, it was finally delivered to us at the end of May 2008. The main reason of this delay was that the database was being updated. Once the update was complete, we could finish characterisation of the Indigenous student population in our university. While the
update was under way, we asked the person in charge of meeting with the Indigenous students to allocate us some time to present our project in one of the activities with them. Although the assistant of that office agreed to include a short written invitation text drafted by me in an institutional email addressed to the Indigenous students, this invitation was never emailed to these students. I then decided on another way to approach this student population. This time the contact would not be through the university office I had approached unsuccessfully but through the snowball technique: I asked the Indigenous students I knew to contact others and tell them about my interest in talking with them. This was, in the end, the way I made contact with them after eight months of failed attempts through institutional channels.

Similar circumstances were at work in our attempts to contact the Raizal students in the San Andres (Islands) Campus. Here I took advantage of a visit I had to make to this campus as the coordinator of another project I led in the Academic Vice-Rector’s Office,38 I met the academic in charge of coordinating the program that the university created to facilitate the transition between the initial access of Raizal students to the courses in the islands and continuation of their studies in one of the main inland campuses. In that conversation, I once again provided information about the objectives of the (P)AR program on academic writing in Spanish and suggested he may wish to join the initiative. He did and offered that the information concerning the small group of students in the islands would be sent by the person in charge of direct contact with them. After frequent phone calls and emails, the information was sent to me more than seven months later; the person in charge of that information had been off work after an accident and no-one performed her role while she was away. In one of my subsequent visits to the islands, I met the students who would participate.

It was clear that the academics responsible for these two institutional programs were not only interested in supporting the project I was leading but also saw in this partnership a way to address a common goal. The loose threads were, in both cases, related to the administrative staff in charge of information management.

38 In Latin American universities, the Rector is the highest educational authority. He or she holds the powers of the Vice-Chancellor in the English speaking countries. The Rector is assisted by Vice-Rectors; these would correspond to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor role.
The lack of timely responses to the information requested really affected our weaving of the web of relationships with the student population. This was also the case for some administrative staff of the Faculty responsible for follow up on compliance of the contractors in charge of importing some bibliographical resources to support the participants’ learning and teaching of Spanish as a second language. About AU$5000 were wasted as a result of these time delays.

How I am telling this story so far may give the impression that everything went wrong in my weaving of relationships in this (P)AR program. However, one of the most salient features of the political spiral of (P)AR is that not only can the resistant threads with their tight ties bring about new beginnings, some broken and loose threads can lead to that too.

3.7. Weaving new figures with colourful threads

I invited two Indigenous people to participate more actively in this (P)AR program in my university. One was a former Indigenous student who took one of my subjects twice (he failed it the first time); the other was the only full-time Indigenous member of the academic staff at the university. The two belong to different Indigenous communities and participated in this (P)AR program by playing three different roles each at three different moments. First, I invited them to narrate, like all the participants in the first study, their schooling experiences with Spanish from early childhood to university life. Their narration was supported, when necessary, by my posing questions suggested in the interview protocol designed by the inter-university research team. Their second participation was the result of their agreement to transform their narratives into two chapters for the research book. To fund this, some money was allocated for the Indigenous student to join the (P)AR program and write a chapter. Meanwhile, I negotiated with the Head of the Department about appointing the Indigenous academic as co-researcher, one of whose tasks was to write the chapter based on his interview.

My work with both Indigenous people was definitely enlightening. From their narration of personal experiences with Spanish in schooling, in general, and with academic writing at university, in particular, I was able to understand more deeply
my role in their stories. For the student, I could understand much better what went wrong in his learning and my teaching processes. Our talk (the interview) was a self-discovery experience for both of us as individuals and as members of the university community and broader society. I apologised for my unawareness (not bluntly calling it ignorance) of his challenges in the classroom with such a theoretical subject as the one I was delivering at the time. He too apologised, explaining it was difficult for him to understand what academics wanted him to do or learn. Again I felt I was being very unfair with him, even in our mutual apology. This led me to think of the importance of including in the research book some chapters aimed at telling the academic community a few stories to illustrate what Indigenous people have to pass through in Colombian schooling and the particular situations they had to face in university life when writing academic texts in Spanish. These chapters would also need to illustrate how to prepare academic texts so they are respectful of each other’s traditions (the non-Western oral tradition and the Western written tradition).

Something similar happened with the Indigenous academic I invited to participate. Our offices were in the same building of the Faculty for about five years, but I knew little about him and how he became part of the academic staff. Through working with him on this (P)AR program, I knew he was the first full-time Indigenous academic in Colombian higher education. From a seminar I attended in 2008 at one of the other universities participating in this (P)AR program, I learned that another Indigenous man who applied for a position in Colombia’s second largest public university was challenged in the application process to provide ‘written proof’ of the knowledge he had created throughout his life. His application was successful largely thanks to advice and support from one of his friends, who taught him how to write a CV.

The Indigenous colleague who agreed to participate in this (P)AR program narrated his own ordeal gaining an academic appointment in our university. Like many other Indigenous people, he made decisions about his life at a very early age. His decisions led him to travel and work throughout the country until he met someone interested in researching his native language; he would serve as ‘a primary source’ for a research project. His beginnings at the university as a
research assistant enabled him to work with other academics who helped him to cope with the demands of the academic world.

I learned through my colleague’s story that there has long been an Indigenous-like language created by Westerners to refer to non-Western people and their worldviews. His doubts about the authenticity of what an anthropologist wrote about something my colleague’s grandfather told that anthropologist reminded me of the angry voice of an Indigenous student I heard the day I was writing the first draft of this (P)AR program proposal in my office. Using a loud speaker, that student was trying to persuade the university community not to join academics’ research initiatives as these had always invited Indigenous people to participate in projects based on selfish intentions. I very much wanted our project not to be or be seen as one of those.

As a consequence, I suggested to my Indigenous colleague to revise the transcript of his narration to confirm its content, and to edit some excerpts in his native language. I offered to edit the transcript for its Spanish language, and tried to minimise my editing; we both felt that readability was the main concern. While doing this writing exercise with him, I asked him if he would like to become a co-researcher in the (P)AR program. He accepted. I told him about one idea that I thought was particularly important in the original (P)AR proposal: staging an academic event on the academic writing of students in Colombian higher education whose native language is not Spanish. I told him I would ask a former co-researcher, who was now in charge of coordinating a Master degree course, if he would be interested in working with my Indigenous colleague to organise it.

I had experienced some conflicts of interests with that academic before, so it seemed that a new formula (a new team) and new circumstances could work much better. Knowing that the original idea had been brought about in this (P)AR program, I understood the coordinator of this Master degree course could have been interested in running this event to promote the main emphasis of the new cohort: bilingualism. I had a meeting with him, and we agreed that he and the Indigenous academic would be in charge of organising this academic event. I asked that the initiative and contribution of the inter-university research group be acknowledged at the event, which was held in June 2009. Students from several
linguistic and ethnic minority communities (Indigenous students, deaf students), well recognised national and international researchers and academics, representatives of the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education, and the directors of some of the offices supporting these student populations in the university attended the event. Over three days, papers were presented, experiences narrated and debates conducted about bilingual students’ academic writing in Colombian higher education. The thread that was once loose was now being woven again to continue the spiral weaving of the political of (P)AR. The social problem we wanted to put on the table for discussion at a national level was much more important than personal conflicts. In the end, we could agree on the common good.

Certainly there are new beginnings from this academic event: discussions that took place, a variety of initiatives, and four hand-written drafts of chapters by the two Indigenous people who I worked with in this (P)AR program. Most importantly, the event had finally opened a national debate about the academic writing of bilingual students in Colombian higher education. Here was discussion about new ways of transforming academic struggles to agree on a common goal. Many agendas once agreed to are lost along the way, due to territorial battles of people in the academy. But academics now have a more important battle to fight: a battle against the academic ego that is everyday more exalted by the accountability culture. Today, common agendas to support the more deprived communities have never been more challenged while competition dominates education. However, unexpected weavings can surely help us as we look for creative, effective ways out from this trap.

Another important moment in this experience of (P)AR weaving its spiral concerned a role I played in 2008. In that year, my full time workload had been allocated as half time to lead the (P)AR program with the inter-university research group, and other half to lead an institutional project aimed at providing some guidelines to self-review the university’s roughly 300 graduate courses. Drafts of a national policy on the accreditation of graduate courses were then being discussed in the academic community. My participation in this institutional project from January 2008 until July 2009 is the matter of another story. Here my reference to this project concerns the relationships I established with the
academics in charge of the policy-making processes of the university at a national level.

This institutional project was run by the office of the Academic Vice-Rector in charge of curriculum development of the graduate courses. While developing that project, I had the opportunity to meet and work with the director of the office responsible for guiding curriculum development processes in the undergraduate courses of the university. Our discussions about the accreditation processes of institutions and courses in Colombian higher education frequently were intertwined with reflections on various situations that the students who belonged to ethnic and linguistic minorities were involved in their daily academic lives.

One of these issues was closely connected to a new policy then under discussion. It sought to support a sector of the student population that had access to the university every session but was assessed as having low levels of proficiency in reading and writing Spanish, and in English as a foreign language. Drafts of the policy had already been written, referring to new actions to guarantee improvement of those language skills among such students in the initial stage of undergraduate courses. These drafts were informed by our discussions about what certain academic demands meant for non-Western students. The result of this awareness-raising process was inclusion of a specific section on Spanish as a second language in the final version of the regulation decree, to support students who needed to achieve a ‘sufficient’ proficiency level in languages at the university by the beginning of 2010. This already colourful thread of the weaving now took the form of specific institutional actions as a result of our finding common concerns in shared policymaking agendas. However, this was not the only policy action linked to the discussions promoted by the (P)AR program.

An initiative of the university to offer special subjects to the new students in need of improving their academic performance in Spanish, English and mathematics, was also connected to the (P)AR program. One of the academics interviewed in the first stage of the (P)AR project turned out to be not only a colleague in my academic unit but also the person in charge of coordinating these special subjects at the Bogotá campus. As soon as I knew I had been awarded an international scholarship to do my PhD studies in Australia, I contacted her and asked her if she
was interested in becoming the lead researcher of the (P)AR program on academic writing in my absence; she replied positively. While the research teams in the other participating universities had started their own research spirals, the spiral at my university was about to take a new turn with the arrival of a newcomer who would also be, at least temporarily, the new project leader. I offered her, of course, all the support she would require to move with the (P)AR program. I suggested she proof read our research book on the project’s first stage as a strategy to learn about the main findings to that stage. Her leadership would require that she join the inter-university research group as the Indigenous academic had done. She also participated actively in drafting the proceedings of the June 2009 academic event held at the university, in which she presented a paper and participated in one of the discussions as a panellist. I understood the new lead researcher would represent a new beginning for the (P)AR program in our university. I expected that she would not be another version of me but rather the weaver of a colourful new strand in the spiral weaving at my university.

Sometime later while I was studying in Australia, a chance arose for the new lead researcher to present a paper at the annual conference of the Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN), where this (P)AR program originated. I encouraged her by email and Skype conversations to overcome her fear about presenting the paper at this English-speaking event. I offered to co-author the paper she would present as a type of bridge between the project’s outbound leader and inbound leader. I advised her about bureaucratic procedures to help actually realise her trip to Greece and provided some support for her experience in the academic English-speaking world. This experience was a first for her, one that I am very pleased she could pursue. She still coordinates the subjects on writing and reading academic texts in Spanish at the Bogotá Campus, and she has advised me that her appointment to teach and research Indigenous students’ academic writing in Spanish has been continued. Three years after I left Bogotá in 2009, I will be back at the university working with her in a (P)AR initiative for which we obtained funding to continue enhancing plurality in the university community through reading and writing processes.
3.8. Threads that weave new arms of the spiral

The research experiences in the other two participating universities also offer interesting stories. The private university where this (P)AR program has been carried out is one of the oldest universities in the country. It was founded in the fifteenth century by one of the religious denominations that arrived early in what was called the New World. Now it has about 21,000 students and 3,500 academics. The (P)AR research team at this university was formed by five academics who quickly sought funding for this research project. They knew that there were Indigenous students at the university and were therefore surprised to learn that the university did not have a database on these Indigenous students. There was no collection of information on who they were or in which courses they were enrolled, even in the offices in charge of student affairs. After presenting information about this situation and the inter-university research group’s initiative to the Rector of the university, who was formerly Dean of their Faculty, the group members agreed to make door-to-door visits to the Faculties to identify the Indigenous students. This was the only way to start the research work while the office in charge of course enrolment constructed a database with these details.

After some months of hard work, the researchers constructed their own database. They contacted the Indigenous students and invited some to participate in the first stage of the program. I had carried out (P)AR projects with three members of this research team in the past and the other two members had been students of mine in a Master degree at my university. These earlier linkages enabled us connect with each other in various ways. This research team presented some preliminary findings at the June 2009 seminar on academic writing with bilingual university students.

The research team in the district public university, like the research team in the private university, needed to proceed at its own pace. Here too institutional processes, procedures and policies shaped what the group could achieve, as well as how and when. From the beginning, the lead researcher’s main challenge was to link her research activity to her duties as coordinator of the inter-university PhD course in the field of education in which her university participated. With
roughly 26,100 students and 1,700 academics, this university ran the specific PhD course in collaboration with other universities in Colombia. Here the leader’s first objective was to seek project funding for three years – an institutional requirement. It made this research team wait longer than they had expected before they could start the project. The team finally started the first stage of the (P)AR project in this university in December 2008 and finished it in December 2011. The second stage is in progress.

In spite of the delay (two years) caused by waiting for their university to provide the necessary research funding, this research team attended all fortnightly meetings with the inter-university research group and participated actively in discussions about the design of the various data collection and analysis techniques. It also supported all the academic events organised by the inter-university research group on various research matters. After two years, the group ran seminars on this research topic in its PhD course, with national and international guests. In 2010 it presented preliminary findings of the first and second stages of this (P)AR program at national events. These findings were particularly related to critical discourse analysis studies of national and international policy documents in the field of education that mention Indigenous and Afro-Colombian student populations. Some PhD students are currently carrying out their research projects, which analyse various situations concerning the academic writing of these ethnic and linguistic minority sectors in the higher education context.

The research processes in our three universities have an autonomous life – a life enriched by the particular characteristics of both their student populations and their academics, the institutional cultures of their institutions, and special features of the research problem in that specific university context and the researchers’ particular ways of approaching these features. In 2012 it is four years after our initial talks on responding to the invitation to participate in the international initiative on the geopolitics of academic writing. All three of our universities have shaped their own spiral weaving processes based on the power coming from people who each day have been engaged in this research project in one way or another. This power has enabled us to manage creatively the conflicts that have emerged in our particular institutional contexts. The institutional struggles
stemming from the competitive trend that we see is now undermining higher education, have not undermined the collaborative relationships we have woven among ourselves and others in our (P)AR projects over the years.

3.9. Lost needles or new threads?

In weaving this story, I have here reached the stage where I must pose a crucial question: what has happened to the Indigenous, Raizal and Afro-Colombian students who have participated in this (P)AR program during these four years? We knew intuitively that something started to happen as soon as we started to interview these students and some of their lecturers. They all told us this. They had never been asked what we were asking about; they had never recalled their experiences in a way that could be useful for them and others. Not only could they face their painful experiences in a productive way, but they could also assess these experiences in relation to how they could orient their academic writing to improve their work – and their grades. This research experience in particular led me to appreciate how helpful it was to run a critical ethnographic interview-based stage at the beginning of the (P)AR program. In my university, for example, the students’ stories about their university life enabled me to understand the complexity of the educational experiences through which they had passed and are still passing. I hope that readers of our research book can similarly gain deeper understanding.

We researchers had expected from the outset that the academic writing experiences of the Indigenous students and the Raizal students were not the same; their cultural and social contexts challenge them in different ways. Clearly, a common thread – profound confusion – weaves through the transcripts of this new generation of Indigenous and Raizal people. They see themselves as the beneficiaries of some kind of acknowledgement of their place in society and what they want to become, while they are still locked into a web of social relationships that does not treat them as equals in the end. The academic texts that they need to write for university studies constitute a site of this social struggle. They are expected to write like a native speaker of Spanish. And depending on the subject and the lecturer, their ‘non-Western’ worldviews can be intertwined with the
worldviews that dominate in the West. Their search for what they want to become is challenged on a daily basis at the university. All the interviewed students spoke of the loneliness they experienced when they arrived at the university, and the discouraging return to zero that they had to accept on recognising they were not acknowledged for who they are and what they know. These responses speak much of the personal and political weaving that sustains our academic settings. The testimonies of these students offer us an account of much that has changed in our schooling but also much that has not changed.

Like these students, a Latin American PhD Mestiza student living in semi-rural Australia experiences hardship with academic writing in an English speaking world. Also like them, my main challenge is to find a way to continue searching who I am while continuing to weaving relationships with other people whose mother language and worldviews are not necessarily my own. I appreciate that throughout life we engage with others who do not share our views completely – or at all – even when we share a mother tongue.

Recently I have thought about various answers given to the question of what indicates the success of a (P)AR experience. With special affection I recalled the answer of Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda; when the (P)AR practitioner becomes redundant in the research context, maybe the (P)AR experience can be considered a success (Fals-Borda & Ordonez, 2007, p. 11). However, I also remembered the words of Rodney Mark, Chief of the Cree Nation of Wemindji in Canada: “Ask yourself, if you are not involved in this project will it succeed and if the answer is no, then you should seriously evaluate how to ensure the success of the project when you are no longer involved” (Stoceck & Mark, 2010, p. 8).

I had to leave the (P)AR program that I initiated in September 2006 to start my PhD studies overseas in July 2009. I did my best to ‘ensure’ the creation of a web of relationships around the socio-political problem that the research team wanted to address through this (P)AR program. But I am not sure that the program’s success must rely on me as a lead researcher, as Chief Mark expects. From my point of view, a (P)AR experience succeeds if the weaving of the web is worth it for those who are involved in the project and engaged in this web; the strength of
the web is the guarantee that no matter what problems the participants face, they will trust the web of relationships they have woven to ensure they overcome obstacles. However, from my perspective the most important factor for success is that the people involved in the experience truly care about the people who they relate to on daily basis.

In some way I am aligned with Fals Borda’s answer: being redundant could be a useful indicator of a successful project leader for practical, daily life purposes. However, I need to disagree with him in another way. I question whether a person, including the lead researcher, can be considered redundant in a web of relationships. Such is the interlinked nature of a web. The Indigenous mochila bags, poems, songs, speeches, full theatre attendance for three days, flags, tears, video sessions at midnight, and other tributes offered to ‘el Maestro Orlando’ after he passed away on 12 August 2008 convey a palpable and evocative message and a powerful lesson for us all about this intangible web. Even after he left the research contexts, as a (P)AR practitioner he could never be considered redundant in the web where he belonged. Perhaps that is the way of the threads of love and care and respect that weave their way to join our human hearts.

It has long been my deepest desire to contribute to weaving small parts of the web of relationships linked to our shared concerns as we undertake (P)AR projects in pursuit of the common interest, especially for people who are marginalised or oppressed. However, my ‘Arhuaco mochila bag’ is different from the interconnectedness of the spirals that (P)AR can bring about. I carry this bag with me wherever I go. I have kept on weaving my mochila bag of (P)AR experiences in Australia. Now some new colourful threads are intertwined with those from my homeland.

I believe that the spiral of the political of (P)AR concerns the notion of creation embedded in the Arhuaco people’s cosmogony and Hannah Arendt’s notion of natality, namely, the human being’s capacity of beginning something anew (Arendt, 1998, p. 9). But I think no image can serve well to truly represent the interconnected spirals that have been woven through this (P)AR program. All the threads and ties are intangible, invisible. They have been woven not only by me, as the lead researcher, but especially by all the participants who have worked
thoughtfully through this program to help address the problem of Indigenous academic writing that drew us together.

The metaphor of the spiral of (P)AR has been used in many research experiences carried out by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in different higher education contexts around the world. However, this spiral metaphor has been used mainly to refer to the epistemological dimension of (P)AR; the political dimension of (P)AR has been addressed using other metaphors. For example, Yunkaporta and McGinty (2009, p. 58) refer to ‘the political’ using metaphors drawn from different Australian Aboriginal language groups, which highlight understanding of the interaction of opposite systems, for example, fresh and salt water, as a magical source of creation.

Like the magical salty water to which Yunkaporta and McGinty (2009) make reference to, the (P)AR program that this story concerns has not only generated journeys of self-discovery for some of us but also has created a new web of relationships, aimed at achieving a new common goal in Colombian higher education. This ongoing new endeavour continues to challenge me to make sense of me entering into other people’s lives in our university communities.
Chapter 4 The (P)AR practitioner as a newcomer (Story 2)

[W]hoever, for whatever reasons, isolates himself and does not partake in such being together, forfeits power and becomes impotent, no matter how great his strength and how valid his reasons (Arendt, 1998, p. 201)

In June 2008, I was invited to coordinate an institutional project at my university aimed at constructing and implementing a model to evaluate our graduate courses. The invitation arrived while I was coordinating the (P)AR program on academic writing of Indigenous, Raizal and Afro-Colombian undergraduate students in three universities in Bogotá as I discussed above in Story 1. Instead of finding conflict between these two processes, I thought I had been offered a wonderful opportunity to articulate an ongoing research initiative concerning curriculum issues at an undergraduate level with an institutional project aimed at evaluating these kinds of matters in graduate courses at the university. From that moment on, I divided my full-time workload equally between these two projects.

I have two special memories of the course evaluation project during those busy days. First, although the ongoing institutional project to evaluate graduate courses was never introduced as a (P)AR initiative at the university, it surely was a case of (P)AR. Second, a main feature of this project was permanent tension among academics – caused by their different positions on how the university was expected to respond to the growing demands for accountability in higher education.

I highlight these two memories as they are related to an important issue about (P)AR. As I have stated above, ‘the political’ of (P)AR in higher education

39 In 2012, there are 316 graduate courses comprising 52 Doctorate courses, 143 Master degrees, 83 specialisations and 38 specialties in the fields of human health and animal health. About 7000 of the University’s 45,000 students are enrolled in graduate courses. These courses are offered in six of the University’s eight campuses. (DNPP, 2012)

40 In Colombia, accountability processes were started in universities in 1992, a year after Congress approved a Bill to both reorganise the nation’s higher education system and legally re-regulate how this system must be ruled. Since then, several governmental offices have been set up and policy actions pursued to enforce the ruling that higher education institutions meet quality standards. In 1996, an accreditation process was introduced for both undergraduate courses and higher education institutions in general. The process required each institution to provide a regular an account of what it has done and how. The many higher education institutions created for business purposes thus had to present solid evidence of the quality of the education they were providing. These moves aiming to ensure quality in higher education were certainly beneficial in some ways. However, meeting ‘high quality standards’ can lead to invisible traps, as the present story goes on to reveal.
concerns both the web of relationships woven through this type of research at this education level, and the resulting ways people organise themselves to achieve their common goals. Because this is so, it is then important to reflect upon the way (P)AR practitioners’ ideas and practices affect these relationships. In an attempt to deepen this reflection, in this story I will explore how my own ideas and practices of ‘research’ and ‘democracy’ in the contemporary accountability culture in higher education may have affected the web of relationships I entered when I started coordinating the project to evaluate graduate courses at my university. Before that exploration I need first to depict the university context in which my arrival as a newcomer to that ongoing project took place.

4.1. About ghosts and rebels

Right after Colombia gained independence from the Spanish regime in the early years of the nineteenth century, the first Vice-President of La Gran Colombia established La Universidad Central de la Republica with three campuses (Bogotá now capital of Colombia, Caracas now capital of Venezuela and Quito now capital of Ecuador). This university was Colombia’s first legal public higher education institution. It was closed by federal governments some years later, but Congress approved a bill to fund La Universidad Nacional de los Estados Unidos de Colombia in 1867. Since then, it has stood firm as a public university ruled by the State (UNAL, 2012).

As such, the authority that governs the university is strongly influenced by the current government. Thus, the University Council is chaired by the Minister of Education, and comprises a circle of people, many of whom have government affiliation: two people designated by the national President, one of the former Rectors, a designated member from the National Council for Higher Education, a member designated by the Academic Council, a professor elected by academic staff members, a student elected by undergraduate and graduate students, and the current Rector, who has a voice but cannot vote.41

41 Conformation of the University Council was defined in an Extraordinary Decree in 1993 and the roles of its members were revised and established in 2005. See. [http://www.unal.edu.co/csu](http://www.unal.edu.co/csu) [Retrieved: 14 December 2011]
This aspect of governance at the university illustrates how the presidential, representative, democratic character of the Republic of Colombia has been retained since its foundation. In my view, it has advantages and disadvantages for the academic life of the university. The university has upheld a special regime that has allowed it to operate more autonomously in academic, financial and administrative matters than other universities in Colombia. However, its autonomy is permanently threatened in turn by the commitments and priorities of the government.

During the first decade of the twenty first century, for example, governments dramatically decreased the university’s funding on the grounds that they were committed to defeating the groups involved in armed conflict that were then bedevilling the nation. Some of the university’s academic autonomy has also been taken away as Colombia’s national governments have joined specific international agendas in higher education that disregard the real circumstances under which it has been accomplishing its goals. Meanwhile, the status and role of higher education in government agendas are just two aspects that make the political environment of this public institution one of the most complex in Colombian higher education.

The university’s creation in the 1860s was also an ‘experiment’ in the new Republic to try to provide the country’s most deprived communities with access to higher education. Upholding the principle of equity has meant that the rich and the poor have always been able to apply for a place. This experiment aimed to educate new generations of professionals and scientists, who would always be committed to a more socially just society in Colombia. The resulting excellence of the university’s academic life after all these years leads about 48000 people to apply for only 4500 places every semester. The ‘white university city’, as it has been known on the basis of its white architecture, also represented a new political scenario to construct the Nation from its classrooms.

This goal has been achieved over time, but the university has been shaped powerfully by difficult socio-political circumstances. In the 1960s, for example, some members of the academic staff and students were strongly committed to the revolutionary movements supporting the guerrilla groups in Colombia. One very
well-known case was Roman Catholic Priest Camilo Torres, who co-founded the Faculty of Sociology with Orlando Fals Borda in 1960. While Camilo tried to reconcile revolutionary Marxism and Catholicism, he left his job as an academic and joined one of the guerrilla groups. El Maestro Orlando, who believed firmly in other ways to approach these problems, could not persuade his friend to not take that path. Camilo Torres was killed by a Colombian military patrol in his first combat experience.

Some sectors of Colombian society thought that an agenda such as that of Camilo Torres responded to the never-ending socially unjust situations in Colombia as lived by regular students at the university. Historically, this has led public opinion to associate my university mainly with a left-wing political orientation, but in fact virtually all political orientations in the country are present in the university. Since those times, several governments have infiltrated the army forces at the university to identify guerrilla group members who are in charge of recruiting students to their causes. In the 1980s and 1990s members of the paramilitary groups also used that strategy to counteract the guerrilla strategies. In this complex covert scenario, academics who defended human rights have been killed; one example is lawyer Eduardo Umaña Mendoza, who was shot in his office at the university in 1998.

‘Participation’ in the academic life of my university has been a synonym for ‘participation’ in the construction of the Nation. Unfortunately, however, some social practices of the representative democratic model in the legislative, executive and judicial branches of the government have eroded the meaning of ‘participation’ in all sectors of Colombian society. The countless judicial trials against elected representatives in the Colombian Congress due to their nexus with guerrilla and paramilitary groups, as well as the innumerable cases of corruption in the executive and legislative branches have infected the daily lives of the Colombian people with a deep feeling of distrust in the capacity of any citizens, elected or not, to ‘re-present’ people’s needs and interests in any field.

Since this university brings together all the social sectors of the country, it also brings together all the country’s conflicts and problems. Discourses and actions that often do not match life outside the university’s eight campuses lead students and academics to challenge discourses and actions within its classrooms and
meeting rooms. Trust has been destroyed and despair often overtakes Colombians’ lives. This national socio-political tragedy is today accompanied by the consequences of external economic pressures that make the university and its staff vulnerable to neo-liberal demands for competition, accountability and pursuit of professional self-interest, consistent with contemporary trends in higher education in many national contexts. These circumstances have made members of the university community more and more sceptical of the value of participating in decision-making processes. Academic arguments to take one direction or another have been defeated by more powerful interests that appear to be driven by motives that are not primarily concerned with the national or common interest.

Representatives of academics, students and administrative personnel have therefore been elected under difficult circumstances; speaking on behalf of the university community has become a great challenge as the voices involved in many social problems do not think they have been fairly represented. Under these circumstances, university community members are full of doubts about whose interests the representatives of the community members really ‘re-present’ and on which basis they participate in institutional processes. Ghosts and ghost hunters wander in the university campuses, while critical participants are taken frequently for rebels.

The (P)AR project I am about to describe was embedded in such scepticism about the authenticity of what we called ‘democratic practices’. I felt it was time to recognise in front of my colleagues that, as a Colombian citizen and as an academic, I was aware of the existence of these ghosts (i.e. government agendas to join neo-liberal transnational higher education trends) surrounding the project that I would soon start coordinating at the university but I was also aware of what I felt was the unfortunate stigmatisation of those who had tried to contend against the university’s loss of autonomy (the so-called rebels).
4.2. Some background about the project

The project on which this story is centred began in 2007 when a former Director of the university’s Graduate Studies Office carried out several activities aimed at revising/evaluating various institutional processes concerning graduate courses. These included two meetings to discuss revising the achievements and pitfalls of the admission and enrolment processes of graduate students, processes that were combined in 2003. Several other activities were organised at the beginning of 2008 to evaluate the research activity of the university’s doctoral courses during the last 30 years. Based on the conclusions drawn from these meetings, a workshop was arranged to balance previous evaluation processes of university courses conducted in 2000 and 2006, to identify critical issues for the new self-evaluation model of graduate courses. This new initiative was also required for the upcoming national accreditation process for graduate courses.

During the first semester of 2008, the two external advisors who were hired to guide the construction process of the self-evaluation model for the university’s graduate courses presented a first draft of this model to the academic community (Santos, 2009a). I was asked to participate in those meetings as the representative of the academic staff in my department. Based on some comments and suggestions I made for the process then in progress, the Director of Graduate Studies asked me to lead the project from the end of July 2008. This project was

42 All the official information related to the (P)AR experience I discuss in this story is found in the website designed for this project as an informative and communicative strategy for evaluative purposes: [http://www.autoevaluacion.unal.edu.co](http://www.autoevaluacion.unal.edu.co)

43 Discussion of the first draft of the model to evaluate and accredit graduate courses in Colombia began in several universities simultaneously with the construction of the self-evaluation model at my university in mid-2008. The national accreditation model, which was issued by the Ministry of Education in May 2010, is based on an analysis of the quality standards adopted in several contexts around the world, among which those identified in the best universities in Latin America were taken into account. This accreditation model is also based on a vision of the university as an institution aimed at both generating new knowledge and contributing to the productive sector of the country (CNA, 2010, p. 3). Action research is mentioned in its rationale as a means through which university researchers can insert themselves within communities or social settings not only to understand them better but also to improve them (CNA, 2010, p. 3). The importance of making the university part of the so-called knowledge-based society through the graduate course research activities is highlighted in conjunction with an understanding of the university as a motor of the social and economic development of any country (CNA, 2010, p. 6). On this basis, the evaluative processes of graduate courses for accreditation purposes in the Colombian higher education context have been conceived as an account of the achievements and difficulties of universities in meeting those expectations (CNA, 2010, p. 13).

44 This draft was published as a working document.
aimed at self-reviewing all graduate courses at the university for national accreditation.

4.3. The ‘becoming’ character of (P)AR

This storytelling journey is aimed at remembering, exploring and reflecting upon some of the notions that I had/have as a (P)AR practitioner and that underpinned my discourse and actions in coordinating this project. I have to start this story by acknowledging that my notion of (P)AR can contest those notions informing other (P)AR practitioners’ experiences.

What I recall as first striking me about this project is that it was never introduced as (P)AR. In fact, my careful search revealed the complete absence of the terms ‘(P)AR’ and (participatory) action research through all the official documents that presented this institutional initiative in 2007. When I began to participate in it, first as a representative of the academic staff of my department and then as the coordinator of the project, I strongly believed this would be an unlabeled project that some of us who were involved could label (P)AR. This was not my usual way of approaching research projects a decade ago. My experience as a researcher in higher education had been informed then by a view of the research activity in black and white: a research project was X or was not X from its beginning to its end; a project not being approached in this way could not be serious work!

Doing (P)AR has taught me that this ‘black and white’ approach to ‘guarantee’ scientific validity in research has clearly privileged knowledge creation processes over people’s processes to achieve the common good. My reflections on the labelling of projects have led me to think about the ways in which people ‘live’ projects in Colombia and in other latitudes in the world. On the one hand, I have known projects that have been labelled as (P)AR but whose participants’ testimonies give accounts of experiences that go far away from the spirit of this type of research. On the other hand, I have participated in projects that have been labelled in different ways (or have not been labelled at all) but that can actually illustrate what (P)AR really refers to, from my point of view. The project this story is about is one example of the latter.
From my perspective, ‘participation’, ‘action’ and ‘research’, the main components of (P)AR, need to be experienced as living, intertwined, guiding principles by the members of the community involved in the labelled or unlabeled project. I am aware that tracking this is a little difficult as what we read in articles and reports of (P)AR mainly concerns the accounts of those who wrote about such research experiences (mainly lead researchers). However, this does not invalidate these accounts in any way, as every piece of work with people involves a plurality of perspectives, which includes the standpoints of the researchers writing about (P)AR projects. My account of this story is based on my lived experiences in the project to evaluate graduate courses at my university; these experiences have led me to conclude that it was a (P)AR process.

When I began to coordinate this project, one important starting point to work on was a preliminary agreement made between the academics participating in the discussions and the two external advisors hired to take the first steps from July 2007 until June 2008. This agreement concerned the need to move from reflections and discussion to actions; the academics did not want to be stuck in never-ending theoretical debates as often happens in the academy. Although the external advisors were suggesting an interpretive approach to constructing the model, ‘action’ appeared as an important issue for this community. Another topic being analysed when I joined the project was the importance of keeping the critique to positive attitudes to national education policies for higher education. There were groups of academics both for and against conceiving the evaluation process of graduate courses as aimed only at meeting the demands from government as had mainly happened in the evaluation processes of undergraduate courses oriented to get their accreditation in Colombia. Both action and inaction were then expressions of the same critical positioning.

A second aspect to be taken into account in the project was the ongoing claim made by the academics for ‘participation’ throughout the process of constructing the new model; in this sense, some academics were uncomfortable at the way the external advisors had addressed the participation issue. On one side, some academics were unhappy with the decision-making, claiming that this specific process needed to be opened to all members of the university community, not just
to academics as had been the case hitherto. On the other side, some argued that this new participative process needed to be led by ‘insiders’; my appointment as the coordinator of the project was welcome in this latter sense.

With ‘action’ and ‘participation’ already agreed as relevant components of the construction process of the evaluation model, I wanted to ask an implicit question about the status of ‘research’ in the process. Although the term was completely absent from the documents, some academics had already expressed concern that an urgent consideration was not to disregard experiences in other university contexts, nationally and internationally, when constructing our institutional model. As a newcomer in the process, I saw clearly that although the term ‘research’ had not been mentioned in the project documents and discussions, it was certainly an important element in our project’s development as academics were implicitly pointing out. There was no doubt that research was prominent in the lives of all academics participating in the project, and in the discussions about graduate courses. I thought then that more benefits could come from ‘research’ as an important lever in this project, although I did not make my idea explicit.

Naming a project is certainly a huge event in the academy in Colombia; addressing the research work as a research project can give the work a privileged status in this academy. However, I have also learned while working with people that sometimes it is prudent to have research debates in the background so that the project’s main issues can be kept in focus. My recent talks in December 2011 with the university’s current Academic Vice-Rector (Director of Graduate Studies when this project started) and former project coordinator (one of the academics who participated in its development) have confirmed this to me. Not only has the notion of ‘research’ given the process a solid ground in a research-based community, but ‘actions’ in particular have validated discourses about the relevance of ‘participation of people’ along the way.

4.4. Making a common cause from conflicting positions

This project, as an initiative of a former Academic Vice-Rector, was managed from the university’s Office of Graduate Studies. There a team was formed to lead
the project at a national level. This team was supported during the first year (2007–2008) by a group of about 20 academics led by the two above-mentioned external advisors. The latter were academics given the challenge of starting to construct the model of evaluation of the graduate courses based only on their expertise in the field of education (both of them were PhDs in education). The 20 academics participating in these initial meetings were appointed to represent their corresponding academic units in this institutional process. I joined this group as the representative of the Department of Linguistics.

It was very interesting and challenging to join these discussions as this communicative space was characterised by clashing disciplinary perspectives about how a model of this sort should be constructed. Philosophers, chemists, linguists, medical doctors, architects and nurses, among others, tried to express their own ideas about what a ‘model’ was and what it should look like. There were all sorts of proposals. However, the main issue began to emerge.

The external advisors’ theoretical discourse in the field of education started to clash not only with the disciplinary discourses and immediate interests and needs of this group of academics but also with those of the Director of Graduate Studies and the Academic Vice-Rector herself. Further, educational theory discussions were not helping the participants to find a path for working through the discussion process, and there was some discomfort among participants as the external advisors lacked knowledge about this particular university context. Some of the participants decided not to attend the meetings anymore and planning sessions at the Graduate Studies Office were more difficult to run.

By June of 2008, the Director of Graduate Studies decided it was necessary to ask one of the academics participating in the discussion to coordinate the project. The request was put to me. After analysing conditions of the work load, I agreed to do it. I felt what I had learned in similar experiences in the private university sector could be helpful for my current university workplace. My appointment quickly ameliorated the discomfort generated by the external advisors’ approach and lack of knowledge about the university. But this did not diminish the discomfort of some participants in the discussions how to run a self-evaluation process of graduate courses mainly for accreditation purposes. Now the critical issue to be
resolved was why we were discussing the pros and cons of carrying out such an evaluation process only in response to requests from the National Council for Accreditation Purposes (whose acronym in Spanish is CNA, Consejo Nacional de Acreditación). This had been the main rationale to develop this project at the university.

The first meeting with colleagues I led as the project coordinator had to be clearly aimed at addressing this issue. The Academic Vice-Rector had indicated clearly his wish to run this new evaluation process for accreditation purposes jointly with two other independent accreditation processes at the university (the accreditation of undergraduate courses and the accreditation of the university itself). But the discussions that took place with the academics in this project were oriented by a simple premise: the evaluation model needed to serve not only this interest and expectation but also the interests and expectations of all university members. Several conversations with the academics leading the university helped to sort out this dilemma without major trauma; the self evaluation of graduate courses to improve these courses was a discourse that fitted harmoniously into the institutional plan. Having both objectives in mind was a crucial achievement for the stages to come.

4.5. The workshops

‘Research’ and ‘democracy’ are notions that are meant to be much closer than ever before. From the very origins of these notions scientists have justified their existence as a resource to contribute to the common good. Historical events in humankind have shown that forgetting this main horizon can be catastrophic. Politically, I think that research is called in to take care of preserving relationships, namely through its ‘human factor’. Unfortunately, researchers’ excessive concern for public recognition in contemporary societies has led scientists to move away from the human beings who inspire their mission. This was something I became convinced about when I coordinated this project.

We needed to acknowledge the validity of the arguments presented by the academics leading the university and some of the academics who were against
carrying out this project only for accreditation purposes. We then revised and reformulated the objectives of the project to assure and gain commitment from all who were involved in decision-making. This way, although the main goal of the process was to improve the graduate courses, we would translate this agreement into a practical information collection process that could be useful later for accreditation purposes. One thing was for sure: nobody, including the academics leading the university, wanted to run a new data collection process about the graduate courses when the official national accreditation model was starting to be implemented. Unfortunately, this process strengthened a national move that was inconvenient for the project.

Some academics in the discussion group referred to the need to do ‘whatever’ needed to be done, no matter what arguments were put forward. While some of these academics emphasised the need to do the job in order to respond to a pervasive ‘unavoidable’ current international trend, others argued that they were simply exhausted by trying to persuade the academic community not to respond in that direction and refused to bear the high cost to their academic careers from these attempts. These two groups of academics united with another group and urged all of us to do what was ‘expected’ of us, based on the need not to waste time and energy if the CNA was going to provide the guidelines.

The challenge at this point was to show the whole group of academics that, far beyond an interest in taking a pragmatic position to simply complete the job, here was a wonderful opportunity to revise what we had been doing in our graduate courses and to ensure that what we continue to achieve through them is a better life for all, that is, for each member of the university community as well as of Colombian society. When we all agreed on this, we became aware of the time we had already spent trying to construct the institutional model of self evaluation. Then I offered to write a draft of the model based on all the discussions in which the meeting attendees had participated, including those in this new institutional initiative. I promised I would take advantage of all the ideas, critiques, comments and recommendations expressed in minutes, reports and documents written during the first year of the project (from the second semester of 2007 until the second semester of 2008). This reading process would include a review of current proposals to evaluate graduate courses in different contexts, and of the outcomes
of previous evaluation processes at the university. All present at the meeting agreed with my suggestion.

I spent the first part of the second semester of 2008 carrying out this task. By October a working document was ready for circulation. This working document was written based on: a) feedback and suggestions by academics in previous institutional self-evaluation processes, b) a literature review of self-evaluation processes developed in different university settings, c) some relevant notions, concepts and terms on which we needed to agree to reach a common discourse, and d) a comparative analysis of the main matters evaluated in previous evaluation processes at the university to take advantage of 1) information already collected, 2) matters of interest for current participants, and 3) the main matters that CNA was proposing to evaluate for accreditation purposes.

The draft was to be discussed in workshops on the various campuses of the university in December 2008. It was, in the end, a summary of ten years of documented institutional reflections, feedback to previous course evaluation processes and some theoretical debates. My belief in writing this type of document and selecting workshops as the main activity to be developed was that the more recommendations, experiences, perspectives, interests and needs could be considered in construction of the proposal, the more inclusive and comprehensive the discussions, and the more trustworthy the process would be.

This way, when the draft was finished, all the graduate course coordinators of the university, as well as the academics who had participated in the preliminary debates, were invited to proofread it and to participate in analysis of it in four workshops scheduled in the four biggest campuses of the university in December 2008. Faculty Deans and Sub-Deans were also invited to participate in the discussion as well as the Directors of various offices at a national level. We expanded from 20 to 120 academics participating in discussions.

Several activities were suggested to discuss the draft in the workshops, and use forms to collect comments and suggestions during discussions. Master degree students were prepared to help academics in discussions at each campus; among their tasks were elaborating the minutes of each single group discussion and
subsequent typing of corresponding electronic files. The main focus of this first workshop with academics was to introduce participants to one another, and share concerns, expectations and suggestions based on their experiences of previous evaluation processes at the university. Group discussions organised by fields of knowledge were set up to analyse the relevance of the drafted proposal to these fields. The information collected in prepared handouts was published on the website of the project for the participants to check.

This invitation to participate in the process of constructing the self evaluation model had to be translated, from my point of view, into a timely opening up of broader communicative spaces. On this basis, bulletins were sent to the university community from the very beginning and on a regular basis. Additionally, a forum was included in the project website to collect subsequent discussions among campuses and fields of knowledge. Now democratic practices were being shaped by the university community’s needs and interests. Representative democratic practices, namely, those resulting from appointments of academics to represent their academic units in this institutional process, were merging with participatory ones, meaning those democratic practices resulted from broadening opportunities for all members of the community to participate.

4.6. Communication and information for a democratic process

Although in the background of this process, participation by the Master degree students was critical. As I mentioned before, while I was writing the first draft of the evaluation model, I worked simultaneously with the project team to define our roles based on our expertise and the project’s needs at that stage. The Master degree student in charge of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) support, for example, would design a website that could not only serve to document the process and project outcomes but would also help the university members to communicate with one another. It was clear in the feedback provided by academics since 2000 to institutional course evaluation processes that there was a problem with the information required for evaluation purposes at the university, as well as with the communication among different members of this educational community.
The first decision to be made concerned restoring the trust of the university community in the transparency and safety of the process. It was necessary to establish ‘who’ could get access to the information collected in the evaluation process and uploaded to the project website. We decided that every member of the university community should have access to this information but it needed to be done in a safe way for the participants as not only strengths but also aspects that needed to be improved in the courses were going to be published. We then proceeded to ask the appropriate sections of the university for permission to allow members of the university community (students, academic staff, administrative officers and graduate students) to access the project website through their institutional user names and passwords.

The structure of the website map was to provide the essential information that a ‘newcomer’ would need to participate in the project. ‘Newcomers’ included academics appointed to lead the evaluation of a specific graduate course at any moment of the process, students interested in participating in discussions, and administrative officers wanting to know about the relevance of the information that they were providing. In doing this, the ICT expert would be in charge of designing an information system that could serve for course evaluation purposes and included the corresponding tools for permanent data collection and analysis.\(^{45}\) He also designed tutorials for new academics and students joining the project.

This was a process of negotiation with Academic Directors of campuses as we needed more people to be involved in constructing this information system. As a result, ten Master degree students from various courses were hired. The tasks they performed ranged from door-to-door visits to faculties and specific university offices to ask for relevant information based on the model (and support secretaries in its collection and organisation when necessary) to designing statistical tools to analyse this information and present this analysis via the project website, to supporting the academics coordinating course evaluation in other tasks. Training these students was the ICT expert’s responsibility. The lack of such an information system for course evaluation had been one of the critical issues.

\(^{45}\) This specific work was also presented as a (P)AR project by the ICT expert to gain a Master degree at this university in 2010.
pointed out by academics in the preliminary debates during the first stage of the project when it was led by the external advisors. They did not want to make a new attempt under the same conditions.

These door-to-door visits enabled the project, and more importantly the university, to diagnose the state of affairs of information. While the students reported offices whose information was updated and digitalised, they also gave account of offices where data were not only incomplete or inconsistent with other sources and whose work cultures were still paper-based or depended on specific people’s memories to recover it (a type of living embodiment of memories). In this sense, the students’ participation in the project meetings was especially informed by their first-hand experiences of the lack of an information system at the university. Their comments and recommendations were considered for further redesign of data collection and analysis tools. After three years the databases constructed thanks to these Master degree students’ work and many officers at the university are being consulted by the university for other purposes as well as being replicated by the office in charge of the self evaluation process of undergraduate courses. Finally, in a third stage, the students worked with academics in charge of coordinating the self-evaluation process to carry out the workshops where lecturers and students of specific courses evaluate them.

Additionally, to get participants updated about the project process, there was a person in charge of elaborating and providing the files to be uploaded to the website. The project assistant, who had participated from the very beginning, knew exactly what type of information about the project was available, how much information was digitalised already and needed to be digitalised, where to find it and who had participated with comments and proposals. She was also in charge of designing the electronic bulletin, which would keep the university community updated with the project processes and outcomes; she kept in touch with participants via email and telephone.

The opening up of discussions with academics in meetings, workshops and visits to campuses, was mainly possible thanks to the work of the team at the Office of Graduate Studies, which comprised five officers and ten Master degree students. Constructing a safe environment for the project in terms of information and
communication was one of their main contributions. After the last self-evaluation processes from 2000 and 2006, there was a serious need to restore trust in the university community to start a new self-evaluation endeavour.

4.7. When the ‘centre’ comes to us

Weaving a web of relationships to pursue a common cause is hard work. However, ‘mending’ a damaged web is harder. One of the main complaints of academics in the project was the way these institutional processes had been handled by the ‘centre’, namely, the main campus in Bogotá where the university’s central administration is based. This evolving (P)AR project needed to cope with past unfortunate episodes that had left other campuses disadvantaged. ‘Social justice’ was therefore also at stake.

Visiting four out of eight campuses to work with academics in their own environment helped me to understand some significant parts of this picture much better. Now I understood not only what the academics on these campuses had written in the evaluation reports left on shelves several years ago, but also what can be called the ‘geopolitics of academic participation’. The geographical space each university community lives in (the campus) seems to shape not only its possibilities but also its difficulties in relation to ‘participation’. The thoughts, feelings, actions and interactions of the academics living in the Colombian islands in the Caribbean region, for example, were completely different from those of the academics based in the campus located in the Colombian Amazon jungle, the three campuses in the mountains of Colombia, or the campuses in the valleys or the plains.

We were challenged by more than curriculum development while delighted by our compatible interaction with their diverse ecosystems. The isolation of several campuses, deriving from their geographical location, was exacerbated by insufficient material supplies (especially technological infrastructure) and/or lack of recognition of immaterial ones (i.e., linguistic factors). Among the resulting problems, some campuses had to cope not only with difficulties in connectivity on
regular basis but also academic difficulties associated with the languages involved in learning processes.46

All these elements play a decisive role in the concerns of our project. They work for or against the way any course is – and can be – conducted, and the extent to which people in the university are motivated to participate in institutional initiatives at a national level such as the one I was leading. I was aware that these circumstances are not exclusive to economically developing countries; however, I understood that they made academic life in this context harder. Notwithstanding, I perceived geographical remoteness as a double-sided circumstance. Members of the academic communities located in the university’s campuses in the islands and the jungle can sometimes experience difficulty when trying to communicate effectively with the main campus in the national capital, due to technological problems or language differences. Yet their somewhat remote locations work to foster university communities that are more cohesive than those of campuses located in big cities.

As the project coordinator, working across the campuses also enabled me to appreciate how these difficult circumstances defined particular features of academics’ participation in constructing the evaluation model. I found people who were more relaxed, receptive and collaborative than their city counterparts when talking with me in their ‘homes’ – their campuses. These academics were proud of their people, their achievements, challenges, facilities, and institutional and natural environments. They were clearly more self-confident and comfortable in telling us about their difficulties and other problems. They felt that if people based in the main campus visited them, then they outside the cities also mattered. They saw our visits as expressing a type of deference from the centre to the periphery. I felt that our visits, especially our one-on-ones with academic staff, served palpably to strengthen the ties of the web of our shared project. Our geographically remote ‘brothers and sisters’ saw each one of our visits as

46 Colombia is a pluriethnic and plurilingual nation. The 65 Indigenous languages and two Creoles spoken in the country have clashed with Spanish as the dominant and official language of academic life. It is well known that many applicants to graduate and undergraduate courses in Colombia cannot access higher education because they are not ‘fluent enough’ in the official language of the academy. Further, those who have been able to enter a university degree program even though their first language is not Spanish, still face communication difficulties.
confirmation of the university central administration’s interest in their concerns, doubts and achievements. ‘They’ were – and are – part of ‘us’; the remote regions are part of the Colombian nation and of its main national university just as much as the cities are. For me, these responses provided rich and much larger lessons, not just about our remote communities, our project and our university community at large. My learning from these experiences was also about our nation, our nationhood, and myself as part of both.

In contrast to our ‘remote’ experiences, the meetings and workshops that academics from regional campuses attended on our main campus in Bogotá moved in a quite different environment. The activities that we conducted together on the main campus aimed to strengthen the necessary interconnections among the concerns, interests, needs, expectations and perspectives of all the people involved in the project. We all found these challenging. Approaching the ‘university as a whole’ led most academics to interact in ways that were more stressful than in our remote campus meetings. As project coordinator, I could recognise that the less relaxed environment in these meetings was related to some difficulty in some participants’ understanding of what ‘being part of a bigger group of academics’ means in practice. The concept needed to be translated. And we all needed to translate it into action, i.e., into clearer and more effective reactions to and from the central administration in charge of the project. This collective expectation was sometimes affected by a perception that geographic proximity to the central administration put the academics based in the main campus in a privileged position.

The visits to the campuses meant a lot to me. My sense of belonging to my university and to my country grew exponentially when I had the opportunity to ‘experience’ the university within each campus community and ‘live’ my country through the lenses of their members. I started understanding much better the challenges we experience and, therefore, feeling more engaged and committed to each particular university community sector and campus and its corresponding concerns. I was a newcomer in several ways. Most significantly, not only was I the new coordinator for the already-started project, but I was also a learner about the ‘real’ university I was talking about with my colleagues.
The conversations taking place in each campus resulted in an agreement to acknowledge different ways of approaching the self evaluation of graduate courses from an organisational perspective. This was crystallised when, from March to December 2009, we undertook a pilot experience aiming to explore and evaluate the relevance, validity and feasibility of the model constructed, as well as to build an information system for self-evaluation purposes at the university. During this period, 15 graduate courses (ten Master degree courses and five doctorate courses) across the four main campuses were evaluated. All of these processes were developed on the basis of our mutual agreement to acknowledge our differences.

4.8. ‘Being part of’, while ‘taking part in’

I am aware that my ideas about (P)AR, democracy and social justice, among others things, have influenced the way I wove the web of relationships that I joined when I agreed to lead this project. For me, the ‘P’ of (P)AR stands not only for ‘participatory’ but especially for ‘people’, so every single one of my actions was oriented by my belief that ‘people’ are the main end of the project. This helped me to privilege people over the usual concerns that arise when knowledge creation is compromised. ‘P’ also stands for ‘perspectives’, as participants made sense of the process from their own standpoints. This, in turn, resulted in the need to cultivate the virtue of ‘prudence’, since it was only continuous reflective observation and the actions it inspired that enabled me to enter into the already existing web of relationships in a respectful way. Then, ‘patience’ was needed – to cope with conflicts resulting from the clash of different perspectives and when timetables were challenged by people’s processes. All up, then, for me the (P) of (P)AR essentially stood for ‘politics’, the main sphere that (P)AR practitioners deal with every time we relate to other human beings and join with them to pursue the common good.

This different reading of the (P) of (P)AR partnered a new way of reading the ‘R’. Research as a political activity needed to be ‘revisited’, ‘refreshed’ and not to get tempted. We needed to be careful not to privilege the creation of knowledge (about the evaluation model) and its social paraphernalia, over authentic
participation in weaving and healing the web of relationships between us. As (P)AR practitioner, I had to ‘re-establish’ my positioning as a citizen, since as project coordinator my rights and duties were always defined in relation to the rights and duties of those forming our web of relationships. This also included responsibility for healing the web of relationships among researchers. This web had deteriorated to a great extent, largely because of both the competitiveness among staff and socially fragile democratic practices fostered by university policies that embed neoliberal thinking and practice consistent with the new ideological thrust reshaping Colombia’s higher education system.

These ideas of mine always informed our actions – how our coordinating team conducted every workshop, visit and talk. These ideas also informed our understanding, as expressed in written drafts of the model, bulletins and the like. A valuable lesson from my experience in this project is the importance of the dialectical relationship between the sense of belonging to an academic community (‘being part of’) and the engagement in whatever that academic community pursues (‘taking part in’). ‘Being part of’ an academic community cannot be taken for granted. The larger the circle of people, the harder it can be to connect with them and to make sense of their participation in the circle.

On the other hand, I think that our attempts to construct a democratic society, where representative and participatory models ‘can and need to’ converge, enabled participants to join in and be accepted no matter which model they favoured. Many of the academics participating in the project ‘spoke’ on behalf of faculties, graduate courses and departments, while others simply expressed their personal standpoints. In the end all perspectives aimed at achieving the same goal: to identify the best for the university community in relation to the university’s new course evaluation process.

How have these ideas contributed to weaving and healing the web of relationships I entered into? I learned of a really meaningful aspect when I spoke with the Academic Vice-Rector and the former coordinator of the project, while I was back in Bogotá two years after I needed to leave the project to travel to Australia. They explained that the basic principle of ‘democratising the construction process of the model’ also enabled democratisation of the evaluation process of graduate courses
itself. The rights and duties of all as members of the university community as well as citizens of Colombian society have been considered every time a decision is taken. Suggestions from newcomers and lessons from the project experience have led to some adjustments to the model, and these have been made in an informed, comfortable environment that is receptive to suggestions for improvement. The university’s information system has been strengthened, and organisation of the people involved in conducting the project has been revised and validated.

The former coordinator advised that the more the evaluation model for graduate courses has been refined, the more its operations have been decentralised. Each campus has tried to find its own specific organisation style, based on general academic guidelines set by participants at a national level. Campus academic directors, faculty sub-deans, faculty councils, course coordinators, academics, students and administrative personnel, together with the project team at the office of the Director of Graduate Studies, understand more clearly what each member and each unit of the university community can contribute – to what, how, where and when.

Strengthening the culture of course evaluation among members of the university community has projected this collective experience beyond its original scope. All the project’s achievements are now considered assets of the university. Politically speaking, the approach that academics now use to cope with the challenge of evaluating graduate courses is considered to be a model that can serve well for evaluating the university’s undergraduate courses. University members drawing together to pursue a common goal has helped the university community to overcome the initial despair that marked the start of this process. I believe this ‘partaking’ while weaving is what challenges a (P)AR practitioner to think and act creatively and broadly as a newcomer.
Chapter 5 Unexpected paths for new beginnings (Story 3)

Whether a nation consists of equals or non-equals is of no great importance in this respect, for society always demands that its members act as though they are members of one enormous family which has only one opinion and one interest’ (Arendt, 1998, p. 39)

Not only are people’s stories connected; they may be connected in surprising ways. The (P)AR story I tell here is linked to the life and work of an academic in Colombia. I believe his story opens the door to the unexpected paths for new beginnings which the following (P)AR story concerns.

Excursus

I wish I could have met Orlando in person a long time ago. I knew about him as a public person in 1991, when he became a member of the National Assembly that wrote the current Political Constitution of Colombia. At that time I was a Master degree student at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia and a staff member in el Colegio Mayor de Nuestra Senora del Rosario, one of the oldest Catholic universities in Bogotá (it was founded in 1653). I had to tread a long path to understand the relevance of his contributions – not only to the country but also to the academy, internationally. Before he passed away, I was privileged to talk with him at length about matters of mutual interest. Orlando patiently opened my eyes to what a researcher should be and what s/he should do as, inevitably, a political person.

Orlando’s story is in many ways a story of our nation, especially through the second half of the twentieth century when Orlando worked hard for the common good of the Colombian people. And in some ways like the complex story of the life of our nation, Orlando’s life story tells of unexpected paths for new beginnings. In this story I focus briefly on those paths and their new beginnings.

Born in 1925 in Barranquilla, one of the most important cities on the Northern coast of Colombia, Orlando returned home in the late 1940s after completing his first degree in Literature in the United States. Colombia was then broken into two parts –the liberals and the conservatives. The highly important leader of the liberal
party, one of only two political parties at the time, had been shot dead on 9 April 1948. Bogotá was on fire, while peasants in the mountains were organising what is now the oldest guerrilla group in Latin America.\textsuperscript{47} Orlando returned to the US to do his Master degree in sociology, writing a thesis about peasants of the Andean region. He continued researching rural life in a province in eastern Colombia for his PhD degree, which he completed in the US, in 1957.

He was back in Colombia when the debates for land reform were under way. He participated actively in these debates, while an academic staff member of the Universidad Nacional de Colombia. There, with his friend Priest Camilo Torres, he founded the first Faculty of Sociology in Latin America. He liked to narrate how in 1959 he and Camilo recruited the first 30 students of the sociology course by approaching applicants to other courses ‘who were queuing up next door’ and persuaded them to change their mind. This was the genesis of the first cohort of sociologists in Latin America. Orlando believed that as a sociologist he should not only understand but also transform social realities. The only way a sociologist could do that was with communities and from within them. And all of this had to be done while remaining mindful of the scientific work that sociology entailed.

Orlando was the Dean of the Faculty of Sociology at my university for about 10 years. He also became a consultant for the Organisation of American States (OEA in its Spanish acronym) based in Brazil, but returned to Colombia to take on the position of Minister of the Treasury from 1959 to 1961. He then returned to the university, but by the end of the 1960s, he was obliged to leave the university since some of his academic colleagues associated Orlando’s research methods with imperialist ways of doing science. He remembered this episode with pain, although he was grateful that it had happened. Without it he would not have begun to research poor people’s daily life in the way that he did; neither would he have understood the political role of the social scientist as he came to understand it outside the university. Some colleagues who helped force his departure in 1969 attended his funeral in August 2008. Their addresses were \textit{mea culpa} to ‘el Maestro’ – confessions that they had not understood the huge relevance of Orlando’s ways of doing research at that time.

\textsuperscript{47} This revolutionary group, \textit{Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia} (FARC) is known in English as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.
During the 1970s Orlando dedicated his life to supporting peasant, student and unionist movements. Convinced that research had to be carried out within social realities to transform them, he saw the need for (P)AR to take various forms. This led him to think about land reform much more deeply, but in the late 1970s authorities interpreted his work as subversive. Orlando and his wife sociologist Maria Cristina Salazar were arrested, accused of participating in the creation of one of the guerrilla groups that emerged during those days: the April 19 Movement (the M-19). Orlando was released a few weeks later, while Maria Cristina spent one year and a half in prison. Orlando told me of the difficult times that he and Maria Cristina passed through when they were interrogated in one of the headquarters of the army forces in Bogotá.

In the early 1990s, the nation reached a new political landmark when a university student movement persuaded Colombian citizens to include a ‘seventh ballot’ in the election for national president. After that poll 86 per cent of the Colombian voters, about 2,000,000 people, demanded the creation of a new political constitution. The M-19 also made this demand one of its political conditions for demobilising as a revolutionary force, while still no political parties other than the two traditional ones were then legally permitted to participate in the nation’s political life. The National Assembly that was formed to devise the content of the new constitution appointed Orlando to lead discussions on reorganising the nation’s political landscape administratively; Orlando would do so on behalf of the Democratic Alliance party, which had formed after the law was changed to allow operation of political parties other than the traditional two that had dominated the nation for over a century. Orlando led these debates over the two years after the new constitution was approved in 1991. Later he founded the Alternative Democratic Pole with some of the members of this political party.

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48 This guerrilla group was created in response to the fraudulent election process for the presidential election of 1970, when one of the presidential candidates was murdered before the election. After its demobilization in the late 1980s, its members funded the Democratic Alliance political party, which actively participated in the discussion of the current political constitution of Colombia.

49 3,000 weapons were found in a property Maria Cristina had bought at the time. Pereira (2009, p. 237)

50 Gustavo Petro, one of the leaders of the former M-19 guerrilla group who is also an ex-member of the Alternative Democratic Pole was elected Mayor of Bogotá in the October 2011 municipal election. This mayoral position is seen as the nation’s second most powerful position (after the
While away from university auditoriums and lecture halls in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Orlando decided to follow through on his understanding that poor people in rural areas have considerable ‘unacknowledged’ knowledge from which other people may usefully learn. He therefore went to learn from poor people living in his region. There he met the fishermen of small villages along the San Jorge River, who shared with him their knowledge about their ‘amphibious’ life. Orlando was impressed with the way these fishermen lived in the swamps and coped with difficult times. There he learned about ‘feeling–thinking’ beings and the ‘hicotea’ men, both of which he would refer to in his talks and writings, with due acknowledgement to their sources in the swamp peoples. Orlando would make clear in his interviews and talks that he did not coin the term ‘sentipensante’ (‘feeling–thinking beings), but learned it from a fisherman who told him that the fishermen of the region actually acted with their hearts but using their minds too and that when they did they were ‘sentipensantes’ (Bassi & Britton, 2008). Orlando then included this beautiful and simple notion, as he referred to it, in his book *La Historia Doble de la Costa* (*The double history of the Northern coast*).

His books also wove in another symbol of the ‘amphibious culture’ of this region: the ‘hicotea’ men. According to these fishermen, to be a ‘hicotea’ man means to be not only a ‘feeling–thinking’ person but also a person who can endure tough situations. The ‘hicotea’ turtle illustrates this well. During good times, this turtle enjoys life, while during dry seasons it buries itself in the sand until the rain returns and the turtle comes back to life with the same joy. The ‘hicotea’ man, then, is a person who endures the blows of life, knows how to be patient and understands how to overcome the blows to come back to life with joy. These fishermen called themselves ‘hicotea men’; they told him that, in spite of the difficult situations they had to pass through because of their poverty, in the end, happiness wins.

These symbols of the ‘amphibious’ life of the fishermen informed Orlando’s main claim to enrich science with sentiment and feeling and his choice to define (P)AR as ‘vivencia’ (‘life experience’) (Fals-Borda, 2006b, pp. 29-30). In his critique of
Eurocentrism, Orlando said that this ‘vivencia’ would enable scientists to ‘grow from within’:

More endogenous paradigms rooted in our realities and circumstances would likely have contributed more effectively to our progress. Our experience has shown that such alternative paradigms, more open than those imported from advanced countries, could offer constructive ways out of our problem. (Fals-Borda & Mora-Osejo, 2003, p. 33)

Orlando was also known for his good humour, even during difficult times. The anecdote of his ‘terrible toothache’ at the May 2007 symposium where he was presented unexpectedly with a festschrift in honour of his life and work, captures this wonderful personal quality that helped draw a wide circle of friends and followers around him.51 His rich humour worked very well with the surprising way his life took on the qualities of a Colombian magic realist story. He was meant to live as a convenor.

Orlando was born in Barranquilla, a city on the North coast well known in Colombia as the meeting place where the most important of Colombia’s rivers, the Magdalena, reaches the Caribbean Sea. In Colombian mythology this is the hometown of the ‘alligator man’, the popular character of a famous folk song composed in North coast country in the 1950s. This myth tells of a man who asked a sorcerer to prepare a potion so he could become an alligator and spy on the beautiful women who bathed in the river. One day he could not take the white potion to help him recover his human form and became half man and half alligator for the rest of his life. The folk song tells how the alligator man of the myth became someone who has no good luck but faces his unfortunate situation with humour.

Orlando used to tell how surprised and delighted he was when the Gumatj clan of the Yolngu people in Central Australia gave him their totem, the crocodile, when they adopted him, and gave him the name Ganma, which means ‘where waters meet’. He said in one of his last interviews that there could not be a more beautiful and living place than the mangroves where the sea water meets river water (Fals-Borda & Ordonez, 2007, p. 14). This claim was completely coherent

51 When Orlando heard that the Colombian president, a man of somewhat different political disposition and colour to Orlando, would attend part of the proceedings, Orlando’s instant ‘toothache’ provided the necessary getaway excuse – delivered with style, grace and humour.
with the way he lived his life. He advocated convergence not only of popular knowledge and scientific knowledge (Fals-Borda, 2006b; Fals-Borda & Mora-Osejo, 2003) but also of North and South (Fals-Borda & Ordonez, 2007). The ALARPM World Congress and PAR Conference that he convened in Cartagena, Colombia, in 1997 was, for me, one of his most precious contributions. Our special ‘alligator man’ was at his finest, bringing convergence between knowledges and peoples from North and South, in what became a brilliant tribute to his life and work.

In 2006, two months after I asked Orlando if he would accept this tribute to be prepared by his colleagues at home and abroad, his wife Maria Cristina passed away. He used to tell me that he was just waiting for his friends to come in May the following year before being reunited with her. Meeting his international and national colleagues then became a good motive to live for a little while longer. At the 2007 symposium it seemed everyone knew this was a unique moment; something spiritual lingered in the air from the very beginning. In spite of the usual stress that we the organisers were passing through, we could feel a unique, positive energy in the air. We all recall the event as a time of smiles, hugs, laughter and joy while we learned excitedly from and with each other. I was especially moved by a request from the keynote speakers: could the lights could be turned off while each one of them asked Orlando to light their candles to signify the passing on of his humble wisdom. The depth and beauty of these moments were profound and joyful for us all, perhaps, especially for Orlando.

I visited Orlando a few more times after the symposium. He had been travelling—with doctor’s permission—to Montreal, Canada, to give the Latin American Studies Association (LASA)–Oxfam America Martin Diskin Memorial Lecture to the 5260 attendees at this event. In March 2008 he received the Branislaw Malinowski Award in Memphis from the Society for Applied Anthropology; advance news that reached Orlando a few days before the festschrift symposium in Bogotá in May 2007. We all celebrated this good news in the event. My last memory of him was in July 2008, one month before he passed away. I rang him to ask if I could come to his apartment for a chat since I had been embedded in some difficult personal matters all year. I brought a tub of the pistachio ice cream he liked so much. When I came in and started talking, he told me that he had passed
away the month after the symposium! I thought he was teasing me. Then he told me that he had joined the demonstrations of teachers against the education policy that was then under debate. Rain made him wet during the demonstration; he never thought his getting wet was going to become a serious matter.

A week later, a friend of his from Germany arrived in Bogotá and told him she wanted to visit him. When she arrived at his apartment, he could hardly open the door and fainted. She immediately took him to the hospital where one of his nieces worked. Doctors in the emergency room declared him dead as they could detect no vital signs; he was taken to the morgue. There his niece, weeping inconsolably beside his bed, saw his neck artery was throbbing! She proceeded to do cardio pulmonary resuscitation. He stayed in the hospital for about a month. I was shocked when I heard this story and regretted that I had been so embedded in my own personal affairs that I had not a clue about this. Orlando looked at me with a gentle smile and with a tiny bit of pistachio ice cream on his lips told me: “I think that I passed away, went to hell and the devil sent me back to life as he did not want a trouble maker there!”. We both laughed.

It seems that (P)AR may indeed suggest ‘trouble making’ in some national contexts like Colombia, as it challenges the state of affairs in a community in one way or another. Personal tensions can easily arise when people engage with each other. Tensions within the (P)AR organisation, for us while carrying out the symposium as tribute to Orlando, and in Orlando’s life too, are simply examples of how people’s interests can clash when they attempt to achieve the common good together. However, as Orlando also taught us during the three days of his funeral at the university, this ‘trouble maker’ can leave an indelible mark in the lives of the people who work with (P)AR practitioners as he did in Colombia and in many other countries round the world. Throughout the three days of his funeral, the theatre where his coffin was placed was crowded day and night. The list of people who wanted to present their respects to ‘el Maestro’ was enormous: from children who wanted to recite poems to him, university students who had prepared songs, Indigenous leaders who wanted to offer their best woven bags, and politicians he had opposed who highlighted Orlando’s contributions to constructing the new nation of the twentieth century, to former colleagues who had asked Orlando to leave the Universidad Nacional de Colombia in the 1960s
and leader women who thanked him for supporting their endeavours. Here again he was convening them all with the quiet wisdom of his new immortal silence.

5.1. My (P)AR story begins

In Colombia it is common practice to work in several universities simultaneously. Sometimes it is the result of the necessary exchange of expertise between universities, but most of the time it is the academics’ only way to make a decent living. The latter was true for me in 2003, when I became part of a huge group of academics travelling among universities, who unfortunately were tagged as lacking a sense of belonging to any of the workplaces we transited through. I was not a casual appointment in either of the two places where I then worked, but I was perceived this way nonetheless. I still think these so-called academic travellers are the ones bringing fresh air into organisations and, on occasion, bringing opportunities for university communities to revise what they are and what they aim to achieve. Casual staff members are always expected to partake in institutional processes while in many other respects they struggle to be considered part of the ‘host’ institution.

By September 2002, I was forced to leave the private university where I obtained my first degree in 1986 and where I worked in a teacher education course for about 10 years.52 Two months later I applied for a part-time vacancy at the university where I had completed my Master degree and obtained the position. I combined this part-time job with another one that was offered to me in a private university. My new circumstances in 2003 allowed me to continue working in the private sector of education while starting as an academic staff member of the Department of Linguistics in a state university. This was a fortunate combination since I was able to work on one of the relationships I have been most interested in throughout my academic life – language and education – while also being able to continue working in a teacher education graduate course. These two jobs also helped me to deepen my understanding of what makes private and public universities so different from each other in my country, even though both are committed to education as a public good.

52 This (P)AR experience is told and reflected upon in Chapter 6.
This story is about a (P)AR project that I led in the private university where I started working in 2003. It is about the permanent struggle between the political and the social realms in universities. In particular, this is a story that narrates how a (P)AR project, which was born from a request of the institution to find out ways to harmonise its philosophy with a national education policy, ended two years later when the university implemented an institutional research policy.

5.2. The (P)AR project

In March 2006 the Directors of the three offices of the university in charge of Learning and Teaching, Curriculum Affairs and the philosophy of the religious community that rules the institution (that of the Christian Schools of La Salle), respectively, invited me to participate in some meetings they were holding to discuss the best way to implement a national education policy about university curricula. They already knew about my experience in curriculum development in higher education and about research I had carried out on this specific university’s culture. From 2003 to 2005 I had led a critical ethnographic study to interrogate the beliefs and practices of this university community in relation to autonomous learning and teaching. This research was awarded a prize in 2006 for the best piece of research in the field of social sciences at this university.

After running a seminar on current national and international debates about competency-based curricula in higher education with the three advisors of the Rector, a proposal to formulate an action research project to construct the institutional approach emerged. This research project was aimed at constructing with the university community a proposal for a competency-based curriculum development process informed by the Lasallian philosophy. Students, academic staff and directives of 22 undergraduate courses and 13 graduate courses spread across three campuses participated. The research team was formed by three academics teaching in the Master degree of education and three research

assistants, who had been former graduate students and participated in the critical ethnographic study mentioned above.

Five groups of university members were identified then as essential for becoming engaged in constructing the institutional curriculum initiative. These were the directors of the university offices already committed to the idea, members of Faculty Curriculum Boards, voluntary academic staff of faculties who would formulate classroom action research projects, a group of students from the Master degree in education interested in developing their research project on this matter, and a group of undergraduate students, lecturers and course coordinators who could share with us their ideas, suggestions and concerns about this curriculum development process (this last group consisted of 90 people).

The main concern of the directors of these three offices was how the university community could become more familiar with action research as an approach to curriculum development in higher education. This question was posed when I became involved in a special situation in the Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN). This unexpected circumstance represented both an opportunity for the university to deal with such a concern and a huge responsibility for the research team.

I joined CARN in 2000, when I attended one of its annual conferences for the first time. One of the members of this network, Professor Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt from Griffith University, Australia, emailed me in February 2006 to ask me if I could contact el Maestro Orlando Fals Borda at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, where she knew he and I were working. She, as a member of the Organising Committee of the Action Learning, Action Research and Process Management Association (ALARPM),\(^{54}\) was interested in locating him as the association wanted him to be the central keynote speaker of its quadrennial world congress to be held in Groningen, the Netherlands, that year. I agreed to be to bridge. After some attempts to find Orlando first at the university campus in Bogotá and then by emailing his wife, sociologist Maria Cristina Salazar, I could finally talk with

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\(^{54}\) The ALARPM association was founded in 1991 following an inaugural Research Symposium in Brisbane in 1989 and its first World Congress was held in that city too in 1991. In 2007 this association was renamed the Action Learning and Action Research Association (ALARA).
him. He declined this invitation as he had been in poor health; his knees were not working well and his doctor had advised him to not travel much. He then asked me if I could read his keynote at that event. I said that it would be an honour but that I was not sure I could arrange funding. I told Ortrun first that Orlando could not go to Groningen and, some days later, that I could not go either. She then made arrangements for someone attending the conference to read el Maestro Orlando’s keynote.

While exchanging emails with Ortrun, I became aware that educators in Colombia had not offered a tribute to Orlando, although sociologists had done so a year before. I asked Ortrun if she would come to Colombia if I could organise an event of this sort and her response was positive. She also offered to support me in anything I may need to organise such an event. When I presented this idea to the three directors I was working with, they asked me to explore it and present a proposal to the Vice Rector in the following weeks. We all agreed that the field of education had to acknowledge Orlando’s contributions to the field now that he was in his early eighties. It was also clear to all of us that this tribute could also be helpful for making the university community familiar with action research and its various approaches.

5.3. The vicissitudes of an international event

A group of colleagues at this university wanted to join the initiative to organise an International Symposium on (P)AR that would also be a tribute to the work and contributions of el Maestro Orlando Fals-Borda. It was March 2006 and I had started contacting some of the most acknowledged academics in the field of action research. My attendance at the annual CARN conference in Utrecht, the Netherlands, in 2005, helped me not only had to meet other academics in the field, also but to become more aware of the politics of (P)AR. The debates that took place in that European country helped me to understand much better that some theoretical approaches to (P)AR had become political confrontations. I realised

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55 I never called el Maestro by his name as a sign of the respect and admiration given to a few academics in my country. This is one of the reasons why it took me some time to call Professor Stephen Kemmis, Professor John Elliott and other academics by their given names. However, I will call el Maestro by his name in this story as a way to enable him interact on equal terms with other scholars in the field of (P)AR.
that notions, concepts and beliefs about the common good resulted in differences of opinion and practices of how that common good ‘had’ to look. Then I decided to proceed with caution. I was fairly sure that all the international academics I was thinking of would be happy to celebrate Orlando’s life and work, and this kind of debate was welcome in my country. However, due to my experience in Utrecht, I wanted to be sure all the potential guests could also have a very good time together in Colombia.

The first academic I contacted was Professor Stephen Kemmis, from Charles Sturt University, Australia, who had attended the joint ALARPM/PAR World Congress in Cartagena, Colombia, in 1997. Stephen was one of the 1300 attendees at the conference that Orlando organised. As soon as Stephen knew about the idea to pay tribute to his friend and colleague, he took note in his diary to guarantee his attendance one year later (the tribute would be held in May 2007). Then I thought of inviting another academic very well known to the Colombian audience as his works had been translated into Spanish: Professor John Elliott from the University of East Anglia, the United Kingdom. I had met him in 2000 when I attended my first CARN Conference. I was sure he would love to join the tribute to Orlando. One email was enough; John accepted and so did his wife, Professor Christine O’Hanlon from the University of East Anglia. Now I had arranged to bring together three of the most important approaches to (P)AR in the world. What next?

While I had a list of other important international academics who would like to join this tribute to Orlando, I had to prioritise some international guests according to whether their works in action research would be known by potential attendees at the event, and whether they could meet the objectives of the research project I was leading. With these criteria in mind, Professor Shirley Grundy from Deakin University, Australia, came onto the list immediately, which excited us immensely. Our research group was using her theoretical and practical guidelines for curriculum development. Shirley accepted quickly. Then I realised that Latin American (P)AR scholars were missing from our list. Thus I invited former Brazilian student of Pedagogist Paulo Freire, Joao Francisco de Souza, who accepted. The list was completed with Professor Robin McTaggart from James Cook University, Australia, co-author with Stephen of the *Action Research*
Planner, which is also known in Latin America, and Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt, Orlando’s friend, whose approach to action learning would be introduced to the audience at the event as none of her writings had been translated into Spanish. I conveyed to all these academics that the proposal for funding the Symposium would be submitted to our university in April 2006 and that the Rector would have the final word on how many keynote speakers the university could afford to support.

While preparing our budget for airfares and other expenses of the international scholars and for other organising costs, I realised that I might need to present this proposal to more than one university for financial support. I began by approaching the Rector of the private university that would support my attendance at a conference on qualitative methods in Australia that year (Santos, 2006b). I thought this event could be one of the outcomes of such trust between us. This also resolved my dilemma as to which university would be first to know about our proposed 2007 Symposium plan to honour Orlando. I asked the Rector if his university would be interested in contributing towards funding this event and to what extent. I thought he may prefer to share the expense with another university due to the high costs of this event. I was completely wrong. He was interested in his university participating in this proposal on its own; the University of La Salle is known in Colombia for its tradition of teacher education and the Rector recognised our proposal as a wonderful opportunity to position his university in the international scene. I was surprised and delighted by this response, and happy that now I would not to have to look further for supplementary funding.

As soon as our proposal was approved, I proceeded to talk with Orlando and asked if he would accept. He was delighted. By now it was April 2006 and I moved quickly to confirm with the keynote speakers that the proposed event was now in place. All took note of the dates: 16 – 18 May 2007. We would now proceed with organising, with incidents concerning the political of the academy teaching us along the way.

The first unexpected episode concerned warnings sent to the Australian and British keynote speakers not to travel to Colombia at this time. Their respective foreign ministries had posted a warning to would-be travellers that Colombia was
considered a high risk country and should be avoided by travellers. The speakers’ responses touched us with their generosity and courage: they would come to the Symposium for Orlando despite the official warnings. Their agreement to come was also to make a deliberate political statement about the unnecessary costs of internationally stigmatising countries like Colombia.

The second incident was related to an unfortunate circumstance that led Stephen to advise us that he could not come to the event. His university had appointed him to lead an institutional process to cope with new research policies in Australia. This unexpected information resulted in some difficult situations for us as organisers since the Rector and the Academic Vice-Rector of our funding institution, the University of La Salle, thought that Stephen’s absence could affect the registration fees that had been set to partially support funding for the Symposium. However, something worse was set to come.

The amount of the conference registration fee I initially suggested was increased considerably. Now it was certainly inconsistent with the spirit of the event and its title ‘Action research and education in context of poverty’. Many teachers and academics could not afford the higher fee. While I tried to persuade the Rector not to increase the registration fee, he insisted that any important event like this should charge a high registration fee as had been decided with the increase. In his view, the importance of the event should be reflected in what attendees would pay. My colleagues from other universities who I had worked with in several action research projects did not attend the symposium to demonstrate their opposition to this university’s stance.

This overt disagreement in conjunction with some other incidents introduced some tension among the academic who was chairing the Symposium organising committee, one of the co-researchers of the action research project and myself. Academics and non-academics participating in organising the event frequently asked me to give them indications about certain aspects, and although I advised them to ask the Chair of the organising committee about these matters, they

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56 We decided a symposium would be the best option for this event. It was entitled ‘Action Research and Education in contexts of poverty. A tribute to the life and work of Professor Orlando Fals Borda’.
continued coming to me as the person most knowledgeable about the proposal. I had declined to be chair of this organising committee because I was a part-time staff member, and recognised that this committee needed a full-time academic to lead it. Tension grew between the committee chair and me as we continued with organising, and resulted in her resigning to take co-researcher status. From her viewpoint, her authority as Chair had been completely overlooked.

One final incident was the straw that broke the camel’s back! It took place during the event. The keynote speakers had arrived and were waiting at the hotel to meet members of the organising committee. It was the day before the opening of the symposium and we met with them in the bar. We introduced them to some of the organisers and provided some last recommendations. Suddenly, the Chair of the Organising Committee informed us that the Rector of La Salle as our funding university had invited the President of Colombia to open the event and for security reasons the event would start half an hour earlier than planned. I reacted immediately since I knew that the President, Alvaro Uribe, was the last person Orlando would want to have at his tribute. Our Colombian colleagues in the bar knew that the President had been accused of violating human rights and Orlando was a member of the political party that led the charges. To avoid political confrontation in front of the guests, I advised that the event should not start earlier as the attendees had not been informed about this change in the program. The former Chair disapproved of my comment, recognising that I was expressing an underlying political statement against the President’s attendance at the event. Besides, I knew the President would take advantage of this event to defend his government’s education policies that teachers’ unions were then fighting against. The Chair of the Organising Committee made clear that the President’s attendance was a decision made. At that moment I understood this was a political move by the Rector of La Salle to publicly demonstrate his affinity with and support for Uribe’s government. This volatile incident was resolved in a surprising way.

57 The now former President of Colombia, Alvaro Uribe Velez was accused of violating human rights while implementing his government’s policy of democratic security. While implementing this policy, the government strengthened its use of armed forces to fight against outlaw armed groups. Critics felt the government had focused too much on military aspects at the expense of addressing the complex social, human rights and economic concerns of the Colombian people.
As soon as Orlando arrived to the opening ceremony and learned that the President would make the opening, he decided not to appear at the event when the President was there. As expected, the routine official procedure unrolled to prepare for the President’s presence, Security guards asked the audience to leave the theatre so they could check it and attendees’ belongings, while cameras were set up to develop one of his ‘community councils’. The President opened the event lamenting the absence of Orlando, who, in spite of his disagreements with government policies, Uribe said he admired. He then proceeded to run one of his ‘community councils’ with those present in the theatre.

During previous weeks teachers’ demonstrations had marked the streets so Uribe wanted to ‘talk’ with the teachers. International guests were curious about this Colombian way of doing politics. For some it was their first time to witness this type of political practice. After the President’s talk, the La Salle Rector expressed his pride to be considered a close friend of the President, whose visit to the university ratified this relationship. The President left the venue and the program finally started three hours later than planned. Orlando met all the international and national guests in one of the most prestigious clubs of the city, where a special lunch was offered. This was the first time Orlando would see some of his old academic friends again, some scholars of action research who wanted to meet him and the Rector! In spite of Orlando’s absence in the opening ceremony, nothing was said during lunch and the following days. This incident was mentioned only on the last day of the event, when Orlando was receiving an Honoris Causa Doctoral Degree in Education; for the first time he would address the audience. He opened with an apology for not being present for the opening ceremony. Giggling, he said: “I had a terrible toothache!” The full Colombian audience applauded him, with the international guests and other attendees joining their applause.

At the end of the event’s first day, I had a difficult talk with the Vice Rector. He was upset that I had expressed my disagreement overtly on the President’s visit. I

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58 During eight years, President Alvaro Uribe travelled all around the country talking to people in an unusual way. These were called the ‘community councils’ and were transmitted live on TV. Depending on the most critical problems of the location he was, President Uribe brought the ministers and directors of offices involved in such problems. He started the talk with people and asked the corresponding governmental officer to respond to people’s inquiries. President Uribe was very well known for all the strategies he used in order to get people’s sympathy.
replied, respectfully, that my main concern was to make the person to whom the university was offering this tribute, feel the best possible under the circumstances. I certainly did not want further discussion with him on deeper political disagreements. But he made it clear that this was not all that he had been informed about. He expressed his discomfort with some incidents concerning the Chair of the event. I simply replied that I had not intended to disrupt her functions but I could not avoid people coming to me since they were not clear on indications they received from her. They understood that I had made the proposal and directly contacted international and national academics. After a two-hour talk, the Rector offered me a lift home.

The symposium ran smoothly after the President’s departure. Attendees could not believe that all the most important scholars of the field of action research, and Orlando himself, were present. We all felt very proud of our Colombian quota in this historical academic event. About 380 attendees from Venezuela, Brazil, Ecuador, Mexico, Chile, Argentina and Colombia very enthusiastically attended the plenaries, round tables, paper presentations and reflection sessions. Deans of several Faculties of Education in Bogotá had agreed to chair the reflection sessions that were scheduled at the end of each of the three days, while other recognised Colombian academics in the field of education were invited to participate in roundtables. Aware of the importance of mutual understanding, I responded to my own claim in Utrecht in 2005: the non-speakers of Spanish would have proper translation into their languages (in this case, Portuguese and English). I also suggested students from the Master degree course in education who were proficient in English accompany the keynote speakers in academic and non-academic activities.

Three parallel projects linked to the symposium also took place. An American scholar I had met in the conference in Australia in 2005 was eager to attend the symposium and meet Orlando. The office in charge of research at the university invited Professor Phil Carspecken from the University of Indiana to give a seminar on the research approach he knew best: critical ethnography in education. This office paid for Phil’s flights and his accommodation in Bogotá. He gave this seminar the day before the symposium; several academics had already read his book and wanted to engage more deeply with his work. Thirty academics from
various universities attended this seminar. The other two projects were related to publications. The first publication was a festschrift for Orlando (Santos & Todhunter, 2007). This was a suggestion by Ortrun, who advised us of someone who could edit the chapters in English and I would be the editor of the chapters in Spanish. The result was a double-sided festschrift composed of five chapters in English and four chapters in Spanish, one of which I wrote (Santos, 2007a). All keynote speakers as well as some Colombian academics contributed chapters to the published festscrift.

The second editorial project was a special issue on ‘Participatory Action Research’ for an international journal in the field of education in Latin America; this was published in Spanish. I could not lead both projects, so declined to be the guest editor of this special issue; I suggested one of the co-researchers of the action research project on curriculum development be the person in charge of that project. This special issue was published one month before the symposium and contained articles on action research experiences, including one this co-researcher and I wrote (Santos & Quintero, 2007), as well as interviews with some of the keynote speakers coming to the symposium, two of which I conducted (Santos & Grundy, 2007; Santos & Zuber-Skerritt, 2007a, 2007b). This special issue was to serve as a warm-up for the upcoming event. The central text was the transcription of an interview with the man we wanted to honour in the symposium: el Maestro Orlando.

Organisation and carrying out this academic event to both tribute Orlando and lubricate the university community’s familiarity with (P)AR challenged the research group to cope with many more people and interests than we initially thought. The common good began to appear very unstable as each individual and group brought together in this (P)AR experience brought their own interests and ideas of the ‘common good’ into this picture. Many of these interests and ideas merged very well in the process, while others did not. Then I realised that for the ‘good’ to become ‘common’ we should not disregard any newcomer’s ideas, as this would disregard the diversity of people becoming engaged with the original proposal.
This negotiation process had to be developed on different grounds. While the international academics were especially interested in joining the initiative of the symposium to celebrate Orlando’s life and work, the university directives were trying to position the organising institution in the international academic scenario and the attendees were clear about making a huge effort to meet these first-class academics in person. The research objectives had evolved from organising this event to increase the university community’s engagement in constructing the new curriculum proposal and networking with a specific academic community in Latin America. In spite of these different reasons and interests, together we brought about something new: the realisation of a unique event in Latin America, which especially acknowledged the life and work of one of our great Latin American scholars. Perhaps it was the convergence of this diversity that led us to get what we achieved in the end.

However, bringing together such a diverse group of people to create this unique moment also implied bringing together the structures and interests of the social groups to which they belonged. Some of the international academics were also Australian and British citizens who had been warned by their respective governments not to come to Colombia, and Orlando was not just master scholar but also the founder and a member of the political party in opposition to the ruling Colombian government. And whereas most attendees were teachers who could hardly afford this event, the Rector was a member of the Catholic communities that had expressed their support for the policies implemented by the then ruling Colombian government.

Welcoming new people in the (P)AR scene implies welcoming both the individuals and the groups to which they belong. Sometimes the groups and interests these individual represent are compatible with what (P)AR aims to achieve. Sometimes they are not. For the latter, carrying out a (P)AR project can be risky. Yet it can also happen that the (P)AR project itself can be perceived as a threat to the stability and functionality of an existing structure of one of these social groups. The event to pay tribute to Orlando’s life and work brought to the scene many interests of groups and individuals, some of which challenged both the symposium and the (P)AR project that brought this event to life. For all of these concerns about individuals, groups and interests, more than we conference
organisers it was el Maestro Orlando himself who really was responsible for drawing all of us together.

5.4. **What did trouble making mean in this (P)AR project?**

I can certainly not compare myself with Orlando. But I could understand what he meant by referring to himself as a ‘trouble maker’. In some ways it seems to come with the turf. I have lived my life as a (P)AR practitioner with the feeling of eventually becoming the ‘bad guy’ of the movie. This project was one such case. One day my academic worth was acknowledged in being asked to lead a (P)AR project to construct a new type of curriculum at this university; the next I have been identified as a threat.

After the symposium was finished, the research group focused its complete attention on the academic settings we had identified as relevant at the beginning of this (P)AR process: the meetings with the directors of the offices in charge of academic matters at the university, the faculty curriculum boards and the academic staff of these faculties interested in getting engaged in the project, the Master degree in education course, and the group of undergraduate students, lecturers and course coordinators who would be interviewed in the critical ethnographic stage of the project.

The meetings with the directors of the university offices were interrupted in the second semester of 2007 as the person who convened and chaired them, namely, the Director of Curriculum Affairs, former co-researcher of this (P)AR project and chair of the symposium, had expressed her disagreement on the way I had oriented my support to the organisation and carrying out of the event. From her point of view, I had not acknowledged her authority in the way she felt I should have. It had become completely clear to her that I had overlooked the position she had in the university hierarchy. Consequently, she decided that her office would be in charge of providing the new guidelines to deal with the national education policy under discussion. She resigned her position as a co-researcher of the project and as a member of the research group. With no chances to discuss anything with her, we decided to continue keeping on working with other members of the university community.
As we had already presented the (P)AR initiative to some faculty curriculum boards before the symposium started, and many of their members and academic staff attended the tribute to Orlando, we received the news at the beginning of the second semester that six lecturers from the Business School were interested in joining the project with individual classroom action research projects. We decided to reorganise some of the responsibilities in the research group. While three co-researchers would be in charge of the literature review of contemporary debates on the notion of ‘competency’ and its analysis under the institutional educational philosophy, I would guide the writing process of the action research classroom proposals of the academic staff members. These proposals needed to be submitted to their School to obtain the necessary funding, which included the allocation of time for research. I also would keep on working with former students in the Master degree course to carry out the 90 interviews to reach an equal number of community members. These interviews would be made, transcribed and analysed by the research assistants.

Finally, one of the co-researchers and I would be in charge of one of the five research seminars offered to graduate students to develop their research projects. Most of the students who enrolled in our seminar had been able to attend the symposium and were willing to start their (P)AR initiatives in their corresponding educational settings. While some planned to develop their (P)AR projects in the undergraduate courses in which they were lecturing, some others planned to develop their initiatives in public and private high schools. Thirty graduate students expressed their interest in doing different types of studies related to the discussion of competency-based curricula. Fourteen of these 30 students actually did (P)AR projects, while 16 conducted descriptive/interpretive studies. Interesting discussions were under way in class while students starting writing their (P)AR proposals. However, there were two incidents on which we had not counted.

First, it was more than theoretical frameworks to approach education that eventually resulted in confrontations among academics. Research approaches did so as well. Although this course was introduced as aimed to provide students with a variety of research resources and updated insights about educational matters in
secondary and higher education, the curriculum was shaped by the educational and research streams associated with their disciplinary fields. The research experience of four of the lecturers was informed by the positivistic paradigm as their first degrees concerned the fields of psychology and the natural sciences. Two other lecturers came from the field of literature and philosophy, while only one was a sociologist. This was problematic when the students’ (P)AR projects were submitted for evaluation. Whereas some academics could not accept the (P)AR way of creating knowledge as valid, others provided feedback based on what they would have done from their experience. In the end, each single defence session became a discussion of (P)AR among the academic staff in charge of the course. These were surely interesting debates about our theoretical and research approaches, but they presented stressful situations for the students submitting these projects. However, this was not the main issue in the process of developing the students’ (P)AR initiatives.

Second was clash of timing for classes. The seminar my colleague and I were in charge of to continue research on competency-based curricula approached from a critical perspective began to clash with logistical arrangements made by the course coordinator to guarantee the end of the studies of the students of every cohort. This course coordinator, whose first degree was in social communication and whose main topic of interest was creative writing, had suggested academic staff support the idea of asking the students to present their research findings in a particular portfolio format. The students were expected to present progress reports on their research every semester. Most academics agreed. While the coordinator’s proposal was taking form, the research process began to become standardised, as the coordinator decided to establish what sort of content, in terms of the research process, each portfolio should include. My colleague and I expressed our concern about the assumptions informing these practical decisions (e.g., that each research stage should take the same time). However the coordinator found our request not to standardise preliminary-finding reports inconvenient for his commitment to providing evidence to those directing the university that cohorts would indeed graduate according to estimated times. Discussions among academics in charge of these research seminars began to make students stressed and confused. A disruptive struggle for power was at work.
within a small group of the academics in this Master degree course. It was resolved with more new policies put in place.

I had started working at this university in 2003 as a part-time lecturer, based on an agreement that I would attend teaching activities and meetings on Thursday and Friday afternoons and Saturday mornings, and accept commitment to attend research meetings when necessary. Most of my reading and writing for research purposes would be done at home. During the organisation and carrying out of the symposium, I devoted much more time than this. Since my part-time position at Universidad Nacional de Colombia was changed to a full-time position in 2005, I was forced to be really strict with this, so that I could still continue with my research and teaching in this private university. This meant that I could not attend meetings scheduled on days other than those I had agreed to, and the current course coordinator was happy with that until disagreements on research matters surfaced. In the second semester of 2007, a new institutional policy on workload was put in place. This policy aimed at demanding all staff members attend all activities scheduled by the university for community-building purposes. I understood the university had a right to request this of academic staff.

However I could not reach an agreement with the course coordinator about the days and times that I would attend teaching, research and administrative activities under the new institutional policy. The coordinator told me that my contract therefore would be finished without any compensation to me, since, from the coordinator’s point of view, I was not complying with my obligations as a part-time staff member. In my talks with the course coordinator, the dean and the Rector, respectively, I presented the argument that they could not fire me the way they were planning to since I had not breached the mutually binding agreement I had signed with the university in 2003. From my perspective, what was really happening here was fundamentally a change of university policy, which the university had the right to do. But that policy change entailed changes to the university’s expectations of part-time staff members and to the employment conditions under which I would be able to meet these new expectations. The current Rector, who was Academic Vice-Rector at the time of the symposium, agreed to end my employment contract with the university on the basis of a change in institutional policy rather than on the assumption that I was not meeting
the requirements of our mutually binding 2003 agreement. The university gave me appropriate compensation on the grounds that it was ending my contract for unjustified reasons.

When I left the university near the end of 2007, the (P)AR project was in progress. One of my co-researchers took on the leadership and another accepted responsibility to guide the students and academics for whom I had been the person responsible. This was just the start of a series of institutional policies that would change not only the future of this (P)AR project but also the orientation of the entire university.

5.5. The beginning of the end of a (P)AR project?

The new lead researcher of the (P)AR project was one of its co-researchers. In 2011, five years after we started this (P)AR experience together, we had a wonderful chat, in which he recalled when he joined it, who he was at the time, and what happened after I was forced to leave the university. I am very grateful to him for what he shared with me.

He remembered that he was a novice researcher when he joined the project in 2006. He had done a Master degree in education and some research at the university, but this (P)AR project was the first huge endeavour in his professional life. This project was aimed at engaging the entire university community, which implied that the research would be based on much material. But it also had a challenging political agenda that would encourage this community to think of itself in relation to a mainstream discourse, namely, the discourse of the competency-based curricula in higher education. This collective process brought to the new lead researcher both a series of interesting responsibilities, as he characterised them, and new lines of work that he never thought he would have. From his considerable research on the notion of ‘competence’, he produced many academic works from which he began to develop new projects.

The lead researcher said that after my departure from the university, the (P)AR project continued but all the resources assigned to it were withdrawn. The project had to rely on only two of the initially four researchers, and contracts with the
project’s research assistants were not renewed. It left a huge amount of work for the two researchers to do themselves. These changes in the project related not only to the university’s new staffing policy, but also to a new research policy aimed at promoting the second mode of creation of knowledge suggested by Michael Gibbon and colleagues in 1994. The new Research Vice-Rector decided not to support other types of research, and although some could say that this (P)AR project could be conceived as context-driven and problem-focused, he was interested only in developing projects that concerned technological outcomes. After some years of this institutional turn, and several failures, the university understood that it had neither the infrastructure nor the experience in the political arena to run such a radical shift in its research agenda.

The two researchers in charge of the (P)AR project were allowed to keep only the time that was allocated in their workloads in early 2006 to work on the project. They were told to close the project, either leaving it at the stage where it was or focusing on one of the research objectives formulated earlier. They decided to close the project by selecting one of the specific research objectives and transformed it into a general one. They made this decision based on feasibility and the time they had available for research. Based on the more narrow objective they chose to achieve and the 300-pages of transcripts from on their research, they reformulated the project as an interpretive study. The lead researcher analysed the 300-page transcription of the 90 interviews, while the co-researcher was in charge of theoretical analysis of the notion of ‘competence’. In spite of all the disappointments through which they had to pass, the lead researcher described this research stage as one of the most exciting academically. The researchers proceeded to write articles, which were published in Mexico and Colombia. The lead researcher took advantage of this research experience to continue discussing the pedagogical implications of the theoretical and empirical analyses in his PhD studies. As a result of this, he was invited to participate in debates and graduate courses in several universities, which also triggered a new stage in his professional career.

59 Different from the traditional way of creating knowledge (Mode 1: discipline-based knowledge), in mid twentieth century Gibbons claimed there was a new way of creating knowledge that was context-driven and problem-focused. His proposal had been under debate at the university for some years.
He expressed his regret that the (P)AR project did not have an impact on the institutional process that the Director of Curriculum Affairs guided; he observed that many mistakes had been made during the subsequent years. He recalled the break the research team had taken after the symposium. He especially considered it a pity that all the academics’ enthusiasm derived from their attendance at the May 2007 symposium had not been oriented to construct those curriculum guidelines collectively in the university. He considered the break in the relationship between the (P)AR practitioners and that director as a complete drawback.

What was really amazing, he continued, was that the forced closure of this (P)AR project coincided with the start of a national debate on evaluation and education that led him and the co-researcher to participate actively in it in 2009. They were invited to be keynote speakers at the regional debate held in Bogotá. Not only were their keynote addresses published on the website of the Colombian Ministry of Education but they were also called to give seminars on this topic to several groups of academic staff members at the university.

When the lead researcher put these pieces of the jigsaw puzzle together, he realised that it was surprising how the initial work done in this (P)AR project took mysterious paths and triggered many other initiatives. In the end, not only had the academic staff become involved in projects to revise and reorient what they had done with the former director of curriculum affairs, but also the academic unit in charge of the university’s educational philosophy started a (P)AR project with 30 academics to contribute to this curriculum development process from their subjects. They used the research findings to inform their work with about 70 staff members who had reflected critically on what they had been doing in relation to the new national education policies. What the lead researcher could not give an account of was the real transformations in curriculum processes and pedagogical practices.

Another (P)AR project was developed in the graduate course in education. Unfortunately, once again, only four of the ten (P)AR projects of these graduate students were finished. Deadline times for graduation appeared to be the main challenge to those involved. The students made their six unfinished projects
interpretative/descriptive to meet this institutional expectation. Another outcome of the (P)AR project we started in 2006 was the creation of an office at the university in charge of supporting academics constructing pedagogical knowledge based on (P)AR projects in the classrooms. This office is led by one of the academics who attended the symposium in 2007.

The academic who took the lead of the (P)AR project I left by the end of 2007 is now the Director in charge of the self-evaluation and accreditation processes at the university. He continues moving on critical perspectives to inform understandings of these sorts of educational demands.

5.6. (P)AR and pecking orders

Encouraging academics to be more active in the political realm of our universities implies welcoming their individuality and their belonging to a variety of social groups. This brings, in turn, the convergence of expectations, needs and interests of such individuals and collectives. Dealing with this rich complexity demands that (P)AR practitioners in higher education be aware of the various tensions that these encounters can bring about. When individual identities and social structures and roles are threatened by this convergence of systems of beliefs and practices, a kind of ‘pecking order’ can challenge the (P)AR experience. Social identities and roles may struggle to find a place in the new order constructed through the (P)AR experience. The claim for relationships among equals in the political sphere may collide with the advocacy of legitimising and acknowledging already existing relationships in already established social hierarchies.

While writing this story, nature gave me a wonderful opportunity to witness a clear illustration of something similar to what I lived in this (P)AR project. I was visiting a very good friend of mine in Brisbane at the end of January 2012. I was seated in the lounge admiring the beauty of the Australian birds through the glass window. There were two yellow crested cockatoos eating the seeds my friend left for the birds every morning in the birdfeeder. Nearby two black crows appeared and started eating the leftovers of the bread my friends left for the possums; the crows were taking some of the remaining cubes of bread and dropping them in the water in the adjacent birdbath to make the bread softer to eat. Suddenly, a flock of
small rainbow lorikeets arrived and the big cockatoos fled from the feeder. I could not believe that these beautiful small birds were so aggressive and could take possession of the birdfeeder filled with seeds. However, that was not the only behaviour that surprised me. It was clear that there were some dominant individuals among the rainbow lorikeets. When the dominant lorikeets finished eating, the rest of the lorikeets, waiting in the trees, surrounded the feeder, flew in to feed. When all the lorikeets left, the yellow crested cockatoos returned.

In some way what I lived in this (P)AR project, aimed at constructing a new curriculum proposal for this private university, was a continuous reconfiguration of the relationships that resulted from the encounter of the various social groups engaged in the process at one point or another. The underlying claim of the project to construct this curriculum proposal on the basis of equality clashed several times with the existing social structure established at the university for policymaking and curriculum development. The director of the university’s office in charge of curriculum affairs felt that her authority to give directives within the university had been ignored while she performed her role as chair of the symposium. In response, she let those in the educational community involved in this episode know that there was a social order in place at the university, one that empowered her and that she expected others to acknowledge accordingly. Then she resigned her role as a co-researcher of our (P)AR project and started giving her own guidelines to the academics involved in it. The coordinator of the graduate courses behaved similarly. When he recognised that his guidelines and requests to students and academics had been questioned by them, he resorted to the social order and regulations (i.e., policies) legitimised by the university to re-affirm his status and authority.

Some communities or members of the community appear to need to reassert the existing social order that sustains their authority over others if they perceived that order is threatened by new ways of establishing relationships to work towards the common good. Meantime the members of the community who still believe in the need to changing the state of affairs (including its institutionalised hierarchy) find their own ways of taking remedial action. Sometimes institutional paths work, and sometimes they do not; sometimes what works is a mix of both. (P)AR practitioners in higher education must be aware of these possibilities and proceed
on the basis of what works best in each community at each stage. (P)AR practitioners in universities must be also aware of both their (our) condition as equals and their (our) own status in the existing institutional social orders of which we are part.

Any (P)AR experience is an uncertain exploration of how the political and the social realms work together. Orlando’s life and work illustrate this personal search very well. His exploration, like any (P)AR practitioner’s, brought about expected and unexpected outcomes, some of which could be assessed as positive while others could be considered negative. The research component of (P)AR can give us some ideas of what can be foreseen; however, the ‘participatory action’ of the people involved is what really guarantees the uncertainty of the process. The new beginnings brought about by (P)AR in the political realm can emerge from this bundle of certainties and uncertainties, as well as from expected and unexpected paths.
Chapter 6 The power of the pain of the new (Story 4)

Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer’s apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell (Arendt, 1998, p. 237).

The private university in Bogotá where I obtained my first degree in 1986 is considered the oldest in my country. It is governed by the Jesuits, who taught me from the ways ancient Greeks, Romans and Chinese educated their children to liberation theology, a Christian movement within the Roman Catholic Church that advocated a ‘preferential option for the poor’ in Latin America. From those years, the most important memory for the story I tell here concerns my reading of Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire’s (1970) Pedagogy of the Oppressed. When I read it, I could understand much better that social inequity was rooted in a political failure. Particularly in relation to the field of education, I was made more aware that schooling was being used as a means to reproduce and perpetuate, from within, power-based relationships among human beings. Freire’s main invitation to learn how to ‘read’ the world in order to be able to ‘write’ a new one became the light in a dark tunnel.

I tried to make sense of Freire’s words during my first three years as an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher. During this time I became more aware that I was dealing with subtle ways of teaching particular ideological positions presented in the imported textbooks we used in high schools and universities in Colombia. I was helping, in some way, to reproduce such ideologies through my teaching! I realised that I needed to deepen my knowledge of the human faculty of language to understand much better how this subtle ideological transmission and reinforcement were performed through language; only in this way could I help through my teaching to ‘write’ that other new world Freire was talking and writing about.

With this idea in mind, I applied for a place in a Master degree in linguistics at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia. I started studying again while coping with the commitments of my first part-time job in higher education in another Catholic university. Both would draw me more deeply into the relationship between
language and ideology, this time through the study of my mother tongue: Spanish. When I had completed all the subjects required in this graduate course, I secured a full-time position as a lecturer at the Department of Modern Languages of the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana. There I taught Linguistics in the teacher education course that I had taken as an undergraduate five years earlier.

My research for my Master degree in linguistics was a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of different kinds of written texts that resulted from an ethnographic evaluation of the teacher education course for which I had become coordinator in 1993. This evaluation was carried out from 1995 to 1996 as a response to the university’s request to self-evaluate all teacher education courses for accreditation purposes. In my Master dissertation based on Norman Fairclough’s (1989) *Language and Power*, I disentangled various systems of beliefs embedded in the language used by students, lecturers and administrative personnel during the evaluation process. The resulting methodology to self-evaluate this course was recommended by the university’s Faculty of Education as the accreditation of all higher education courses began nationwide. Twelve years later I met the academic who recommended national course accreditation. She was and still is in charge of the self-evaluation process of courses for accreditation at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, while I was the person in charge of this same process at Universidad Nacional de Colombia.\(^{60}\)

While still a course coordinator at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, I applied for a position at a public university in a city in the South West of Colombia in 1997; I wanted to secure both a more stable position and a better salary. One year later I needed to resign from my new position and return to Bogotá to start a new life with my newborn baby and my husband, who worked in this latter city. After maternity leave, I was hired again by Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá, as a lecturer in EFL and Spanish as a Second Language (SSL). In August 1998, I began leading the first big (P)AR project of my academic career – one that would orient the teaching of foreign languages in the university.

The story I tell here is about this (P)AR project, a project that was the beginning of a personal journey into understanding what bringing about social changes from

\(^{60}\) This (P)AR experience is told in Chapter 4.
within the university means and implies. It is a story about a (P)AR experience that enabled me to understand, for the first time, the nuances of participation in social and political terms, and how incoherent our discourses and research practices as (P)AR practitioners can be. It is also a story that gives an account of the ways our ideological positions as (P)AR practitioners actually influence our ways of relating to others and the sort of reactions they can generate. Finally, it is a story about the meaning of our storytelling of the political dimension of (P)AR in its relationship with space and time.

6.1. A (P)AR project with stage-based (P)AR sub-projects

In 1998 the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana had about 14,000 students and 6,000 more distance education learners (Santos, 2002a, p. 2). The Department of Modern Languages was one of the four departments of the recently created Faculty of Communication and Language. This Department consisted of about 40 full-time lecturers and 80 casual staff, who aimed to meet the foreign language teaching needs in this educational community. At this time this academic unit offered over 280 different foreign language courses to about 5,000 students every semester (p. 2).

Stage 1: Making a common cause from within (1998-1999)

The initial (P)AR project I formulated aimed to prepare a curriculum development proposal with the coordinators of the three main foreign language teaching programs of this academic unit (English, Spanish and French). From the beginning, this proposal was known as the PCGLE, the acronym from the Spanish for ‘General Curriculum Proposal for Foreign Language Teaching’ at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana. This research initiative emerged as a response to the request of the coordinator of the Spanish as a Second Language Teaching Program (SSLTP) to make a comprehensive curriculum proposal for teaching this language at the university. This program was attended only by foreign students who were interested in joining courses at the university or in taking the international exam to test their proficiency in Spanish. The Latin American Centre
of the Department of Modern Languages was, and is still, the academic unit in charge of this international exam for the Latin American region.

One month later, and as a lecturer of the English as a Foreign Language Teaching Program (EFLTP), I invited the coordinator of this latter program to join some meetings to discuss the common ground of both programs. Two months later, the coordinator of the French as a Foreign Language Teaching Program (FFLTP) also came along. After a year of preparation, we had a working document to be discussed with the Department’s 80 full-time lecturers. For the first time, these three coordinators were working together and had overcome the barriers imposed by their discipline traditions. The Anglo-Saxon, Francophone and Spanish–American language teaching traditions were engaging in dialogue to reach a common goal on the basis of a common vocabulary. This was also the first time the Department had a written record of the state of affairs in these three programs with their own academic traditions.

**Stage 2: Crossing disciplinary borders (2000)**

When we were about to convene a seminar to discuss this first working document, the program coordinators/researchers were warned by one of our lecturers (a sociologist) that we needed to substantiate the proposal much more in relation to contemporary socio-cultural and economic trends. Particularly, she claimed that the research group and the academic staff needed to be more aware and knowledgeable of the implications of the globalisation phenomenon for a proposal such as the one under construction. In this way, the sociologist, a lecturer with expertise in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), and two more academics interested in participating and accepting responsibilities joined this initiative as co-researchers. The (P)AR group was now composed of seven academics with different backgrounds and expertise. Group members agreed that it was time for a new stage to take place. As (P)AR practitioners, we were now involved in discussions with other academics in the Faculty of Communication and Language. Because of this newly opened communicative space, we participated in an event organised by the UNESCO Chair for Social Communication based in our university. My main claim in this event was that, based on a literature review in the field of higher education, universities differed
in their ways of understanding and ‘experiencing’ the globalisation phenomenon and, therefore, in interpreting what types of changes needed to be made in the processes of communication within this particular educational context (Santos, 2002b).

The research group made two decisions based on some preliminary discussion. One acknowledged the need to start involving students in our research group for curriculum development. To do this, we applied, successfully, for funding via a university program aimed at supporting initiatives to improve teaching practices in this institutional setting. The other decision we made was to negotiate with the Director of the Department on the allocation of time in the academic workload of the 40 full-time lecturers of the unit to run a seminar lasting one semester. This seminar would discuss the curriculum proposal. This suggestion was also approved. From there we entered a third stage of the (P)AR program composed of two (P)AR sub-projects. These became Stage 3A and Stage 3B.

Stage 3A: Involving lecturers and students in making social change (January – July 2001)

Our submission to the university’s funding program was for a (P)AR project to encourage lecturers and students to reflect upon the impact of the evaluation and assessment processes of these language courses in the student–teacher relationship. The lecturers attending the seminar described in the following section (Stage 3B) were invited to join this experience. Seventeen lecturers joined: seven EFL teachers participating in the teacher education course in modern languages, six EFL teachers giving English subjects in other courses at the university, two French as a Foreign Language teachers of the teacher education course, one Spanish as a Second Language teacher in the Latin American Centre and one EFL teacher in charge of an English subject for university academics (Santos & Ruiz, 2001, p. 40). Eleven were full-time lecturers and six were casual staff (Santos & Ruiz, 2001, p. 41) in charge of 17 groups with a total of 243 students (Santos & Ruiz, 2001, p. 38). They were invited to talk about and reorient their own teaching–learning processes on the basis of their conversations during the semester. The coordinator of the French as a Foreign Language
Program and I were members of the research group in charge of this (P)AR sub-project.

**Stage 3B: In-service teacher education for awareness raising and understanding (January – July 2001)**

The activity planned as the centre of this stage was a seminar. All full-time academic staff of the Department were expected to attend it during the first academic semester of 2001. Sixteen meetings took place from January 22 to May 21 that year. The seminar was attended regularly by 29 lecturers from all the language programs, including one seminar delivered on-line. These lecturers were 22 full-time, one part-time and six casual (Santos, 2001a, pp. 18-19). Five researchers were in charge of this (P)AR sub-project, which was aimed at engaging academics in discussion and further development of the curriculum development proposal. Following Elliott’s (1993, p. 178) distinction between first-order action research aimed at achieving reflective teaching and second-order research aimed at facilitating it in others, the research group wanted to explore if the seminar could work well for improvement and involvement purposes, as suggested in Grundy’s (1987) proposal for curriculum development as action research.

**Stage 4: In-service teacher education for collective construction (July 2001–September 2002)**

As a result of the two (P)AR sub-projects described above, lecturers organised themselves in five different groups to continue researching specific concerns particular to each group. The names of the groups reflected their shared concerns: ‘Context and Pedagogy of Foreign Languages’ (three lecturers), ‘Evaluation of Foreign Language Learning’ (five lecturers), ‘Curriculum Management’ (six lecturers), ‘Collaborative Learning’ (two lecturers) and ‘New Technologies and Language Learning’ (three lecturers). Each group established its own research objectives and timetable, according to an agreement made in the full research group. It was also agreed that each group would give an account of its activities and outcomes. This included a basic literature review of each topic of interest, as well as a plan of activities for the following semester. (COLCIENCIAS, 2012)

The (P)AR practitioners leading the collective journey decided to deepen their enquiry and action into a theoretical matter: we wanted to conceptualise much more clearly the notion of ‘communicative competence’ from an intercultural critical perspective. To do so the group divided this stage into two moments: an exploratory moment to identify the most relevant theoretical works concerning the notions of ‘competence’, ‘communicative competence’, ‘intercultural competence’ and ‘critical competence’, and a second moment to consolidate a review of the state of the art of these concepts in the fields of linguistics, social communication, and cultural and political studies (COLCIENCIAS, 2012). The outcomes of this exercise would inform the ongoing (P)AR experience at the Department of Modern Languages. I could work with this sub-group only in this fifth stage until August 2002 (the exploratory moment) when I had to leave this university.

6.2. From a collective paralysis to a forced restart

The cultural approach to curriculum development addressed by Australian academic Shirley Grundy (1987) in her book, *Curriculum: Product or Praxis?*, was the main guidance for this four-year (P)AR journey. The existence of a translated Spanish version of Grundy’s book enabled participants to gain direct access to the material of study. Grundy (1987) suggested approaching curriculum development as a way of organising educational practices, most of which resulted from the experience people had with the curriculum. She said that this approach was different from the conceptual approach, which was based on the assumption that curriculum design was prior to any human experience, and, therefore, curriculum development was just a logical deduction of an abstract set of ideas outside people’s experiences. Aligned with the cultural approach, Grundy claimed that any curriculum development process was not far away from people’s beliefs about human beings and about the ways they interact with the world. For her, any curriculum development process approached from a cultural approach had to be
an action research initiative that would enable participants to identify such beliefs while organising educational practices. Grundy (1987) drew from Freire’s notion of ‘praxis’ in his Pedagogy of the Oppressed, as well as from German sociologist Jürgen Habermas’ theory of knowledge-constitutive interests (which distinguished technical, practical and emancipatory interests) to describe different types of curriculum development.

From the beginning I was particularly interested in understanding much better the two guiding principles that Grundy proposed to develop an emancipatory curriculum as an emancipatory action research initiative. She claimed that this specific type of action research was aimed at improving people’s existing social conditions through their involvement in this social change-making process. Improvement and involvement were, then, the key methodological elements to carry out an action research from an emancipatory perspective. As a form of democratic research, this type of action research would approach participation not as a mere means to an end but as an end in itself. An emancipatory curriculum, then, would be a way of organising educational practices in such a way that participants’ self-reflection and actions could enable them to perceive when propositions represented distorted views of the world and to change the structures in which learning occurs, respectively. Language was therefore understood in this type of curriculum as a means for transforming participants’ consciousness of their existence, as well as for their involvement in the educational encounter.

During the first two years of this (P)AR experience (Stages 1 and 2), I began to understand that some of the obstacles to involving course coordinators and lecturers in this process in the first place, were related to organisational management practices. While participants (coordinators and lecturers at this point) agreed on the importance of looking for common times to reflect upon and eventually reorient what we were doing in our teaching practices as a collective, these times were always left outside the lists of priorities they established, due to their ‘overloaded’ academic workloads. These undesirable working conditions together with individual concerns about being accountable and finding out ‘how to do things well’ led academics (coordinators and lecturers) to leave ‘collective reflection at the bottom of the list’. However, I found this was only part of the
problem. Individual practice, which worked collectively, was reinforced by managerial practices at a higher level.

While the discourse of the academics in charge of curriculum management (the director of the department and course coordinators) was always characterised by references to the importance of academics’ individual autonomous decisions, academics usually refused to become involved in curriculum discussions more actively as ‘there was no time left for that’. In spite of the basic explicit agreement in this particular educational community on the need for revising and eventually reorienting foreign language teaching processes at the university, a sort of ‘collective paralysis’ had developed (Santos, 2000, p. 5; 2001b, p. 61). The only way the process could continue was by appointing a small group of academics to do ‘this important job’; I was one of the academics chosen. It was not what I was expecting but this was the way it was. At the beginning I thought I had failed, as I would not be able to encourage people to participate more actively. Then I thought maybe social change-making processes took their own pace and their own forms; I needed to be patient and not to give up.

By the end of 2000, a decision made by the Rector forced the Department of Modern Languages to revise its strategy to cope with change. Due to general discomfort with the university’s foreign language courses, the Rector had decided to form a committee to make a university policy on that aspect. As soon as this happened, the (P)AR leading group suggested to the Director of the Department to allocate some time to continue the collective discussion on the orientation of foreign language teaching at the university; it was clear that a decision had been asked to be made outside the Department and the academic staff had something to say about that. The Rector agreed, although for different reasons. He found that our research proposal and the external process to define the orientation of foreign language teaching at the university met another request, this time at an intermediate level. The Dean of the Faculty of Communication and Language had asked the directors of the departments to encourage academics to become more engaged in research processes. With these university and faculty processes under way, the Director of the Department decided that our request to allocate some common time (two hours per week) for academics to discuss the (P)AR
curriculum development proposal could work well to meet expectations at other levels. Two more hours would be allocated weekly for reading purposes.

Then I realised that the reason why working conditions in the Department were changing was not necessarily due to the Director’s involvement in the (P)AR initiative. In fact, he never participated in the discussions with academics during the four years I led this (P)AR process. He endorsed this activity only when it responded strategically to a need that emerged among his managerial duties (Santos, 2001a, p. 12). As soon as full-time academic staff knew that a two-hour seminar would be held weekly to discuss the curriculum development proposal, different reactions surfaced. Most academics welcomed the time allocated for collective discussion in the department, but a few did not, believing that they already had plenty of work.

Discussion of the curriculum development proposal started in the seminar in the third week of January 2001. While academic staff read, analysed and discussed the proposal, an invitation was made to them by the (P)AR leading group to join a (P)AR sub-project. It aimed at revising and discussing with students the evaluation and assessment processes of the foreign language subjects. These conversations with the students would serve to identify how these processes had affected the way they relate to each other and, eventually, to reorient their learning and teaching practices to sustain more meaningful experiences. Fifteen of 29 academics accepted the invitation. From then on, these fifteen academics and two members of the (P)AR leading group would participate in the discussions with colleagues in the seminar while also starting dialogues with 17 groups of students (243 students in total) in efforts to make sense of the pedagogical encounter in classrooms.

6.3. It is important but irrelevant: students and lecturers agree

The question that emerged from the 15 lecturers who accepted the invitation to join this work with the students concerned how to start this dialogue. We agreed that it was necessary to have a few exploratory questions as a group and that it could be helpful to pose these questions on the first day of classes. We also agreed
that students would be informed that these questions were part of a research project aimed at both making sense of the evaluation process in the classroom and improving the student–teacher relationships, which had been affected by the collective concern about marks and final grades. We did so. Before posing the questions, we asked for the students’ consent to tape record these initial dialogues as a way of documenting the process and to do a follow-up with them. This first dialogue between lecturers and students on the first day of classes was expected to end with some agreement on the evaluation process derived from each conversation. Both students and their lecturer in each group also agreed to do the follow-up on what had been agreed in these conversations. On this basis, we all proceeded this way in the first class; all the groups of students agreed to participate. From the end of January to the start of June 2001, each lecturer and students developed the subject considering their agreement to make the learning and teaching processes as well as their relationships more meaningful in the classroom. This group of lecturers ran the collective initiative from 15 January to 8 June, when casual staff contracts ended.

One of the critical issues in approaching curriculum development as an emancipatory action research initiative dealt with encouraging lecturers and students to learn from each other. As stated in Grundy (1987) and expressed in the (P)AR curriculum proposal under exploration, both teachers and students were active critical creators of knowledge, as well as both teaching and learning through dialogue (Santos & Ruiz, 2001, p. 27). Through this (P)AR sub-project we wanted to make sense of those words.

During the first week of classes, important reflections began to emerge from participants in the classrooms. One of the most shocking was this: although the students generally perceived the teacher–student relationship as friendly, they assessed it as inconsequential due to the ‘irrelevance’ of the subject in their professional educational processes (Santos & Ruiz, 2001, p. 42). This was found to be related to the student’s minimal use of foreign language in out-of-class educational activities at the university (Santos & Ruiz, 2001, p. 50). Even though providing evidence of the students’ intermediate proficiency in a foreign language was a requirement for any undergraduate degree at the university, opportunities to practice that language during the four years of study at the university were almost
non-existent. Fulfilment of this foreign language requirement without transcendence in daily academic life at the university had given rise to tensions in the student–teacher relationship in the classrooms that students initially found to be friendly. A consequence of this incoherence within the university community was to find out that students usually perceived the evaluation system of the foreign language learning process to be authoritarian (Santos & Ruiz, 2001, p. 50).

Being aware of the ‘irrelevance’ of mastering a foreign language in other educational settings that are different from the foreign language classroom, participant lecturers claimed that, like students, they had been forced to fit into this inconsistent normative framework within the university. They urged students not to be autonomous in seeking change in their syllabi, and expressed their frustration, and sometimes fear, of transgressing existing norms (Santos & Ruiz, 2001, p. 50). The students in turn told their lecturers that they had the same feeling of fear but in relation to the normative framework set up in the classroom. Both lecturers and students concluded that they had accepted academic life was like that and that nothing could be done to modify or otherwise improve it.

Lecturers and students then proceeded to revise how they had participated in the decision-making process concerning evaluation of foreign language learning in the classroom. The main finding in this respect was that both lecturers and students identified that an ‘external entity’ made decisions about what was supposed to be said and done in classrooms (Santos & Ruiz, 2001, p. 52). Students and academics personified this external entity differently: the students perceived the lecturer as that external entity, while the lecturers perceived the course coordinator as that entity. These perceptions resulted in feelings of disappointment, discouragement, scepticism and hopelessness, which revealed their perceptions about lacking autonomy in the classroom.

Participating in the decision-making process for this type of evaluation was consequently characterised as being merely expression of their opinions about how to implement decisions made somewhere else (Santos & Ruiz, 2001, p. 52). However, that was not all. Participation was also seen as being defined by other social conditions and economic and cultural factors. For example, possibilities for
participation were different depending on which faculty or which course the students belonged to. It seemed to students and lecturers that more attention was paid to medicine and engineering students’ opinions, for instance, than to anthropology students’ opinions on any revision of the curriculum. Likewise, students of teacher education courses thought that those enrolled in the English area were more likely to be able to participate in the decision-making process about evaluation than those enrolled in the French area. They saw that in the end, English had a different status in the academic life than French. Both lecturers and students agreed that there hierarchical relationships were in place—among university faculties and among courses within the same faculty (Santos & Ruiz, 2001, p. 52).

Lecturers and students also identified another hierarchy affecting degrees of participation in the decision-making process to evaluate foreign language learning. This was defined by the type of contract each lecturer had in their Department (Santos & Ruiz, 2001, p. 52). In this sense, casual staff were less likely to participate in decision-making about evaluation than full-time academic staff. In relation to these sorts of impediments, participant lecturers in this (P)AR sub-project also raised another interesting issue for discussions in the classrooms. Some of them claimed that students themselves were not prepared to participate in decision-making for curriculum purposes since they did not know what a foreign language learning process was about. Some students replied to this claim that they felt frustrated when they realised that what they had achieved in terms of autonomy and participation in educational processes in high school clashed with the vertical and authoritarian approach to creating knowledge and the corresponding evaluation system at university. This brought about a subsequent vertical student–teacher relationship in epistemological terms (Santos & Ruiz, 2001, p. 54).

In addition to these insights about participation, lecturers and students drew some other conclusions about negotiation in the classroom for evaluation purposes. If participation was mainly associated with the mere expression of an opinion, negotiation was linked to a multiple choice exercise (Santos & Ruiz, 2001, p. 55). Students were compelled to choose an answer from among a set of options given by lecturers. An authoritarian system of evaluation such as the one under
reflection could not allow room for other forms of participation and negotiation. This was aggravated by the expectation that many times participation and negotiation were to be carried out in the target foreign language. Some students saw clearly that it was harder to participate or negotiate in the foreign language classroom since it required students to have a basic level of proficiency in that language (Santos & Ruiz, 2001, p. 55). One of the most critical negotiations in this (P)AR experience concerned the assessment of ‘participation’ itself in the classroom (Santos & Ruiz, 2001, p. 57). While many students thought their participation in the learning process had to be taken into consideration in the final mark, most lecturers considered participation as a necessary condition for learning to take place and, therefore, not susceptible to being marked (Santos & Ruiz, 2001, p. 57). No agreement was reached on this matter.

In spite of the strong critique of the evaluation system of foreign language learning processes at the university, students and lecturers recognised this was just part of a broader problem in the Colombian education system (Santos & Ruiz, 2001, p. 60). Through the dialogues that took place in these classrooms, lecturers and students could each develop a clearer picture of the constraints upon them while performing their corresponding social roles. This awareness enabled them to recognise one another as equals and to try to find their own ways to make more meaningful progress during the 16 weeks they spent together. Although many claimed they had been anxious during these talks (Santos & Ruiz, 2001, p. 66), they acknowledged that these talks strengthened the student–teacher relationship for formative purposes (Santos & Ruiz, 2001, p. 75).

Lecturers also highlighted that the (P)AR experience encouraged students to become more engaged in their learning processes, while the dialogues served as a starting point for the lecturers to prepare classes (Santos & Ruiz, 2001, p. 68). Students also pointed out that these conversations about the evaluation process throughout the semester had led them to find another meaning for the notion of ‘evaluation’ itself: they found it could serve as a resource to investigate their own learning process (Santos & Ruiz, 2001, p. 78). Finally, the students referred to one of the most critical issues in terms of social justice: they expressed their disagreement with the profit-making character of the evaluation system for
foreign languages (placement tests and proficiency tests) at the university (Santos & Ruiz, 2001, p. 91).

Drawing from the findings in this (P)AR sub-project, four topics were identified as needing to be tackled urgently: 1) the lack of autonomy in classrooms; 2) urgent revision of curriculum management in relation to evaluation; 3) the need to contextualise foreign language pedagogy to make the learning of a foreign language more meaningful; and 4) the need to approach the notion of communicative competence from a critical and intercultural perspective (Santos & Ruiz, 2001, p. 72). Later on, specific research projects were formulated and carried out by different groups of academics to address these matters.

6.4. What are we doing?

While the (P)AR sub-project described above was being carried out (stage 3A), the (P)AR sub-project in charge of discussing the emancipatory curriculum approach with the academic staff (stage 3B) was taking place. The agreement with the Director of the Department was that the leading research group of the PCGLE (General Curriculum Proposal for Foreign Language Teaching) would be in charge of this activity. An academic of the Department of Information Studies who was then responsible for promoting research in the Faculty joined the group and was appointed as the coordinator of the seminar. This would create an interesting situation, as the perspective of an outsider would each week join those of the group of academics participating in this (P)AR sub-project.

One of the problematic aspects identified during the first two years of this (P)AR experience, namely, the lack of ‘common spaces and times’ for collective reflection on the proposal, would now be solved, in some way. We would have a two-hour seminar every week for 16 weeks. As described above, the research group in charge of facilitating this process was interested in knowing if this strategy could help academics to gain a better understanding of the curriculum development proposal and, subsequently, more involvement in its construction. Following Elliott’s (1993) proposal for a second-order action research, we wanted to know how we could facilitate that.
Our only pertinent knowledge at the beginning of this specific process was that we were responsible for organising and developing the seminar. To do it the best way we could, this group of five researchers met every week, two hours after the seminar. We had agreed that in each meeting we would: 1) do a diary entry with each of our group members’ reflections about the seminar session of the week; 2) read the written comments made by the participants at the end of each session of the seminar; 3) analyse this information; and 4) make decisions about the orientation of the following seminar session. Initially, it was proposed to the participants that the three main concerns we shared would be considered as three important components of the seminar process: 1) a presentation and discussion of a specific section of the curriculum proposal; 2) an introduction of action research as the approach suggested to be used in the classrooms; and 3) group work by topics of interest. We started following this initial plan until we realised something was wrong.

First, while analysing our diary entries and the participants’ comments, we found that our pedagogical practice in the seminar corresponded to that described in the curriculum development proposal as the pedagogical practice informed by a technical approach to curriculum development (Santos, 2001a, p. 23). The facilitating group as well as the participants were given an account of a group of people especially interested in developing shared knowledge about the proposal; in short, we were using the seminar to achieve that end. Second, and aligned with this approach, we were making decisions on the basis of a linear process, namely, one that needed to start by setting the objectives at the beginning, adopting a methodology to achieve them, and an evaluation process to give an account of the expected outcomes. And this was not all. Third, while trying to find a way out of what we were inviting our colleagues to change, we began adopting another unexpected practice. In response to written comments by some seminar participants, who assessed the activities as not very ‘engaging’, we unconsciously became concerned with the need to ‘improve our pedagogical practice’ (Santos, 2001a, p. 24). It seemed that our own approach to facilitating the reflective process had illustrated, unintendedly, precisely what we believed and advocated should not be done!
By the end of the second month of the seminar, we addressed the big questions: what sort of democratic practices were we encouraging the participants to do? What sort of dialogue were we promoting? What next?

The facilitating group then decided to stop the process and shared with the participants our surprising finding: “we had fallen into the trap” (Santos, 2001a, p. 30). While we were talking about the need for changing our pedagogical practices in the classroom, we were reproducing them ourselves in the seminar. We confessed that we all needed to learn how to change the ‘old ways’ of teaching and learning that had not allowed people (students and lecturers) to participate in defining their own educational goals, for the ‘new ways’ that would enable us to construct our own goals on the basis of our differences (Santos, 2001a, p. 30). Some academics were disappointed with such a confession; they wanted to rely on us to tell them ‘what the new practices looked like’. Once again the concern about the ‘how to do things well’ surfaced among us (Santos, 2001a, p. 26). However, there was much more to share.

We also found in critical discourse analysis (CDA) a helpful resource for learning about participants’ understanding and involvement in this (P)AR experience. By then, my approach to this matter was completely defined by the theoretical framework underlying the curriculum development proposal. On the one hand, I suggested that participants’ understanding of the matter could be evidenced in the way they located their own educational practices in one of the three curriculum approaches (technical, practical or emancipatory) as a result of their reflective processes (Santos, 2001a, pp. 34-35). On the other, I found that participants could reveal their involvement more clearly by moving from impersonal discursive forms to first person singular discursive forms when referring to problems and solutions (Santos, 2001a, pp. 36-38).

By the end of the seminar, the participants expressed their views that, in spite of the unexpected track we all took, they had achieved a basic understanding of the characteristics of the three approaches to curriculum development described in the theoretical framework of the proposal. They also claimed they had improved their understanding of the curriculum approach suggested for the university’s foreign language teaching and learning. The 15 academics who participated with their
students in the (P)AR sub-project on evaluation added that while they felt it was a long journey to travel as a collective, it was nevertheless worthwhile. However, some situations that would soon arise made it clear to everyone that transgressing the existing social order was surely not welcome.

6.5. The resignation letter and the ‘Hot Seat’

It was the end of 2001 and the Director of the Department asked me if I was interested in the position of Coordinator of the Latin American Centre. I had worked in the Spanish as a Second Language program during my first year back at the university and I thought the Coordinator position would provide me a useful opportunity to explore the emancipatory curriculum development proposal in one specific course. In agreeing to accept the position, I negotiated with the Director the appointment of two full-time lecturers to build in the Centre a research–teaching team. The two interested lecturers belonged to the EFL Program and had been engaged in the (P)AR experience from the beginning. The Director of the Department approved these appointments. I proposed formulating a (P)AR project to develop our own teaching materials based on the curriculum development proposal. Lecturers in the Spanish program had always expressed their discomfort about the suitability of the materials imported from Spain, our Colombian socio-cultural context had been always been overlooked. They were confident they could create more suitable and meaningful materials for our Colombian students and lecturers.

Another problem identified in this program had been the lack of lecturers appropriately qualified and prepared to work as Spanish as a Second Language teachers in the Department. For a long time there had been requests that the Department offer a teacher education certificate in this field but the Department had not produced a proposal that would provide benefit for its academic staff. Thus the strategic plan I proposed to the Director also included preparation, offer and delivery of such a certificate. After three months of negotiation in the Faculty, I secured the funding to run the certificate. Three groups of about 20 teachers each would attend this three-month certificate course.
During the first semester of 2002 we worked hard on material design and teacher education. I was in charge of managerial duties as well as teaching and researching based on the curriculum development proposal. Our efforts seemed to work well. But after the first certificate was offered and delivered, I began to receive complaints from two coordinators. First, the coordinator of the English language program advised that he needed the two full-time lecturers back in his program and he had disagreed with those appointments from the very beginning. Second, the coordinator of translation services, the former Coordinator of the Latin American Centre, advised that she had been looking for the funding the Faculty had given me to run the teacher education certificates. I did not know how to reply since I had held continuous talks with the Director and the Dean of the Faculty but had never been made aware of her interest in that funding.

To identify how to best respond to these two specific controversies with coordinators, I arranged an appointment with the Director of the Department. I told him what was happening and that it was impossible for me to develop the research and teacher education initiatives without the two full-time lecturers and continuation of funding that the Faculty had provided the previous semester. He did not say a word. I told him that I could not continue coordinating the Latin American Centre if these controversies were not solved. He remained silent. I told him that I needed him to make clear that the appointments and the funding had been approved with his endorsement since my colleagues argued I had gone too far in my duties. Still, silence. I advised that I could not continue in the coordinator’s position and that he was free to appoint another person. I definitely did not want to have troubled relationships with colleagues and could continue as a full-time lecturer in the Department. I asked him to whom I should address my resignation letter and he answered to the Dean of the Faculty. And that is what I did.

The day after I submitted my resignation letter, the Director of the Department notified me that a meeting had been prepared with ‘all’ the colleagues with whom I had conflict. I entered a small meeting room where the two coordinators who complained to me in previous days were present, as well as an academic who had complained to the Director about a filing cabinet that had been assigned completely for the (P)AR project. The sociologist participating as co-researcher in
the (P)AR project had been asked to chair the meeting. The Director began by noting many conflicts in the unit that were related to my way of approaching academic life. He asked every person in the room to express what she or he wanted to tell me and advised that he had asked the sociologist to chair and take minutes for the meeting. I understood ‘the political’ of what was happening, but could not avoid discomfort being in the very ‘hot seat’ that the Director had created for me to sit in.

Two days later, while giving a class in one of the teacher education certificate courses, I received a phone call from the Dean asking me to go to his office when I finished my class at 8 pm. The Dean of the Faculty was a Jesuit priest with whom I had worked ten years earlier when the new Faculty was created. I was one of three female course coordinators and we used to refer to our group of women with the Dean using the collective ‘nosotras’ (the female, first person, plural pronoun ‘us’). I came in to his office and he asked me to sit down. He then gave me a letter stating that the university had ceased my employment. He told me he was very sorry about this situation, since he knew about my work but had to support the decisions made by department directors in the faculty of which he was in charge. I asked him if it was possible for me to know the main arguments expressed in the request of the director of my department to fire me. He gave me the director’s letter and told me that I could take it home and read it carefully. And that if I wanted to defend myself, I could bring a letter asking for an investigation. I replied that I would have expected to be asked for my reply to the director’s arguments before receiving the dismissal letter. However, since that had not happened, I preferred not to be in that university. I could not bear to be in a place where such unjust situations were accepted. I handed back the director’s letter and said good-bye.

My last day at the university, in late August 2002, was certainly hard for me. The university where I had heard strong claims urging our shared need to fight against social injustice now appeared in my eyes, for the first time, to lack all credibility; it was a day of tears in many people’s eyes. I expressed my gratitude to all staff and said goodbye. Some days later I wrote a letter to the Academic Vice-Rector telling my story; I asked for a revision of staff dismissal processes at the university. Two months later I learned that a complete academic unit had been
closed; the five full-time lecturers of the Department of Linguistics received a letter like mine late one Friday afternoon. They were asked to take their belongings the following day so that everything would be clean on Monday. That December the contracts were not renewed for the two full-time lecturers appointed to the Latin American Centre at the beginning of the year, and neither was the contract of the coordinator of the French Program. Another co-researcher decided to apply for a vacancy in a public university in December 2002. I did too. The next year the Dean was transferred to another campus and the Director of the Department was forced to resign after financial mismanagement was proven against him.

6.6. Some new beginnings from a painful break

In 2003, four colleagues and I create an inter-university research group. The other members were two researchers who participated in the four-year (P)AR experience and remained at that private university, an academic of a local public university, and another academic of the state university where I am now employed. With this group we began a new stage in our academic lives; we started carrying out another (P)AR experience in 2007, this time in three universities. Coordinating this (P)AR inter-university project required me to return to the Department of Modern Languages at the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana. I was received with smiling faces in the faculty and in the department. On one of those visits I met one of the coordinators who had been responsible for the ‘hot seat’ idea. We hugged and said good-bye; then she phoned me and asked me to forgive her. I said that there was nothing to forgive; that everything was in the past. Likewise, the sociologist who still works there answers the phone from time to time when I am looking for one of the researchers of the inter-university group. She greets me with affection and I do the same. She was one of my first lecturers in my first degree. She opened my eyes to the social concerns in Latin America; there is no resentment in my heart for her either.

Ten years after my departure from this university, I could talk with the other three lead researchers of this (P)AR experience. We met many times but we never

61 I tell about this in Chapter 3.
talked about what happened in late 2002; we had all ‘moved on’ from that painful time. But now we agreed that the time had come for us to open up to each other, so that we could all learn from our shared reflections on that (P)AR experience, its consequences, and our own failures or shortcomings. The academic who was the coordinator of the French program and was dismissed at the end of 2002 could also tell his story. This is what they told me about their perception of what happened. As the stories unfolded, the scales fell from eyes. Now I could see that I had then been very naïve about the political of (P)AR.

While one of them explained he was accustomed to doing politics overtly all his life, the two other confessed their naïveté about this. However, they all acknowledged they were completely surprised by the reactions of some people, patently arising from fear about the implications of the discourse we were introducing. They said they knew the process would be difficult; after all, the curriculum development proposal asked each academic to express his/her political stance, which would bring new conflicts into academic life. However, they said, we were all unaware of how dangerous the lecturers in teaching and managerial roles perceived our discourse to be. They had come to see us as a threat while we thought we were helpfully facilitating a collective process. In late 2002, the primary emotional reactions (resulting in our dismissals) were evidence of that perception.

This (P)AR process entailed introducing so many changes in the lives of the participants, including different ways of relating to others and to the world, that some of them found it unbearable, and struggled to find a way to keep their ‘known’ life in place. One by one each of us as researchers accepted now that we had made many mistakes in that (P)AR process, largely because we ourselves were also trying to understand the discourse that we were promoting among our colleagues, and had failed to fully appreciate the major ideological import of the project. We could now see after the ten year interim that two of our strategies were profoundly mistaken.

First and most significantly was the issue of ideology. Motivated by the strength of our own urges to foster certain types of social change in pursuit of justice and equality of opportunity for all, we had inadvertently imposed upon project
participants (our academic colleagues) our own emancipatory perspectives that some colleagues resisted as inconsistent with their own worldviews. Second was pace. Without fully appreciating our actions or their consequences, we had tried to make the participants’ pace fit in our own. But, as we could appreciate collectively ten years later, (P)AR practitioners need to be able to identify when project participants are receptive to ideas and when they are not.

The main contribution of this (P)AR experience, not in spite of but rather through its pain and hardship, was developing participants’ self-awareness and appreciation of the political life in which they are embedded. This self-awareness process was so powerful that it was impossible to predict how the content of some participants’ minds and hearts would translate into human action. While some of the lecturers wanted to share their thoughts, others preferred to keep their thoughts private because they identified working conditions were not favourable to public disclosure. Likewise, academics performing managerial roles did not find other ways to solve the conflicts this self-awareness process was creating other than by ‘disappearing people’; unfortunately, they found appropriate working conditions to do it.

This (P)AR project led academics to understand that whatever their political stance, it brings consequences to them and others in all the social settings in which they participate. The two academics who remained at this university have vindicated this (P)AR project by putting people in the centre of the process. One of them travelled overseas to do his Master degree with Norman Fairclough in England in 2003. The other, although next on the list of dismissals at that time, was not fired because as Director of the Teacher Education course, her immediate boss was the Dean of the Faculty. In her new position she had the opportunity to talk with the newly appointed Dean after his predecessor, the Jesuit priest, left. She offered him her version of what happened to the academics whose employment contracts had been cancelled. He recognised he had received a very different version from the Director of the Department and realised he had to change his own managerial practices when conflicts arose among academics.

Since then the PCGLE has been used to inform other curriculum initiatives in this Faculty. The curriculum development proposal oriented curriculum reform of the
teacher education course of the Department of Modern Languages (2003–2005). Since then a set of subjects is dedicated to the study of curriculum development from a critical perspective. This (P)AR project also informed the curriculum development process of the new area of Linguistics in charge of the teaching of Spanish as mother tongue (2006). This area was created in the Department of Modern Languages when the Department of Linguistics was closed in December 2002. Also, all new foreign language programs (Italian, German and Chinese) have been developed based on the PCGLE. Finally, this project also influenced the discussions in the Observatory for Curriculum Affairs in this Faculty in 2005, which aimed at articulating the existing curricula in the Faculty. After five years, when all the discussions in the Faculty had taken place and the curricula of the undergraduate and postgraduate courses of the Faculty had been articulated and were ready to be implemented, a new Dean was appointed. Unfortunately, this Dean has brought back a vertical approach to the decision-making process.

Finally, the former coordinator of the French as a Second Language program made a surprising confession to the group. He thought he was fired not because of his participation in this (P)AR experience but due to a personal conflict with another colleague in the area. Since working conditions in the Department and the Faculty stipulated that staff could be dismissed only with the endorsement of the director of the unit, the French coordinator’s colleague also was fired. He obtained new employment at a state university where he was in charge only of teacher education courses. Before he was dismissed from the Jesuit university, his main concern while participating in the (P)AR experience was the role of autonomy in the emancipatory curriculum approach.

For him it is possible that a participant may decide autonomously not to ‘be emancipated’ and/or not to ‘emancipate’ others. He is still exploring this issue in his classes on curriculum development from critical perspectives. At a personal level, the (P)AR project we led has helped him to continue revising who he is in the field of education and he has done so while performing his teaching and managerial roles. In 2010, before travelling to France to finish his PhD studies, he proposed a Master degree course informed by a critical perspective to curriculum development. The first cohort had already graduated. It seems to him that conflicts
and incoherence between discourses and practices are at the core of any emancipatory curriculum, in other words they are its essential components.

6.7. Storytelling and ‘the political’ of (P)AR

This is not the first time that I tell stories that can be difficult or painful to tell. This is an excerpt of my first attempt:

Behind stories, there is much more than just the telling of a chain of events or anecdotes. Story telling provides the reader or listener with the underlying ground that supports the acting of a group of human beings. In the research area, we have not made the best use of this discursive mode, due to the fact that we have been concerned with the reporting of results. Another reason why we don’t tell stories is because we are not accustomed to thinking that what you are going to tell, in terms of the process, can be worthwhile for others. Besides a low self-esteem attitude, we do not narrate our experiences sometimes because we do not really know how to tell these types of stories. We have some sort of discursive limitation created by practices in our discipline in which positivistic trends have had a strong influence. Another reason for avoiding writing about our experiences refers to the fact that many threatening feelings appear in the process of making this decision; feelings dealing with the unexpected effects of exposing yourself to critics, of exposing other people’s processes, of exposing institutional dynamics, among others. Unfortunately, the decision of ‘not telling the story’ makes the gap between researchers and other academic actors, wider. People surrounding researchers never know the dilemmas, anguish, anxieties, worries, and fears, the latter have to face. This paper was developed as a result of my reflection about these issues, and as my first attempt to overcome some of the natural fears we face when being a researcher. (Santos, 2001b, p. 50)

This was the way I started my first publication in English. I had been invited to write an article for a special issue on curriculum development. I thought the story of this (P)AR experience was an enlightening story to tell. I wrote the first draft and asked one of the American lecturers in the Department, one of my English teachers in my first degree, to proofread the paper. She was a participant in this (P)AR experience so could also give me her opinion of my perception of this project experience. She told me that she thought my description conveyed well what she understood had happened to our academic staff in organisational terms (collective paralysis, as described above). Encouraged by her opinion and a closing date for submissions, I emailed my paper to the journal editor to be considered for publication. She sent it to an American reviewer who considered my story made an interesting point. The editorial decision was to accept the paper and it was published in 2001.
When I was dismissed by the Jesuit university in September 2002, several (P)AR sub-projects were under way. One of those was aimed at engaging all the coordinators of the Department in a reflective process upon curriculum management. The co-researcher in charge of leading this sub-project suggested the group should read this journal article, as it was the only documented reflection on the managerial practices in the Department. The coordinators who had participated in putting me in the ‘hot seat’ (three of the six) claimed that I had wrongfully published about a confidential matter that concerned only the academics of the Department. They considered there had been a lack of ethics in publishing about those events.

This journal article can surely be considered an instance of the storytelling of the political of (P)AR. What this article brought about in three different moments for three different readers (the proof reader, the reviewer and the editorial coordinator) is what I refer to as the political of storytelling. We can never know how a written or an oral story will affect the web of relationships and the organisation of people sustained by this web, how readers will interpret the story and for what purposes.

Drawing from Arendt (1998), six years after that article was published I claimed in a book chapter dedicated to Orlando Fals Borda that (P)AR practitioners are politically committed to tell the stories the way they live (P)AR experiences, although the meaning of the story can be revealed fully only when the story ends (Santos, 2007a, p. 49). Through storytelling, (P)AR practitioners contribute to discovering and creating social realities, and with this, in turn to maintaining the public sphere where plural human beings speak and act (Santos, 2007a, p. 50).

6.8. Casting aside ‘the undesirable old’

The tension between social participation and political participation in (P)AR is the tension created between our urge to partake of particular social groups and our interest in partaking in the construction of the common world beyond them. We are both what we do in such social groups (lecturer, student or coordinator) and who we are in the political realm (citizens). To clarify understanding we can think
of both types of participation separately and speak about each one alone. However, we cannot separate this double-sided partaking of ourselves. What we must try to do every time we relate to one another is to not sacrifice the challenging complexity of our political participation for our urge to fit comfortably in various types of social groups. Political participation emphasises partaking in action to achieve the common good with those who, though equal with us, are different from us and may belong to other groups. But the overwhelming strength of group ties puts emphasis on the importance of sticking together with those whom we already recognise as like ourselves.

In relation to (P)AR practitioners’ discourses and practices, it is very easy to talk about the social changes we need to make and want to make. However, we refer to those desirable changes drawing from our perception of real existing social conditions from which it is not easy to escape. Moving from discourses to new realities usually takes quite some time if we consider that the paradigms we want to change are those we have been embedded in most of our lives. While we as (P)AR practitioners try to leave behind our own undesirable frameworks and structures, I believe the worst thing we can do is to classify people.

For example, classifying curriculum development approaches or action research forms in terms of the Habermasian theory of knowledge constitutive interests, led us to read the world in particular ways. In this sense, it worked as an ideology based on an assumption that at any time there are people doing ‘wrong’ things and others doing ‘right’ things. While (P)AR practitioners aimed to promote doing well, not evildoing, we must not adopt this type of ideological thinking as a moral stance to judge (P)AR participants. Our set of ideas must work at the same level as those forming the plural community; the common good needs to be identified and established on the grounds of the recognition of the condition of plurality. As illustrated by the last story told here, classifying people, for instance, into one of the three categories of educational practices derived from the Habermasian theory of the knowledge constitutive interests, in some way undermined the condition of plurality in the political realm. Instead, it served to effectively establish a new social order where there are always unequals. This may be why, 20 years after publishing her seminal work, Curriculum: product or praxis? (1987), Grundy found more helpful the Habermasian idea of ‘life-world’, as a more appropriate
notion to refer to people and their relationships with one another (Santos & Grundy, 2007).
Epilogue

Leading (P)AR initiatives in higher education has enabled me to approach ‘research’ in a more human way than other research approaches and to learn more about (P)AR conceptually and in practice. Particularly, the four (P)AR experiences that I discuss in Part II, helped me to understand more deeply the important role that we, as (P)AR practitioners, play in the political lives of our university communities: our role as weavers of non-existing, broken, stray or loose threads in the webs of relationships that hold together the political realm of these communities.

In reflecting upon my recounting of these four stories, I have come to appreciate that this storytelling has made me more aware of my role in interweaving these (P)AR initiatives. I contributed to weaving relationships across universities and projects. As to weaving relationships between university community members, some of the academics and students are now connected across universities. Likewise, some of the (P)AR initiatives I proposed led to collaborative work between universities. As for relationships woven across projects, examples include the linkage of the common goals concerning some undergraduate courses (the project on the academic writing of Indigenous and Raizal students and lecturers in Chapter 3) and the evaluation of graduate courses (the model to self-evaluate graduate courses in Chapter 4).

Even now, after three years away from Colombia while researching and writing this thesis, I have made initial stitches to start weaving some relationships between university communities in Colombia, Australia, Sweden, the Netherlands, Norway, Finland and the United Kingdom. Here I am reminded of something that has surprised me during my three years in Australia: the fate of spider webs. On windy days I have seen complete spider webs flying through the air and on sunny days they glisten. They fly in the wind until they find where to take hold, where they fit comfortably. I think new winds have brought some webs of relationships woven in Colombia to this Australian land. I hope the Australian, Swedish, Dutch, Norwegian, Finish and British webs can fly through the Pacific and Atlantic air to take firm hold in Latin American lands. Perhaps they fly across in my hands and my heart to communities in my homeland who will respond with
alacrity to the many mutual benefits that such international, multinational connections can bring.
PART III: NEW BEGINNINGS DRAWN FROM NEW STORIES
Chapter 7 From trouble makers to miracle workers

Although our (P)AR stories in higher education may have happy endings or tragic outcomes, we need to be cautious with the conclusions we draw from these stories in political terms, as Arendt well understood. Since every appearance in the world of appearances in which we live is perceived by a plurality of spectators (Arendt, 1978, p. 21), we must be aware that any judgment we can make about words and actions said and done by (P)AR participants, including ourselves, can be contested. Notwithstanding, the perspectives of those of us who have led these (P)AR processes can contribute to gaining a broader understanding about the existing world, our roles in it, and the contributions of (P)AR to constructing a better world.

Because we are not able to undo what has been done or said, nor we are able to foretell what consequences words and actions can bring about, we depend for our humanity and our solidarity with others on forgiveness and making and keeping promises. Indeed, forgiving and keeping promises are two of the most powerful faculties in politics according to Arendt (1998, p. 237). Not only do these faculties depend on plurality as they make sense of the presence and acting of others, they are especially linked to natality, the human condition that makes possible the new beginnings that emerge in the realm of human affairs. Aligned with Arendt’s way of thinking, I have written this last part of the thesis taking into account that, besides forgiving some painful episodes in some of our (P)AR experiences, we cannot make promises and keep them if, as (P)AR practitioners, we are unaware of the kind of actions we have done and words we have said that could have produced harm rather than prevented it.

With these initial considerations in mind, I have structured this chapter to answer the six specific research questions posed for this study, as a bridge to address the central research question, the answer to which I provide in Chapter 8. In keeping with Arendt’s phenomenological approach, I draw my answers to each specific question from a more abstract reflection about the existing world as it has presented itself to me. I share some of the features of this existing world in and through the new stories about (P)AR in higher education told in Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6, as well as through other episodes related to those (P)AR experiences that I
have not included here because of their length or because they have occurred recently. I make these claims from the Arendtian perspective of ‘it-seems-to-me’ as the only possible way to acknowledge and perceive the existing world as it appears to us (Arendt, 1978, p. 21). Once such claims appear in the world, to others, they then find their own way, either attracting agreement or disagreement as may be. Chapter 8 then presents an answer to the main research question as drawn from the whole phenomenological exercise discussed in this thesis. Part III ends with Chapter 9, in which, once more drawing from Arendt’s notion of natality, I present some implications for carrying out (P)AR in contemporary higher education.

The reflections presented in this chapter are specifically aimed at taking one step further in the process of identifying some of the existing conditions under which we are carrying out (P)AR in contemporary higher education. These conditions are intimately related to the conditions we are attempting to create through (P)AR in our university communities. In this direction, the new storytelling of some of my experiences as a lead researcher of (P)AR projects has helped me to identify pieces of the puzzle of ‘the political’ in higher education. To put the pieces of this jigsaw together, I will start by exploring the ‘malaise’ linked to the signalling of some (P)AR practitioners as ‘trouble makers’ in universities. From this starting point, I offer some initial claims concerning the specific research questions.

7.1. Different, contested and changing notions in (P)AR

Research question 1:

What notions of ‘social justice’, ‘democracy’, ‘citizenship’ and ‘education’ underpin the different kinds of human and social actions that occur in (P)AR in higher education?

Some of my experiences as a lead researcher of (P)AR initiatives in higher education have been associated with a feeling that I have been perceived as a ‘trouble maker’. My first thoughts suggest to me that this perception can be linked to how my words and actions, as well as those of others involved in those (P)AR projects, could have be seen as a threat to what some people participating in those
projects uphold as a good life. Although some of these ideas about the good life in university communities can collide, it can be said that they coexist on the basis of a common interest in advancing social justice and democratic citizenship at this level of education. Notwithstanding, notions such as ‘social justice’, ‘democracy’, ‘citizenship’ and ‘education’ are contested: they are understood by different people in different ways.

Of special importance for understanding ‘the political’ of (P)AR in higher education is what the Arendtian phenomenological approach suggests in relation to the plausibility that the relevant and the meaningful of this world, including the world that human beings construct in-between, could be located precisely on the surface (Arendt, 1978, p. 27). In people’s urge to appear in front of others, not only do they give common names to the world they share, making intersubjective communication possible (Arendt, 1978, p. 119), they also do other things. Drawing from this claim, in the following I discuss what I have drawn from my (P)AR experiences in higher education, particularly from what I have seen (P)AR participants do and what I have listened to them say in relation to the notions mentioned above.

Based on these words and actions, I argue here that the notions of ‘social justice’, ‘democracy’, ‘citizenship’ and ‘education’ in (P)AR projects are different, contested and changing. To illustrate these three characteristics of the notions compromised in (P)AR processes, I will resort to Story 3 (Chapter 5). This story refers to the (P)AR project aimed at constructing a curriculum proposal to harmonise a national education policy to run competency-based curricula with the philosophy of the religious community ruling the university where this (P)AR initiative took place. In particular, I will refer to an event described in Story 3: the dispute that emerged at the moment of establishing the registration fees to attend the symposium on (P)AR and education.

62 Italics are mine.
In this specific dispute, there were two different notions of ‘social justice’ underpinning the overt positions involved in this decision-making process. On the one hand, the Rector’s and the Academic Vice-Rector’s ideas of ‘social justice’ were linked more to ideas of fairness in a market economy. In different ways and circumstances, both referred to two other pieces of information they presented as ‘facts’ to sustain their position. First, they claimed that the registration fees they proposed for attendance at this symposium were similar to those established by other institutions in other fields to run international events like the one we were going to carry out (i.e., in several meetings they provided examples of registration fees charged to attendees in simultaneous international events in the field of business management). Second, they said that the registration fees had to compensate, to some extent, for the high costs of running this international event. The third consideration they presented was more as a belief than a fact. They argued that if the registration fees were not similar to those charged for international events in other fields, people could underestimate the value of the event and decide not to register.

Acknowledging the institutional economic effort to make this international event possible, on the other hand, I suggested in the proposal for the symposium an amount estimated on the basis of three considerations: 1) the socio-economic characteristics of the audience the event was intended for (university community members, as well as professionals in the field of education); 2) an analysis of the registration fees of similar events in the field of human sciences and social sciences; and 3) the rationale of the event, which included the foundational philosophy-based institutional commitment to fight against situations that exacerbate social inequalities (a symposium entitled ‘Action Research and Education in contexts of poverty’ could not be addressed to only those who could financially afford it). As to the cost of the event, I was clear at the time I presented the proposal that several universities could contribute to funding this event in case the first university I approached would not be able to accept the complete financial burden. When the university authorities agreed to run this event on their own, I thought that they were agreeing to fund most of the event. I was wrong.
These two different notions of ‘social justice’ are related to what Gale (2000) refers to as the retributive and the recognitive models of ‘social justice’. In relation to the case described above, these two models differ, for example, in considerations about how social justice should be achieved. While the retributive model considers that ‘social justice’ should be achieved through open competition and protection of life and property, the recognitive model contemplates that it should be attained through democratic processes that include the interests of the least advantaged (Gale, 2000, p. 268). The university authorities’ position on this matter was more retributive oriented, while mine was more recognitive driven.

Besides the coexistence of different notions of ‘social justice’ in (P)AR processes in higher education such as those described above, it can be said that some of these notions are contested. As it can be seen in this particular case, the retributive model of ‘social justice’ informing the position of the Rector and the Vice-Rector of this university community was contested by the notion of ‘social justice’ underlying my position as the proponent of the international event project. The recognitive model of ‘social justice’ considers more the cultural politics of social institutions such as educational ones, whereas the retributive model of ‘social justice’ is more concerned with the economic sphere. (Gale, 2000, p. 260) My position was, definitely, against approaching the matter under discussion exclusively from an economic perspective.

However, notions such as that of ‘social justice’ are not only different and contested in (P)AR projects; they are also changing. During the registration process of the event, the President of the symposium, one of the advisors of the Academic Vice-Rector, started receiving innumerable requests coming from

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63 Based on an analysis of contemporary debates of social justice, Gale (2000) categorizes social justice in terms of distribution, retribution and recognition. The distributive model of social justice is based on John Rawls’s (1971) work. From this perspective, social justice involves two main principles: liberty and the equal distribution of material and social goods. It is the emphasis on this latter principle that has given the name to this model. Based on Nozick’s (1976) critique to an overemphasis on the second principle, the retributive model of social justice emerged. Gale says that this second model highlights the importance of the processes by which individuals produce and acquire those social goods. Some academics such as Rizvi and Lingard (1996) call this conception ‘market-individualism’. Finally, drawing from Young’s (1990) and Fraser’s (1995) works, Gale states that the recognitive social justice incorporates aspects to those considered in the other two models. In particular, the recognitive model of social justice points out the importance of acknowledging the place of social groups in the meaning of social justice. Aligned with this third understanding of social justice and making reference to Arendt’s (1972) thought, Gale claims that “social justice ‘is not ‘making’ but ‘acting’. It is not something that can be, but something that can be done” (Gale, 2000, p. 253).
members of the university community as well as from members of other universities and the broader society. These requests concerned asking the organising committee to revise the amount established for the registration fees of an event such as this symposium and to consider reducing it. Acknowledging the importance of the symposium for the national and Latin American academic communities, these requests came together with reflections about what paying the required registration fees would represent for students’ and lecturers’ budgets. As a result of these requests, the university authorities decided to create different types of discounts depending on different types of groups of people and circumstances. Thus, special discounts for undergraduate and graduate students and for university lecturers, as well as for particular groups of people (i.e., non-governmental organisations, charity communities, etc.) were offered. The positive response by the university authorities to these requests appeared to me as a change of mind in the authorities’ initial position. The inclusion of special economic considerations according to the needs of different groups of people was an indicator of their move towards a more recognitive model of ‘social justice’, more closely linked to the institutional philosophy.

‘Democracy’ and ‘citizenship’

Story 3 (Chapter 5) can also provide some examples of different, contested and changing ideas of ‘democracy’ and ‘citizenship’. The dispute to establish fair registration fees for the symposium was embedded in a decision-making process in which at least two types of university community members were speaking openly with one another: the university authorities (the Academic Vice-Rector, his advisors and, occasionally, the Rector) and an academic (me as the leader of the (P)AR initiative). Being part of a democratic society such as we have in Colombia, it was possible for me to speak on behalf of those who had expressed to me their interest in attending this international event. I re-presented the interests of some graduate students from the Master degree in education, in which I was a lecturer, as well as of academics from this university and other universities interested in attending the event. I also tried to re-present the interests of other sectors of the broader society such as charity communities in charge of educational institutions. In this specific political scenario, where perspectives of different groups of people converged to attain a common goal, the representative
democratic model did not work very well. This was due to the unequal power of the groups re-represented in the voices of those participating in the debate.

On one side, the (P)AR leading group was mainly interested in running an event to convene members of this university community with other university communities to talk about (P)AR and education in contexts of poverty, while paying tribute to the most acknowledged Colombian (P)AR practitioner in the world. On the other side, the university authorities were primarily interested in positioning the university in national and international academic settings. Partially because of this, the Rector and the Vice-Rector, and their advisors, overlooked potential attendees’ needs and expectations. Unfortunately, the authorities’ interests became the leading principle of the talks, leaving academic reasons at a second level in the discussion. This was a dispute in which the voices of several groups were delivered through the presence of one (me) and the voices of a few were endorsed by the presence of many in the meetings in which registration fees were discussed. Under such unequal conditions for this debate to occur, the representative model of ‘democracy’ did not work – demanding direct participation of the people interested in attending the event was required.

This has led me to think that a problem with the representative democratic model in our university communities is perhaps sometimes not necessarily linked to an absence of different people’s voices through the representatives’ voices but to the lack of people’s appearance in the public realm to equalise relationships of power. As the example of the lorikeets on the bird feeder shows, the more unequal the relationships of power, the more direct participation is needed. In other words, it was not enough that I had tried to re-present several groups’ interests in the discussions; it was necessary that the people re-presented took their real form as ‘people’ in the public realm.

These two different notions of ‘democracy’ in practice (the representative and the participatory ones) accompanied two different notions of ‘citizenship’. The representative model of democracy strongly relies upon a liberal idea of ‘citizenship’ as a type of membership whose primary value is to maximise individual liberty, one aspect of which is to be represented (Schuck, 2002, p. 132). The participatory model of democracy mainly depends upon a republican idea of
‘citizenship’ that stresses the public nature of that membership; this public nature manifests itself in a public-spirited person who undertakes public responsibilities (Dagger, 2002, p. 150). As illustrated in the dispute under analysis, these different notions of ‘democracy’ and ‘citizenship’ were contested.

Our attempts, as (P)AR practitioners, to present the views of the individuals and groups ‘not present in the public realm’ can work well in certain situations. However, representative democratic practices under the conditions set by contemporary trends undermining higher education can go against the ‘social justice’ we want to advance. This is the case of the neoliberal forces informing some representative democratic practices in university communities, in which the absence of ‘actual’ individuals and groups in the public realm allows groups with economic power to proceed more comfortably. Under-representation and non-participation, unfortunately, strengthen unequal relationships of power in decision-making processes in higher education.

Notwithstanding, there is always a chance that (P)AR participants’ ideas of ‘democracy’ and ‘citizenship’ can change. Returning to our dispute under analysis, the immediate shift of the university community members interested in attending the symposium from the representative democratic model to the participatory one, induced other unexpected events. That was a particular achievement in this university community since it is harder for students and academics of private university communities to contest directions that emerge from the authorities; in private universities, as in ‘private sector corporations’, hierarchical structures are more entrenched.

‘Higher education’

Finally, the (P)AR experience told in Story 3 (Chapter 5) also serves to illustrate different, contested and changing notions of ‘higher education’. To address these notions, I will analyse a specific event concerning the orientation of the Master degree course where we, the (P)AR practitioners in charge of this (P)AR project, were lecturing and researching with these students the construction of curricula through (P)AR at different educational levels.
The coordinator of this teacher education Master degree course insisted in pre-establishing types of students’ outcomes to guarantee their success. Based on this way of thinking, he suggested (almost commanded) what, when, where and how students had to do particular research tasks throughout each semester and through the six research seminars delivered in the course (our seminar was entitled ‘Competency-based curricula and (P)AR’). His proposal included establishing types of assignment-style outcomes that students needed to submit according to a timetable set by the course coordinator, no matter what type of research the student was carrying out. His position relied on an idea of ‘higher education’ mainly linked to achieving students’ and lecturers’ high levels of performativity. Timely outcomes would indicate, from his perspective, high-qualified students and lecturers. These results could also work well to meet the expectations of the university to graduate students as part of its commitment to being accountable to the broader society.

As soon as this highly controlled approach to the curriculum was suggested, the (P)AR practitioners lecturing in this course expressed our disagreement. In our view this approach would create a misleading idea about what higher education means. A few other academics in charge of the other research seminars expressed their alignment to our position. Unfortunately, most of the other academics, expressed to us that disagreeing with the course coordinator’s position could threaten their jobs and, therefore, their economic stability. Although most of the lecturers had full-time positions in public universities, their contracts as casual staff or as part-time staff in this private university provided them important additional income. Because they did not want to put this income at risk, they decided to step aside in this dispute.

The course coordinator’s position in relation to the curriculum approach to this Master degree course and our own very different approach were underpinned by different ideas of ‘higher education’. His position was more oriented to achieving ‘higher’ degrees of performativity to achieve a ‘higher’ degree of effectiveness of the curriculum approach, in order to achieve a ‘higher’ number of graduates. Our position relied more upon nurturing in students ‘higher’ degrees of critical thinking and autonomy to cope with this and other educational experiences. We wanted to enhance a ‘more meaningful’ learning experience at this level of
education, considering the real student populations of whom the course students were already in charge. This was particularly relevant for us as most of the graduate students came from diverse disciplines and professions, and enrolled in education studies to enrich their teaching in primary, secondary and university settings. Under the conditions created by the course coordinator, ‘education’ appeared to the students as a ‘technical matter’ to be controlled, for expected results to be obtained. The idea of ‘education’ that our group wanted to share with our graduate students was one more oriented by a critical approach. This was related more to experiencing ‘education’ from its political dimension.

In the end, the course coordinator conceded to allowing our seminar to determine our internal processes and products. During the debate about possibilities, we would also be able to reflect with our students about different types of curriculum, including their own at this university, in order to understand them and identify implications for the social-change making process to which we were committed. In this sense, both the coordinator’s notion of ‘higher education’, and ours, were contested.

Finally, these contested notions of ‘higher education’ also changed over time in this Master degree course; not so much in the coordinator’s perspective nor in ours, as far as I know, but particularly from the perspectives evolving in the students’ minds. Contesting the highly controlled curriculum approach was stressful for these graduate students, but those carrying out (P)AR projects in their educational institutions (at primary, secondary and tertiary levels) could gain deep understandings of recent trends undermining education across all three levels. ‘Higher education’, in this sense, meant developing ‘deeper understanding’ and ‘more politically committed educators’. These latter notions were certainly not the ideas with which they had started their graduate journey.

7.2. More on these notions and (P)AR in higher education

The puzzle of ‘the political’ of (P)AR in higher education, however, is related to more than a ‘malaise’ linked to different, contested and changing notions of ‘social justice’, ‘democracy’, ‘citizenship’ and ‘higher education’. The perception of some of the (P)AR practitioners as ‘trouble makers’ is also associated with
their being embedded in the practices of university communities. This ‘malaise’, then, not only refers to notions underpinning the words and doings of individuals; it also concerns how these notions appear to us as forged in collectives.

**Foregrounding and backgrounding ‘social justice’**

Based on my reflections upon the four (P)AR stories in Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6, I appreciate an ambiguous approach to ‘social justice’ in contemporary universities. While ‘social justice’ is generally foregrounded in practices such as institutional policymaking, it is frequently backgrounded in other daily-life practices within the university. To exemplify this claim, I refer to Story 1 (Chapter 3). This story concerned the (P)AR project aimed to understand more deeply the social injustice embedded in situations in which Indigenous and Raizal students and lecturers of a public state university became involved due to the university’s requirement that they write in the official national language (Spanish, the language of the majority ethnic group).

Most of the university community members involved in this (P)AR project assumed that any institutional activity was aligned with the goals of the university to advance social justice. What we did not know was how this would actually materialise. To be sure, a more equitable distribution of resources and recognition of difference on the basis of group identity had been foregrounded in the university as part of an ongoing social change in Colombian society in the second half of the twentieth century.

In 1986, six years before the new Constitution of Colombia would force the change, this university had already issued an Act to acknowledge the historical transgression of the rights of Indigenous peoples and the poor to tertiary education (C. S. U. UNAL, 1986). Since then, 2 per cent of the places the university offers each semester in each undergraduate and graduate course is allocated to members of Colombian Indigenous communities. These communities currently form about 1 per cent of the Colombian population. This 2 per cent also covers the best high school graduates from poor communities, mainly located in rural areas. This recognitive approach to ‘social justice’ was also applied to members of black, African American, Palenque and Raizal communities 20 years later (C. S. U.
Introduction of this institutional policy was accompanied by the creation of a university office in charge of supporting these students in their transition to life in the university.

These institutional policy initiatives together with the ideas and testimonies provided by (P)AR Indigenous, Raizal and Mestizo participants constitute important evidence of the institutional commitment to advance ‘social justice’ in this direction. Unfortunately, this recognitive approach to ‘social justice’ failed, to a certain extent, due to unexpected responses coming from some members of the university community. Here I refer to two specific cases: one concerning some members of administrative personnel then in charge of managing information, communication and financial resources, and the other concerning some academics then performing managerial roles at a faculty level.

In relation to the administrative personnel, their delayed replies to our requests for databases concerning the Indigenous and Raizal students’ contact details in the university, affected the support we aimed to provide for a full academic semester. Although we received a very positive response from the directors of the university offices where these administrative people worked, these people released the information we required one full semester later, claiming a complex updating process had caused the delay. Likewise, my constant enquiries as the lead researcher to several faculty offices to follow up on the contractor who was responsible for the acquisition of learning materials, failed. After one year of requesting information about the status of the purchase of the bibliographical material selected to support the Indigenous and Raizal students’ and lecturers’ writing processes, we had still not received the material. I then spent another year reporting the incident at various levels, suggesting criteria that should be used to select the contractors, and trying to find alternative ways of purchasing bibliographical material on-line. Some potential contractors I had contacted in the past would not agree to submit their documentation to the university because of the excessive paper work that public universities demand. In the end, due to time constraints to execute the budget, I had to reallocate this amount of money for publications concerning this (P)AR experience.
The only responses that we received during this frustrating process to obtain both the Indigenous and Raizal students’ contact details and the bibliographical learning material were linked to expressions such as “we will investigate what happened”, “lots of other requests are in progress” and “sorry for any inconvenience”. One of the email exchanges presented a reference and apology to the ‘real people’ affected by these delays and absence of learning resources. Assistants of project management processes at the Faculty treated these issues as ‘normal hiccups’ linked to their everyday work routines.

As it was too late to ask for a quote from another company to provide the required learning support materials, I decided to allocate this money for the publication of the research book. This would include two wonderful chapters written by an Indigenous student and an Indigenous lecturer. Unfortunately, we would experience more ‘hiccups’; this time they would be linked to some academics. The first incident derived from the response of the Academic Sub-dean of the Faculty to the co-authored publications. He decided to intervene in the publication process when he learned that the director of the government institute in charge of protecting the languages spoken in Colombia was interested in co-authoring the research book of this (P)AR project. As I already explained in Story 1 (Chapter 3), our interest in working with this institute had emerged from a six-month period of conversations, during which we found common ground. With the participation of the people of this institute, the (P)AR initiative was gaining an echo at government levels; this institute is in charge of language policymaking on behalf of the nation’s Ministry of Culture. We were also able to receive more resources to work with the Raizal students in the Colombian islands in the Caribbean Sea.

As I noted earlier in this thesis, the director of the institute and I had agreed to reactivate a memorandum of understanding between this institute and my university. The institute would provide a part-time researcher to support the Raizal students’ writing processes, while we would support the Indigenous students’ process in the main campus in Bogotá. As a result of this collaboration, we also agreed to co-author the research book. What we had achieved during six months of conversations unexpectedly was aborted the day the Academic Sub-dean had lunch with the director of the institute. The only explanation given to me through the Director of the Department I belong was that the Academic Sub-dean
considered it completely unfair to accept a co-authoring endeavour with the institute since ‘the original idea had emerged in the Faculty’. Six months later, while talking to the new Dean of the Faculty about this incident, I was told that his position about co-authoring was favourable. Unfortunately, the research book was already written and I was about to start my PhD in Australia.

The second ‘hiccup’ was related to the two academics in charge of managing the peer review process of the research book for its publication in the Faculty. Both were directors of the unit where I belong. At the beginning of my stay in Australia, a former director of the Department received the PDF file of the book. He had to appoint peer reviewers to provide their concepts about the book for its publication. After six months of not receiving any news, I decided to follow up on the process. By email he replied that the peer review process had not yet started but that it would start soon. By the end of my first year overseas, I asked again. This time a new director had been appointed. Two months after my first enquiry to her, she replied that she had found out that the peer review process had not begun. Then she committed to start it. Six months later I was told that there had been some problems with one of the reviewers, who had not replied yet. A further six months later, two years after I left the PDF with the former director, I was informed that another reviewer ‘was going to be’ appointed.

When I received this news, I decided to ask the Dean for advice about how to proceed in a case such as this. We were disappointed that a research proposal that had been awarded at a national level in the university for its educational relevance had received such catastrophic lack of support from the Faculty at the administrative and managerial levels. The new Dean suggested I make one more request for a peer review process, with a copy to him and the new Academic Sub-Dean. This was while I was finishing the writing of my PhD thesis. I therefore decided not to make a new request but to ask for some time to be allocated to working on the manuscript in my academic workload during the second semester of 2012, after my return to Colombia. The book needed to be updated in various places including data on the student population in the eight campuses and some recent relevant initiatives and achievements in progress of the (P)AR team at the university. I will be back in Colombia to edit the book and ‘start again’.
During these three years, and simultaneously with my follow up emails and phone calls, I had to apologise regularly to the Indigenous student and lecturer, who I had encouraged to write their stories in two chapters of the book. In my endless waiting for a positive response about the book’s publication, I deferred my apologies to other students and lecturers who had participated in this (P)AR project; after four years they may or may not be at the university. Paradoxically, the (P)AR project about the geopolitics of academic writing had by necessity dealt with the ordeals of ‘using’ established material conditions in bureaucratised institutions and ‘coping with’ a lack of political commitment to publish research from within our university communities.

This has been, in short, a story of a failed attempt to ‘make public’ what we wanted to make public. But this is not a story of the geopolitics of academic writing in Canagarajah’s (2002) terms as it is not about the effects of the material and immaterial conditions for academic writing in developing countries (cast as periphery) on meeting ‘satisfactorily’ the requirements to publish in the developed countries (cast as the centre). Instead, this has been a story about the effects of the immaterial conditions for academic writing in ‘the academy’ (cast as periphery) on meeting ‘satisfactorily’ the requirements to publish in ‘the bureaucratic structures’ of our universities (cast as the centre).

‘Social justice’ cannot be advanced in a ‘chain of collective hiccups’. The ideas of ‘social justice’ foregrounded in university policy documents and initiatives moved by some members of the university community can be easily backgrounded by other members who, although ‘doing things’ or ‘not doing’, forget the people for whom those doings are intended. Particularly bureaucracy, as Arendt suggests, the most social form of governing, can become cruel and tyrannical (Arendt, 1998, p. 40). The more that university community members are attached to the ‘mechanics of the bureaucratic life’, the less likely they feel responsible for what is not done since there will always be someone else to blame. Chains of inactions, like chains of actions, bring about their own consequences.

However, these foregrounded and backgrounded notions of ‘social justice’ are not only derived from weak ideas and practices of social responsibility that result in inaction. They can also result from undermining managerial practices embedded
in weakened organisational structures, in which personal conflicts of interests are resolved without regard to the common good. This was illustrated in Story 3 (Chapter 5), when, after I expressed my disagreement about the curriculum approach to the teacher education Master degree course, its coordinator recommended terminating my contract. His main argument was that I could not perform my part-time duties under the new staffing policy of the university. This combination of weakened organisations and personal conflicts of interests was also exemplified in Story 4 (Chapter 6). After resigning my position as coordinator of the Latin American Centre due to disagreements with the managerial style of the director of the department, he decided to set me up in a ‘hot seat’ situation to collate complaints to justify the cancellations of my contract.

In these two (P)AR projects, academic staff and students were affected by struggles for territories and public reputation. Again the notion of ‘social justice’ was foregrounded in university discourses but backgrounded in its practices. In fact more awareness was raised about social injustice issues generated by traditional ways of approaching academic writing in the three university communities that the four stories are about. But there is still plenty to do in relation to creating more communicative spaces in teaching, researching and managerial settings for university community members to become more aware of the effects of their actions and especially of their inactions, to overcome these issues collaboratively.

**Imbricated practices of ‘democracy’ and ‘citizenship’**

In relation to the notions of ‘democracy’ and ‘citizenship’, on the basis of this study it can be said that the more public funding upon which a university community is grounded, the safer are its communicative spaces and, therefore, the more likely that authentic democratic and citizenship practices can occur within and beyond the university. In this respect, my (P)AR experiences in the public state university differ ostensibly from my (P)AR experiences in the two private universities. In publicly funded universities like the public state university that Stories 1 and 2 (Chapters 3 and 4) are about, no matter how complex the conflicts can be, it is always possible to address such conflicts in the public sphere.
Concerning the conflicts highlighted in Story 1 (Chapter 3) in relation to the follow up to the contractor’s commitments to achieve learning materials and the peer review process of the research book, I could address these problems in the public sphere. In spite of my temporary stay in Australia, I could bring those critical issues to the attention of the people directly involved (i.e., the Dean of the Faculty and the Master degree board). Perhaps the issues more difficult to address were those concerning the responsibilities of some of the administrative personnel. Due to the many instances that entailed bureaucratic structures, enquiries cannot be resolved as other offices will always be implicated.

On the other hand, when conflicts arose in the (P)AR projects discussed in Stories 3 and 4 (Chapters 5 and 6), there were always favourable working conditions for the avoidance of overt discussion. In the case of the (P)AR project to construct a competency-based curriculum aligned with the institutional philosophy (Story 3 in Chapter 5), the conflict that emerged with the co-researcher, the director of the office of curriculum affairs, was easily resolved. This dispute was addressed by appealing to her managerial position in the university. She interrupted work with the (P)AR team and asked the university community to follow her indications as director of that office. This would have not happened in a public university; university community members would have appeared in public to express their thinking.

Likewise, in the (P)AR project to approach foreign languages teaching and learning from an emancipatory perspective in Story 4 (Chapter 6), the director of the department decided to ‘dialogue’ with me (the hot seat) to substantiate with the complaints of a few ‘guests’ to the ‘talk’, his own interest in resolving the situation of the person under discussion (me). In public universities there are special ways for these sorts of conflicts to be resolved. In these two cases, democratic and citizenship practices were constrained to the private sphere, namely, to specific spaces where some voices would not be heard. The cancellation of contracts on the basis of ‘un-justifiable causes’ appeared in both private universities as ‘common acceptable’ practices, which sent a clear message to the rest of the university community members.
About these two notions, namely, ‘democracy’ and ‘citizenship’, it can be also said that even though all the participants involved in all these four (P)AR projects live in a country whose constitution proclaims its government to be a ‘presidential representative democracy’, this type of democracy and its citizenship practices are lived in different ways. Besides the different experiences that (P)AR participants have probably had as Colombian citizens, these university community members also experience this ‘presidential representative democracy’ in different ways depending on whether they belong to a public state university community or a private one. This has been shown through Stories 1 and 2 (Chapters 3 and 4), in which a public university community was involved, and Stories 3 and 4 (Chapters 5 and 6), in which two private universities were implicated.

In the public state university where Story 2 (Chapter 4) takes place, one third of the University Board consists of representatives of the current government. In this sense, the commitment expressed in the Statutes of this university community to serve as an advisor to the State, in many respects exists in a permanent tension with the commitments of the current government expressed through the voices and votes of the representatives of the President in the University Board. While I write this section, two specific political events are exacerbating this tension. On the one hand, a new Rector has been appointed by the University Board from a list of five names of academics of the university community who received the most votes of students, graduates and academics. The representatives of the students and the academics in the University Board are questioning the legitimacy of such an appointment since the consultation with the university community gave a different nominee candidate as the favourite. The usual reply coming from the University Board is that the consultation process with the university community is not binding as this is not an election process but an appointment. Meantime, the Board’s choice of new Rector has taken office. Uncertainty circles the eight campuses of the university, as demonstrations are expected from those refusing this appointment.

On the other hand, public discussion of the reform of higher education in Colombia has begun. This university community is participating actively in the

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64 This is what is known in Australia as a nomination by election for appointment by the University Board.
process. This new attempt to discuss the type of reform needed in higher education in Colombia has been agreed between the Ministry of Education and a student movement made up of about 30,000 students from public universities across the country. This agreement was reached after these students refused to attend classes for two months in the second semester of 2011, as they considered the project had not been discussed democratically. The critical issue under debate was that the methodology followed to discuss the proposal of the government to reform the higher education system favoured non-discussion of the several strategies suggested to use more private funding to address the financial crisis of public universities. The students argued that the methodology to discuss the proposal had been manipulated by the government to reduce opportunities for students and academics to participate. Under the pressure of this student movement, the President withdrew the government proposal, committing to agree with the student movement on the methodology to analyse and project the goals of higher education in Colombia and the means to get them. After withdrawal of the reform project from the Congress and the government’s commitment to construct a new methodology, the students returned to classes. These are two examples of how the public university community involved in Stories 1 and 2 lives ‘presidential representative democracy’ from within.

The University Boards of the private universities in Stories 3 and 4, on the other hand, are composed exclusively of representatives of these university communities and representatives of the communities ruling these corporations (in these two cases, two religious denominations). Direct interlocution with the Ministry of Education and with the representatives of the current government is rare, occurring only in specific government settings through the voices of the respective Rectors or their designated representatives. These rectors, like most of the rectors of public and private universities, have expressed their positions in relation to the reform project whose discussion is currently in progress. However, their positioning is much more subtle and less contested. Some of these rectors have expressed overtly their alignment with governmental initiatives, which have been detrimental to public higher education. This was the position of the former Rector of the university community in Story 3 (Chapter 5), who expressed overtly to the educators attending the symposium on (P)AR and education in context of poverty, his alignment with former President of Colombia, Alvaro Uribe.
‘democratic security policy’ enhanced by President Uribe resulted in considerable reduction of the public funding to higher education to strengthen the Colombian army forces.

Most of the students in private universities do not come from deprived communities; they are from middle and upper social classes. On the contrary, most of the student population in public universities come from lower socio-economic levels; applying for places in public universities is their only option to acquire higher education. The more favourable socio-economic conditions under which the students of private universities live, in some way leads them not to become so engaged in public debates like the one about reform of higher education. These students allow their rectors to speak on behalf of their interests. While ideas of ‘democracy’ and ‘citizenship’ as political concepts are foregrounded in policy documents and academic discourses in private universities, these notions are backgrounded and transformed into economic concepts in daily university life activities. As Apple (2005) states: “consumer choice is the guarantor of democracy [and] education is seen as simply one more product like bread, cars and television” (p. 273). Most of the students and lecturers in private universities interact on the basis of the ‘product’ for which the students are paying.

Notwithstanding, some students of private universities have played an important role in the political life of the country. It was in a private university that a group of law students proposed in 1990 to include a ‘seventh ballot paper’ in the elections of that year. As already noted, this additional paper was aimed at engaging citizens in supporting the issue of a new national constitution. Among other political problems was a monopoly of the two traditional political parties, which had been involved in recurrent corruption scandals and alliances with drug mafias. This had exacerbated the armed conflict in most of the rural areas of the country. Students from both private and public universities joined together to endorse and support this movement until this additional ‘ballot paper’ was included. In 1991, this student-led initiative took form in the current national constitution.

Although (P)AR participants in these higher education communities agreed that their participation in (P)AR could be taken as an indicator of an ongoing
democratic process, their participation is actually defined, to a great extent, by the
democratic and citizenship practices in the broader society in which the (P)AR
experience is embedded. This entails the democratic and citizenship practices
promoted by the (P)AR practitioners leading the process, and the democratic and
citizenship practices that the (P)AR participants practice. The web of relationships
in which (P)AR participants are embedded sets the conditions under which our
experiences of participation in democratic and citizenship practices make sense.
How we actually live with other human beings and what we actually do in relation
to one another, no matter where we happen to be, define our dynamic
understandings of these notions.

The ‘higher’ character of higher education as an ‘afterlife’

Finally, the notions of ‘education’, and particularly of ‘higher education’,
underpinning some of the participants’ words and actions in the four (P)AR
stories told in Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 seem to be linked mainly to a shared search
only for ‘better’ conditions under which to live. The notions of ‘higher education’
that appeared before my eyes were especially connected to words and actions
through which (P)AR participants expressed their concern and doubts about the
decision they made to take this path to achieve such ‘better’ conditions to live.
Their words and actions went hand in hand with their acceptance of having to live
an experience of ‘suffering’ through schooling first. In this sense, this ‘better’ life
appears as a kind of an ‘afterlife’ in relation to university life. Happiness seems to
occur in an isolated way; admission procedures to the university as well as
graduation ceremonies seem to be special moments where university community
members are allowed to celebrate. For teachers as well as students the joy
characterising these two moments appears to be contested by a feeling of
permanent anxiety in the transit from one moment to the other.

The ‘higher’ character is, thus, experienced from the admission moment to the
graduation as a synonym of ‘more complex’, ‘more complicated’, ‘harder’, and, in
recent times, ‘more competitive’ and ‘more unreachable’. In all the (P)AR
experiences I have led, including those discussed in the four stories in Chapters 3,
4, 5 and 6, the students and academics have expressed how complicated university
life has become. The Indigenous and Raizal students and lecturers in Story 1
(Chapter 3) stated, for example, how ‘complex’ it had been for them to meet ‘excellence’ standards and how ‘high’ and ‘unreachable’ university admission is nowadays, in spite of the greater opportunities they may have. Also, students such as those mentioned in Stories 1, 3 and 4 (Chapters 3, 5 and 6) expressed how the ‘more competitive’ disputes for curriculum territories among academics have put students in the middle of the battlefield. This occurred in Story 1 (Chapter 3) when, the seven Master degree students who had been attending a weekly extra-curricular seminar I ran for six months about the geopolitics of academic writing were asked to join another research project as a requirement of the curricular research seminar delivered by the lead researcher of that project. Likewise, the teacher education Master degree students in Story 3 (Chapter 5) were in the middle of the dispute between the course coordinator and the (P)AR practitioners in charge of the seminar about competency-based curriculum development from a critical perspective. This also happened to the academics who participated in several activities described in Story 4 (Chapter 6) when they aimed to construct a foreign language curriculum from an emancipatory view. These academics were in the middle of the dispute between the director of the department and the (P)AR practitioners leading the process.

Of special interest is what was expressed by students in the (P)AR process in Story 2 (Chapter 4). The Master degree students who participated directly in constructing the model aimed to self-evaluate the graduate courses found themselves discovering practices of members of the university community that contribute to the ‘more complex’ scenario brought about by bureaucratic structures. Academics in these (P)AR projects, in general, referred to an academic career that has evolved into an academic race. The ‘more demanding’ working conditions for academics attached to contemporary notions of ‘higher education’ have led, in turn, to fragmented and dislocated relationships among the university community members.

So the ideas of ‘a good life’ that may have been threatened by my actions and words as a (P)AR practitioner, to the extent that I was considered a ‘trouble maker’, are linked to notions of ‘democracy’, ‘citizenship’, ‘social justice’ and ‘education’ that are contested in contemporary universities. These notions emerge
from and inform (P)AR participants’ experiences at a macro level, namely, the broader society, as well as at a micro-level, the university life.

7.3. Different, contested and changing ways of doing (P)AR

Research question 2:

*How might these cases of (P)AR be regarded as research practices?*

The ‘trouble maker’ idea is also closely connected to a tension that can be found in (P)AR itself. The fact that (P)AR is a type of ‘research’ implies that it embodies a set of practices constructed throughout time by a particular group of people (the scientific community). Of particular interest for this reflection about (P)AR in higher education, from a political perspective, is the project that Story 2 (Chapter 4) is about. I have been wondering if approaching the institutional ongoing process to construct a model to self-evaluate graduate courses at my university was enough to label it as a (P)AR project. This comes along with the inevitable ethical question about whether it was right for me to embrace the (P)AR spirit in a covert way to fulfil this commitment with the university community of which I am part. Finally, and in relation to the two (P)AR experiences in Story 1 and Story 3 (Chapters 3 and 5), one more question emerges; this is a question about the appropriateness of the mix of types of research at the core of (P)AR.

The relationship between what is accepted by the scientific community and what is necessary to encourage university community members to become engaged in the political realm seems to be the key issue behind the concerns expressed above. My positioning in relation to the debate about what is ‘proper’ in this type of research has been changing over the years, as I mentioned in Story 2 (Chapter 4). More specifically, my positioning has changed simultaneously with my rising self-awareness about how to fulfil my political commitment with the communities of which I am part. In my first (P)AR experiences in higher education, my research practices were mainly informed by the certainties and guidelines found in research books. I thought that as a new person in the field of (P)AR, I could do nothing but trust what more experienced (P)AR practitioners said in their
publications about what to consider when doing (P)AR. My most recent research practices have been mainly oriented by my awareness of the uncertainties that my work with and as part of university communities can bring about, as well as my understanding of the communities themselves. I have gone hand in hand with and as part of these communities to find out their way, our way. I have learned to trust what they know about their own communities, the problems they want to address, and the solutions. In this sense, part of the awareness that I have achieved through my (P)AR experiences is that (P)AR research practices create particular conditions for communicative spaces to emerge, as Kemmis & McTaggart (2005, p. 578) suggest. It is in these communicative spaces where (P)AR participants can reveal themselves through their words and actions.

In other words, in the (P)AR projects in Stories 3 and 4 (Chapters 5 and 6) the (P)AR leading teams were more theoretically oriented to run more emancipatory curricula in these two private-university communities. In the (P)AR projects in Stories 1 and 2 (Chapters 3 and 4), which dealt with curriculum development with Indigenous and Raizal students and lecturers, and graduate course evaluation, my understanding of this public university community enabled me to facilitate and participate in these processes more meaningfully, even going beyond the research objectives initially posed.

As in any intended and planned research initiative, the (P)AR project about an emancipatory curriculum development process for teaching and learning foreign languages in Story 4 (Chapter 6) suggested most of the times and spaces for the university community members to gather for discussion of the curriculum matters at stake. Although this (P)AR project brought critical issues to the attention of this educational community and created communicative spaces that did not exist before in the academic unit mainly involved in this project, it also shaped, in some way, the types of relationships and goals its members ‘had’ to develop. This also happened in the (P)AR project concerning an emancipatory competency-based curriculum development process in Story 3 (Chapter 5).

Institutionalising these (P)AR research practices meant incorporating them into the practices attached to university life itself (i.e., the allocation of institutional resources, including times and spaces, to enhance the university community’s
engagement in discussions). In some way, this determined the scope of the participants’ initiatives (i.e., these ideas should match the university authorities’ agendas). The (P)AR project in Story 3 (Chapter 5), was shaped, to a point, by the initiatives of some of the university community members involved in the project. However, once again some of the ideas that came from the Rector’s advisors were institutionalised, and when these ideas did not match the expectations of one of the advisors (the Director of the Curriculum Affairs Office), they were reversed, affecting the ongoing curriculum development process and the university community as a whole. Especially, in private universities like the two where the (P)AR projects in Stories 3 and 4 (Chapters 5 and 6) were embedded, eradicating institutionalised ongoing ideas by force generated mistrust in the university community members and, in some way, a return to the starting point.

Fortunately, beyond the institutionalisation of some (P)AR research practices that happened not to match overt or covert strategic agendas of the authorities of the two private university communities in Stories 3 and 4 (Chapters 5 and 6), some other research practices of these same (P)AR projects left an indelible mark that afterwards brought about the discovery of unexpected routes and paths to tackle the critical issues raised in these communities. What the (P)AR practitioners involved in both projects gave account of in our talks some years after I, too, was ‘eradicated’ from those university communities, is evidence of that.

In the (P)AR project about constructing an emancipatory curriculum for the teaching and learning of foreign languages, after the departure of those of us whose contracts were cancelled, the (P)AR practitioners who stayed continued self-awareness raising discussions with the academic staff members of this Department. They decided to take this self-awareness raising process even further. They started opening more communicative spaces at Faculty and university levels. This led, on the one hand, to public discussion of the instances and processes to resolve academic staff members’ conflicts at the university and, on the other hand, to adopting the curriculum approach to construct a proposal across the Faculty. The lack of consultation with the former Academic Vice-Rector to cancel academics’ contracts so extensively in this Faculty, including those of the (P)AR practitioners’ in the Department of Modern Languages, led him to ask the University Board to revise the degree of involvement of the Academic Vice-
Rector in this type of matter. Ten full-time academics’ contracts had been cancelled in this Faculty and an entire academic unit had been closed (the Department of Linguistics). All this had happened in four months (by the second semester of 2002). After receiving the University Board’s endorsement, the Academic Vice-Rector decided to appoint a new Dean of the Faculty by the end of 2003 and clarify instances and processes to resolve conflicts in the university.

The former Academic Sub-Dean of the Faculty was appointed as the new Dean. With the changes at a Faculty level, two important events occurred. On one side, by the end of 2003 the new Dean appointed a new Director of the Department of Modern Languages. This decision was partially the result of some conversations between the new Dean and the new leader of the (P)AR project. She provided her view about the (P)AR leading team’s concerns about conditions that were undesirable for the ongoing curriculum development process to continue. Particularly, she highlighted the distrust and distress created by the events that ended in cancellation of the contracts of some academics who disagreed with the department authorities (the director and the coordinators who participated in the ‘hot seat’). This had led the academics to identify communicative spaces in the Faculty as unsafe. With a new director of the department appointed by the end of 2003, the (P)AR practitioners who stayed started discussing curriculum matters across the Faculty from an emancipatory approach. As a result of five years of collaborative work with academics from other departments in the faculty, and with the overt support of the new Dean, a proposal for interconnecting the curricula in the fields of foreign language teaching, social communication and information studies was put forward.

In the case of the (P)AR project that aimed to harmonise the national education policy to run competency-based curricula in universities (Story 3 in Chapter 5), this university community took longer to find its own ways. It started in 2006 but was finished one year later. This (P)AR project had been affected at an incipient stage, when the university community was being encouraged to know and do (P)AR to construct the curriculum, and at a high level, when the (P)AR initiative was put aside for everyday university curriculum purposes. However, when the (P)AR practitioners who stayed were asked to finish the project due to a new institutional research policy interested in other matters, some (P)AR participants
tried to find different communicative spaces to continue discussions in relation to the main issue at stake: the lack of critical perspectives in the implementation of competency-based curricula in the country.

The two (P)AR practitioners who continued to work at the university decided to become engaged in debates on the matter at both local and national levels. They began to be invited to provide their views on this ongoing national policy. They were invited to give seminars and participate in debates in teacher education master degrees other than the one in which they were lecturing in this private university. Three years later, one of these (P)AR practitioners was appointed to lead the self-evaluation process at this university. Simultaneously, a group of academics that was in charge of the institutional philosophy and had attended the symposium in 2007 decided to run 30 (P)AR projects to continue looking for more humanistic ways of approaching professional education. This group of academics could now start carrying out these (P)AR classroom projects three years later following a change to the institutional research policy that had once forced our (P)AR project to be finished. A new institutional self-evaluation process carried out for re-accreditation purposes in 2009 indicated the need to make some changes to the institutional research and curriculum policies.

Institutionalisation of research practices had a different effect in the (P)AR experience told in Story 2 (Chapter 4), which aimed to construct a self-evaluation model of the graduate courses in the university where I currently work. Some university community members’ practices have become part of this institutional process aimed at constructing the model to self-evaluate this public university’s roughly 300 graduate courses. These practices were proposed, discussed and explored with the university community members, including the graduate students involved, as well with the Academic Vice-Rector. My decision not to reveal that I was approaching the project from a (P)AR perspective was based on my awareness that ‘my research interests and concerns’ were not necessarily the main focus of the ongoing process. Concealing was a gesture of respect to the very complex process taking place when I arrived. I only needed to be sure that the research approach I was going to adopt to fulfil my commitment to this educational community worked well for the community’s interests and needs. And, in fact, it did. The testimonies of the academics in charge of the self-
evaluation process of graduate courses at the university confirm that my decision was ‘right’.

So too were my decisions concerning the mix of types of research in the projects about the geopolitics of academic writing of Indigenous and Raizal students in Story 1 (Chapter 3), and about the construction of a competency-based curriculum from a critical perspective in Story 3 (Chapter 5). These decisions were informed by my awareness of the need to understand these university communities more deeply in order to work with them better in a (P)AR stage. For this purpose, critical ethnographic practices were merged with (P)AR practices. Specifically, each (P)AR experience was based on a critical ethnographic study aimed at understanding students’ and lecturers’ experiences in relation to the matters at stake (the academic writing in Colombia’s official Spanish language, of the nation’s majority ethnic and linguistic group in Story 1, as well as teaching and learning in contemporary higher education in Story 3). With time, I understood as a (P)AR practitioner that other research approaches fit well with some (P)AR needs. In these two particular cases, the (P)AR teams needed to much better understand their own communities, as our membership of them could blind us to the diversity of experiences and perspectives within these two communities. Preliminary critical ethnographic studies worked well for developing a better picture of those we were referring to as ‘the university community members’.

From my point of view, the blurred frontiers between types of research identified in my literature review in the field of (P)AR, which I presented in Chapter 1, help to explain the need of (P)AR practitioners to make sense of (P)AR according to the problems they address, the communities with which they work, the conditions under which they do (P)AR, and the diverse perspectives they can draw from to support the (P)AR in which they are involved. The different labels associated with (P)AR practices mainly reflect (P)AR practitioners’ different and contesting views, approaches and practices to deal with their political commitment.

The tension in (P)AR that I mentioned at the beginning of this section concerns a tension within what is embodied in (P)AR itself. At one end, (P)AR is a set of practices aimed at the creation of knowledge. In this sense, the scientific community has an interest in keeping ‘that’ which can be recognised and
acknowledged throughout time so that the main goal of creating knowledge can be achieved and recognised within that community. At the other end of the tension, (P)AR is characterised by the importance of the role of ‘action’. In my view, this distinctive component of (P)AR refers to the end, not as some may claim the means, of this particular research practice. I address this tension more deeply in Chapter 8. In Chapter 9 I will present some implications for an understanding of the (P) of the acronym, ‘participation’, which I indicated in Chapter 1 is a critical issue in current debates in the field of educational (P)AR.

Taking into account what has been evidenced so far, I argue that, politically speaking, the more participatory a (P)AR process becomes, the more challenging it is to meet traditional and rigorous demands for this type of research. The case of systematising experiences in Latin America is one very clear example of how the (P)AR spirit has had to overcome and contest research traditions of ‘rigour’ to become compatible with disadvantaged communities’ actions. This type of research makes reference to communities’ experiences aimed at advancing social justice through the community members’ actions, which follow the spirit of (P)AR and use its conventional resources as well as non-conventional ones, including non-scientific knowledge. These experiences are recalled in a systematic way when the communities have accomplished their goals.

These considerations bring forward some other problematic issues that need to be clarified before addressing research questions 3, 4, 5 and 6. On the basis of an Arendtian understanding of the political of (P)AR, we call one person a (P)AR participant, a (P)AR practitioner, a (P)AR facilitator or a (P)AR spectator, among other terms. If (P)AR makes sense only in an existing world, as soon as a (P)AR experience starts in a university community, all university community members embedded in the webs of relationships involved in achieving the goals that orient the (P)AR process become (P)AR participants, whether they are aware or unaware of their roles in an endeavour started by an initially small group of the community. Politically speaking, all members of university communities are automatically connected to one another on the basis of the general goals they share, which make them gather in time and space. (P)AR carried out in university communities is embedded in a broader endeavour than the research process itself. Notwithstanding, these research practices like (P)AR practices can be
distinguished from other practices such as teaching. This differentiation can also be made among (P)AR practices themselves.

A (P)AR practitioner, from my point of view, is identified on a different ground. A (P)AR practitioner is defined by the set of doings (P)AR is known for, that s/he is aligned with and practices. This set of doings that constitute (P)AR has been constructed, in this case, collectively throughout time, and has been kept, and eventually modified, on the basis of the objectives for which this set of doings was created. Therefore, for a (P)AR practitioner to be considered as such, s/he needs to practice this set of doings. Consequently, I would call a (P)AR practitioner a person who, in a conscious way, becomes engaged in putting into practice a set of doings that (P)AR is about.

7.4. Theories, disciplines, organisations and the political of (P)AR

Research question 3:

*How are ‘the social’ and ‘the political’ understood by different (P)AR practitioners in higher education?*

Research question 4:

*What are the consequences of these understandings for their research practices?*

Drawing from what I have discussed so far, we have seen that the tensions that emerged in university communities as a result of the coexistence of ‘the social’ and ‘the political’ are exacerbated when (P)AR is carried out in higher education. The four new stories I told in Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 about the (P)AR initiatives I led, and other stories I have published in the past, have intertwined with my experiences as a PhD student and a lecturer in a university in Australia during the three years of my PhD candidacy. They provide some more ideas about the ‘malaise’ these tensions are causing. Politically, the signalling of some (P)AR practitioners as ‘trouble makers’ is linked to a tension between the relationships
and organisations brought about by some pervasive social practices in these educational communities and the relationships and organisations that (P)AR participants attempt to construct in these communities. These tensions result in conflicts between the existing conditions in universities and the conditions that (P)AR participants want to create in such educational settings. The contesting position of some (P)AR participants towards some of these pervasive social practices in contemporary universities may be associated with the perception that some (P)AR participants are ‘trouble makers’. To explore the tensions between ‘the social’ of our universities and ‘the political’ of (P)AR, it is important to return to some of Arendt’s reflections about ‘the social’ and ‘the political’.

Arendt says that, different from the clear-cut opposition between the ‘household’ and the ‘polis’ for ancient Greeks, the difference between ‘the social’ and ‘the political’ in modern times is much less distinct. Arendt states that in ancient Greece, while the private realm was clearly linked to the household, which was characterised by ‘strictest inequality’, the public realm was connected to the polis, which knew ‘only equals’ (Arendt, 1998, p. 32). Therefore ancient Greeks’ notion of equality had little in common with the modern concept of equality. For the ancient Greeks, “[equality] meant to live among and to have to deal only with one’s peers, and it presupposed the existence of ‘unequals’, who as a matter of fact, were always the majority of the population of the city-state” (Arendt, 1998, p. 32). She claims that with the rise of the nation-state in modern times, political economists started functionalising ‘the political’. From Arendt’s perspective, this implied the rise of the ‘household’, or of economic activities, to the public realm. Those activities which once pertained to the ancient Greeks’ private sphere of the family “have become a ‘collective’ concern. In the modern world, the two realms [the social and the political] indeed constantly flow into each other like waves in the never-resting stream of the life process itself” (Arendt, 1998, p. 33). I argue here that this permanent flow of ‘the social’ and ‘the political’ realms into one another, as suggested by Arendt, is understood and approached by (P)AR practitioners in university communities in different ways.

For example, the (P)AR project about the academic writing of Indigenous and Raizal students in Story 1 (Chapter 3) is particularly enlightening in relation to the strong influence that our theoretical alignments have on our views about ‘the
social’ and ‘the political’ as (P)AR practitioners in higher education. The conflict that resulted in the temporary separation of one of the researchers of the (P)AR team was mainly caused by his coherent position as a poststructuralist to interrogate permanently the validity of using ‘methods’ to make social changes as well as his consistent attempts to disintegrate the meta-narrative of ‘democracy’ on which the (P)AR project stands. His positioning in a research team in which most of the (P)AR practitioners were aligned with critical theory stances about social injustice certainly became a drawback in the research process and resulted in the unfortunate deterioration of the relationships that sustained the research group. As a result of our disagreements about how to address and solve socially unjust situations in theoretical terms, and their practical consequences for the research process (i.e., the convenience or inconveniences of methods), we agreed to stop working together. His disengagement from the (P)AR process led him to focus his attention on another ‘less structured’ research project. This research project was a new initiative of the department to work with the government institute responsible for protecting the plural character of Colombia in linguistic terms. This research project started informing the research seminar in the Master degree course he coordinated.

These events helped me to understand that ‘the political’ that once had led this colleague, others and me to creating the inter-university research group was being challenged by ‘the social’. This tension was derived from our different theoretical alignments to some other groups, namely, the group of critical theorists and the group of poststructuralists in the field of education. Only when we at first tacitly, and later explicitly, agreed to surmount our theoretical attachments as the ‘sticking paste’ of our convergence, could we focus again on what had really made the members of the group converge. That was our concern and commitment to increase self-awareness about, and collaborative work against, situations of social injustice generated by pervasive discursive practices in our university communities.

Another source of differences in (P)AR practitioners’ understandings of and approaches to ‘the social’ and ‘the political’ concerns the disciplinary traditions in which (P)AR practices are embedded. Results of the (P)AR project to construct a model to self-evaluate the graduate courses in my university in Story 2 (Chapter
4) illustrate this point. The only two members of this project who associated the institutional process with (P)AR were the ICT expert and me. Although he had mentioned that his contribution as an ICT expert to the model to self-evaluate the graduate courses at the university was going to be the final work for his Master degree, he never mentioned that he was carrying it out as a (P)AR project. While I avoided referring to this project as a (P)AR project in order not to distract the ongoing university community’s process, he was approaching the project through his concerns to make ICT tools more helpful, accessible, comprehensible and equitable to the university community members. We had discussed from the beginning the different socially unjust situations that university community members had experienced on previous occasions as a result of the demand of running self-evaluation processes under inadequate information and technological conditions to collect, analyse and report data. This ‘indoor’ social injustice was one of several critical issues participants pointed out as an obstacle, which the project team agreed to tackle from our fields of expertise.

The ICT expert’s political commitment was translated rapidly into working towards an information system through which university community members could participate in the self-evaluation process at the same time as they participated in its construction. My commitment as a discourse analyst took the form, in some way, of putting in place a wide range of ideas for face-to-face and virtual communicative spaces, where the university members could discuss previous and current concerns in equitable and safe ways so that trust, engagement and commitment with this university community process could be re-established.

Whereas this was happening to us as the only two participants labelling this project as (P)AR, the others who were participating in constructing the self-evaluation model addressed ‘the social’ and ‘the political’ from what they could find best in their own disciplinary fields. For example, we had wonderful discussions about ‘the political’ embedded in a self-evaluation process oriented to accreditation as understood by the academics in the field of the arts. These academics had been overlooked in the guidelines drafted by the National Council for Accreditation (CNA) to accredit graduate courses in the country. Artistic creations were barely mentioned in this draft. This led the inter-disciplinary group
of academics who were participating in construction of the institutional model to self-evaluate these courses to endorse the proposals made by the academics in the field of the arts. New indicators were suggested for self-evaluating how our graduate students understand their political commitment in constructing the nation through aesthetics. In this sense, the diversity of disciplinary and inter-disciplinary perspectives gave the process a multidimensional approach to understanding ‘the social’ and ‘the political’ from the disciplines. Each perspective was based on a different understanding and approach to the flow of ‘the social’ into ‘the political’ and vice versa in university life. All these views were collated and included in the institutional guidelines for self-evaluating our graduate courses.

Some excerpts about Orlando Fals Borda’s life in Story 3 (Chapter 5) provide another type of insight into the different ways of understanding the flow of ‘the social’ and ‘the political’ into each other, in Arendt’s words, and, therefore, into the different consequences that these understandings bring to (P)AR practices. The first hint comes from Orlando Fals Borda’s reflections about how to fulfil (P)AR practitioners’ political commitments under particular organisational dynamics. As he used to say, he had to leave the university to gain a better understanding of the social problems he was referring to in the university classrooms. This sort of unexpected but productive circumstance led him, as well as many other (P)AR practitioners, to think that it was worthwhile to approach ‘the political’ by joining it to ‘the social’, more specifically by joining particular social movements.

Other (P)AR practitioners decided that the creation of social movements through (P)AR was a more suitable route for those whose principal site for social change making was the university itself. This latter approach went well with Paulo Freire’s advice to teachers not to lose their jobs since, as he used to say, it is in those sites where social injustice also takes place and (P)AR practitioners could not do anything from the outside. I was not really successful in this sense in the (P)AR projects to construct emancipatory curricula in the two private university communities, as Stories 3 and 4 (Chapters 5 and 6) show (my contract as an academic was cancelled in both instances). However I do still believe that (P)AR practitioners have to approach ‘the political’ from the very core of ‘the social’ of contemporary universities.
Story 4 (Chapter 6), about the (P)AR project to construct an emancipatory curriculum for teaching and learning foreign languages, as well as Story 3 (Chapter 5), about the (P)AR project aimed to construct the competency-based emancipatory curriculum, also show an understanding of ‘the political’ as an arena where the only possible route to success is the annihilation of contesting perspectives about ‘the political’. In both cases, the response of the academics performing managerial roles (a director of a department in the first case and the course coordinator in the second) and with whom I had differences of opinion and subsequent conflicts derived from those differences, was the cancellation of my contract as a member of the academic staff. By forcing me to disappear from the public realm in these institutions, they transformed the public into a private matter. With silent endorsement of the instances I appealed to at an upper level in both institutions (the Vice-Rectors in both cases), the demise of ‘the political’ was completed. These intertwined managerial practices based on individuals’ actions and inactions in university communities became a kind of annihilating practice.

In the (P)AR project in Story 4 (Chapter 6), a communicative situation was set up (the hot seat) and presented as a dialogical opportunity to solve the conflict between the director of the department and me. In the (P)AR project in Story 3 (Chapter 5), however, a new staffing policy in the university was used to solve the conflict with the Master degree course coordinator. While my colleagues and I were clear about the university’s need to present valid reasons when asking for the cancellation of my contract (the conflict I had with the course coordinator), the Dean of the Faculty and the Rector decided to overlook this fact of my employment conditions and focused instead on the rationale of the new staffing policy. Through talks at this top level, I realised that my case was going to be used to send a clear message to the academic staff. The religious denomination ruling the university was aware of the many academics holding full-time positions in other universities while holding casual and part-time staff contracts in this private university. They needed to send a clear message with my case about the ‘changes at the university’. With the main motive of these talks (the struggle for power with the course coordinator) kept in the background and the main issue at stake (a new staffing policy) placed in the foreground, I decided to demand, simply, fair treatment. Acknowledging the right of the university to set new regulations for its
staff, I substantiated that I had fulfilled the terms of the employment contract I had signed with the university in the past. In this light, the Rector agreed that I had not breached the terms of my employment and that I had the right to receive compensation from the university for breaking its formal employment agreement with me.

I can argue at this point that the different and contesting understandings of ‘the social’ and ‘the political’ in higher education can be derived from diverse theoretical alignments. I also claim that the disciplinary traditions and organisational dynamics in which university community members are embedded, among others, bring about different consequences for (P)AR practitioners’ practices. These consequences can be understood as inherent to the political character of (P)AR itself. It is precisely among and from these different and contesting understandings and positions that (P)AR practitioners and other (P)AR participants can make sense of their gathering to build a better common world.

7.5. Overlapping memberships and undermining trends

Research question 5:

How is participation linked to ‘the social’ and ‘the political’ by (P)AR practitioners?

Human beings are always embedded in hierarchical relationships in the social realm due to the different roles they play within it and the different importance of such roles in the social organisation. Therefore, these unequal relationships will always appear and contest in the political arena where the common good of all these different social groups is defined. These plural ways of relating to one another that converge at the university are reconfigured in a new and different social order that results from the different roles that university members are expected to play to contribute achieving goals that the broader society has entrusted it to reach. In this scenario, (P)AR practitioners are challenged to make sense of (P)AR university participants’ plural understandings and practices of participation. The stories told in Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 can give us some traces of this line of thought.
For example, in the (P)AR project about the academic writing of Indigenous and Raizal students in Story 1 (Chapter 3), the (P)AR practitioners of the inter-university research group linked participation to the particular characteristics of each of the three university communities at which our research efforts were aimed. Each group of (P)AR practitioners was respectful of the requests coming from the offices in charge of research affairs within the respective university community. This (P)AR project was introduced in each educational setting as research to be carried out within the university community with the university community members for the university and its contribution to the achievement of the goals the broader society had entrusted each to reach.

Participation, in this sense, was linked to ‘the social’ considering that each (P)AR practitioner actually belongs to a particular university community. This ‘partaking of’ a university community entailed the (P)AR practitioners’ commitment to remain consistent with each university community’s practices and organisational dynamics. Participation was also connected to ‘the social’ in relation to the acknowledgement of the belonging of (P)AR participants to different social orders, including the university’s social structure (students, lecturers, academic and administrative managerial positions), as well as the belonging of each university community member to particular socio-cultural groups (Indigenous, Raizal and other Afro-Colombian groups, and Mestizos). A broader level at which participation was linked to ‘the social’ concerned the belonging of the (P)AR participants to Colombian society, and through it, to a global world.

These multiple layers of ‘the social’ attached to participation in (P)AR was always associated in this (P)AR project about the academic writing of Indigenous and Raizal students with the social order derived from the acknowledged roles and relationships among such roles within the scientific community. It is in this scenario that (P)AR practitioners recognise the roles played by lead researchers, co-researchers, research assistants, and the like. This internal social order has led to competitive practices that result in ranking research groups. From this perspective, (P)AR practitioners have linked participation to overlapping
understandings and practices of ‘the social’ in the university community. Something similar happens in the linkage of participation to ‘the political’.

Each member of a social group that comes into the university participates in both the construction of a new community on the basis of the goals the broader society has entrusted this community to achieve, and the negotiation of the practices that are meant to contribute to that. This participation can take place in ways that are more socially or more politically oriented. In university communities sustained with private funding, such as those in which (P)AR projects were carried out to construct emancipatory curricula (Stories 3 and 4), this participation is more oriented by the ‘contract signed’. This contract entails the ‘compliance’ with the terms of such contract by the parties that sign it. On the other hand, in university communities where more public funding supports the university’s existence, such as the public university involved in the (P)AR projects about academic writing and the model for the self-evaluation of graduate course in Stories 1 and 2, respectively (Chapters 3 and 4), the university community members’ participation is oriented more by an expectation of compliance with agreements reached in the public realm. That university communities such as this public state university have been created for construction of the nation leads its members to participate on the basis of a critical stance about the orientation of the university’s practices. In front of a pervasive trend in higher education that promotes universities functioning as enterprises, (P)AR practitioners are facing the challenge to explore a wide range of routes and dynamics for university community members not to compromise their political commitment as citizens, no matter what type of funding mainly shapes the orientation of the university community members’ practices.

Thus, (P)AR practitioners have been linking participation not only to ‘the social’ through the multiplicity of overlapping interests, expectations and needs coming from the social groups that converge in the university community and the groups of university members created to advance the disciplines and professions. They have also been linking participation toward the construction of the common good, through acknowledging the diversity that the university relies upon. However, (P)AR practitioners’ attempts to contribute to strengthening ‘the public realm’ in order to keep the political realm alive have been permanently contested by some
university community members’ attitudes to comply exclusively with what they are asked to do. This was particularly evident in the attitude of some of the academics participating in the (P)AR project to construct the model of self-evaluation of graduate course in Story 2 (Chapter 4). These academics tried to solve disputes about the convenience or inconvenience of running self-evaluation processes for accreditation purposes only by expressing their view that any dispute was sterile, since in the end they would be asked to do what the National Accreditation Council (CNA) established. Some of these academics tried to persuade others to join them to help address the discouragement, disappointment and attrition that contemporary overloaded practices have caused in universities, so that all academics could survive in a financially shaped, competitive world.

In Chapter 1, I observed a problematic situation I had found in my literature review in the field of (P)AR. This problem concerns the intermittent appearance of the ‘participatory’ component, (P), in the acronyms used by PAR practitioners. To point out this problematic situation throughout the study, I decided to use the parentheses in the acronym (P)AR from the beginning of this thesis. As a first step to resolve this problem, I argue here that the appearance or not of the (P) component in the different acronyms used to refer to AR is related to the degree of relevance ‘participation’ has in the (P)AR endeavour. From this it follows that, when the ‘P’ component is used in acronyms such as PAR (participatory action research), PR (participatory research), CBPR (community-based participatory research) or YPAR (youth participatory action research), the practitioner is highlighting the relevance of ‘participation’ for running the process at stake. The practitioner can link this ‘participation’ more to ‘the social’ (i.e., to highlight the social character of the research process), more to ‘the political’ (i.e., to emphasise the political realm as constructed by diverse participants), or to both. Reading the story told in the oral or written document where the acronym appears can provide some clues about the role of ‘participation’ in the research process involved. However, there are more linkages made by (P)AR practitioners in relation to ‘the social’ and ‘the political’.

As I have mentioned in Chapter 1, there is a debate in the field of (P)AR generated by the existence of contesting understandings and practices of ‘the political’ in (P)AR. This debate is attached to a dispute among the notions of
‘social justice’, ‘democracy’, ‘citizenship’ and ‘education’. What I will add to this discussion now is that the ways in which (P)AR practitioners in higher education are linking ‘participation’ to the social and the political realms are related to contested discourses and ideological positions.

7.6. Making sense without dislocations

Research question 6:

How do (P)AR practitioners’ discourses and practices relate to the particular ideological positions they have adopted?

Most of the practices universities are concerned with have changed dramatically due to the ‘new’ conditions under which the cultural, social and political lives of this type of higher education community are now lived. These new conditions are largely the product of neoliberal ideology, or more precisely the university’s response to and adoption of it. The economic rationality on which neoliberal ideology relies has in practice reconfigured the material conditions under which university teaching, research and managerial practices can take place. (P)AR practitioners, like all the other members of the university community, have seen their practices redefined by pressures coming from demands for revenue generation and economic efficiency, among other things, which are also imposed on many other institutions. Although pervasive, this ideology is being contested in contemporary university communities, in different ways. One of the debates in the field of (P)AR concerns precisely the positioning of its practitioners in relation to this neoliberal ideology. This debate is closely related to the coexistence of a diverse range of understandings of ‘social justice’, ‘democracy’, citizenship’ and ‘education’ that collide, as some of these understandings, and their subsequent practices, have been perceived as favouring neoliberal ideology.

It has been said in relation to the (P)AR project about the academic writing of Indigenous and Raizal students in Story 1 (Chapter 3) that sometimes relationships aimed at advancing social justice in (P)AR projects can be affected by the collision of some of its practitioners’ theoretical perspectives. This happens because theoretical views come with explanations about what the good life should
look like in everyday situations. Sometimes these theoretical views are compatible but sometimes they are not. The latter was true for this project: curriculum development processes oriented by critical perspectives look very different from those oriented by poststructuralist views. If an ideology is, in a broad sense, a set of beliefs shared by a group of people, certainly a theoretical perspective can become an ideology when this group of people claims the universality of its explanations (Arendt, 2005, p. 103).

On the pretension of universality that characterises ideologies, from an Arendtian perspective, it is important to acknowledge that some of the (P)AR practitioners in this (P)AR project about the geopolitics of academic writing moved from the stronger critical approach to curriculum development we had adopted ten years before, to a more moderate critical approach in this (P)AR project. Some of us had participated in the (P)AR project that Story 4 (Chapter 6) discusses, namely, the project that aimed to construct an emancipatory curriculum for the teaching and learning of foreign languages. Despite our change, the collision with the poststructuralist view had to happen: critical and poststructuralist positions concerning the problem we want to address were and are still contested. Beyond the differences between the theoretical perspectives in dispute within the (P)AR leading team, there were also problems associated with resource (time) management derived from work overload. As described before, the poststructuralist co-researcher had been appointed as the director of the department while still performing duties as the coordinator of the Master degree course. I, as the lead researcher, ended up doing what he was meant to do; the result of this was work overload for me too.

This university community has seen its staff reduced significantly due to the increasing cutting of public funding for the university over the last 20 years. This has resulted in fewer academic staff members responding to more expectations. This is intimately connected to the neoliberal ideology subtly entrenched in public universities. In other words, the unfortunate episode under analysis, although with ontological and epistemological roots, was also linked to the sort of pressures and circumstances generated by the neoliberal ideologies informing university practices. However, in relation to this particular type of situation, the members of the inter-university research group in charge of the (P)AR project about the
academic writing have recently ratified its ideological position. We agreed that, no matter how different our theoretical perspectives are, we will continue together to explore ways to advance democratic and citizenship practices as well as social justice. This includes continuing to contest the expansion of neoliberal ideology in higher education in the form of changes to staff working conditions. Our commitment continues to explore with the university community members alternative ways of living a better common life. These are, in political terms, different from what is presented in the disguise of ‘common sense’ by the economic rationality underlying neoliberal ideology. The new (P)AR project we will run is aimed at creating more communicative spaces for a group of university community members to make sense of their academic writing practices in relation to that search for a better ‘good life’ in political terms.

The (P)AR project that aimed to construct a model to self-evaluate the graduate courses of the university where I currently work (Story 2 in Chapter 4) contested neoliberal ideology in a different way. The leading project team based in the office of the Director of Graduate Studies at the university was initially perceived by the project participants as a ‘means’ to implement, in a top-down way, the external socio-economic pressure to accredit these courses. Yet through our discourse and practices we attempted to transform this ‘real’ agenda into a bottom-up response contesting this trend. My understanding about what was at stake in socio-economic terms and about the basis on which I had been invited to lead the project was not naïve.

I was aware of the Rector’s concern to give an account to Colombian society about the authentic commitment of Colombia’s largest university to be accountable, as all other universities have had to be. The special regime this university was granted by a law of the Republic since its creation had been a feature that most of the other Colombian universities had resented. Accepting to be treated equally, under the less favourable conditions that apply to the nation’s other public universities (the increasing reduction of public funding), the university authorities had decided to submit its reputation of academic excellence to public scrutiny. A group of participants in this project refused to accept that the university would run this self-evaluation process on graduate courses for accreditation purposes, since this would mean effectively that the last bastion of
contestation against neoliberal agendas in the Colombian higher education system had been lost. Yet others considered the university had to do this, so as not to lose its credibility in front of the Colombian society and as a necessary step to insert this university into the international game. In such a political environment, I accepted to lead the project because I saw a favourable circumstance that could turn all of this discussion in another direction.

Academics have hardly critiqued the way university communities in my country have addressed the requests of self-evaluation for accreditation purposes. Although there has been a discourse of social justice underlying self-evaluation and accreditation practices, national education policies have reduced this to a discourse of social need to be able to ‘compete’ in the global arena through higher education. This approach has been presented in these policies as the only means to advance socio-economic progress in Colombia. I expressed my position in this respect. From my point of view, while it is important to consider contributing to advancement of socio-economic progress, this should never be detrimental to the formative and political goals of the university.

As the coordinator of this (P)AR project, my challenge was to engage participants in discussing the wide range of positions and perspectives about the ongoing process. Through the discussion process, a common interest was manifested. Academics agreed that the priority would be to construct a model that could enable the university community to self-evaluate the graduate courses on the basis of what this educational community considered was most relevant to know about these courses. This approach would be consistent with a critical revision and participation in the debates about government guidelines to apply nationally to evaluating graduate courses. Most of the academics also agreed that when the accreditation process started at a national level, a decision would be made for each graduate course about whether or not to make a formal request for it to begin the national accreditation process. The possibility of making a formal request to international accreditation agencies was also considered. Each course would be able to use the information and conclusions obtained in the institutional self-evaluation process for accreditation purposes. The most important conclusion was that this model of self-evaluation should be helpful and useful for the education
community in the first place. The model should also allow any group of the university community to propose changes to suit its group needs and interests.

The (P)AR projects that aimed to construct curricula from a critical perspective in the two private universities (Stories 3 and 4 in Chapters 5 and 6) also provide some other clues about the research question under analysis. Although both projects began and ended attached to ideological positions to which they were opposed, these confrontations were taken up, addressed and resolved at an organisational level through the projects. In the (P)AR project at La Salle University aimed at harmonising the national policy on competency-based curriculum development with Lasallian philosophy (Story 3 in Chapter 5), the (P)AR practitioners could overtly express their ideological position about the negative effects of this type of policy discourse on the creation of conditions suitable for advancing social justice from within higher education. This position coincided with that of the university community members participating in the project, but it was in opposition to some institutional policies that were economically driven. For example, value for money was the main criterion used to set the conditions under which the community of educators in Latin America would be funded to attend the symposium about (P)AR in contexts of poverty. And with their basis in economic efficiency, the orientation of institutional staffing and research policies provided no space for ‘social justice’ discourse to register.

The effect of these policies was to obliterate the university community’s discourse about ‘social justice’. It demonstrated palpably the consequences of the university effectively acting as a corporation, motivated by neoliberal ideology in its exercise of power and decision making. Facing incoherence between institutional discourses and practices, (P)AR practitioners’ were coerced to step back from and withdraw their discourses and practices. Those (P)AR practitioners who stayed notwithstanding, found paths to continue contesting through their discourses and practices in different ways.

Something similar happened in the (P)AR project about the emancipatory curriculum for the teaching and learning of foreign languages in Story 4 (Chapter 6). The struggle for power resolved through contractual means found a response
from the (P)AR practitioners’ discourses and practices that expressed slow but clear contestation and it stayed. The effect of this response lasted for about eight years until an outsider was appointed as the Dean of their faculty. After a five-year meaningful discussion process at a Faculty level, a common curriculum was to be implemented across all the courses. This would imply harder work to permanently engage the university community in the process. The new Dean decided that each new course coordinator would be able to choose whether or not to join that Faculty initiative. In May 2012 as I write, the Faculty community is being challenged to respond to this indication. However, this is something that goes beyond the (P)AR practitioner’s hands, as always happens to (P)AR communities.

Based on these examples, I conclude that, like ‘the social’ and ‘the political’, (P)AR practitioners’ ideological positions, discourses and practices flow into one another permanently. It is not only such ideological positions as sets of ideas that make sense in the daily experiences (P)AR practitioners have with their university communities. Their discourses and practices are also permanently revised and reflected upon, against what (P)AR practitioners believe in. This constant flow brings not only new understandings about the ideological positions (P)AR practitioners have taken but also new discourses and practices to make sense of such sets of ideas about what a better world can look like. Since ideologies are linked to all sorts of set of ideas in the disciplines, professions and daily teaching, research and managerial activities, they are likely to struggle in the universities campuses. (P)AR projects bring these ideologies into contact with one another, sometimes producing heat and sometimes producing light.

The main challenge continues to be how (P)AR practitioners can continue to keep on advancing social justice in ways that enable our discourses and practices not to be dislocated by undermining ideologies such as the currently dominant neoliberalism. In the presence of such a complex world in contemporary higher education, it may be expected that we (P)AR practitioners will keep on experiencing the ‘malaise’ of being considered ‘trouble makers’ by some university community members and the pleasure that we are seen as ‘miracle workers’ by some others. As Arendt says, in the end what matters is natality, “the miracle that saves the world from its normal ‘natural’ ruin […] the birth of new
men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born” (Arendt, 1998, p. 247).
Chapter 8 The new beginnings and their turbulent emergence

In this chapter of the thesis I take up the main research question of this study, namely:

What sorts of political lives are we (P)AR practitioners promoting in higher education?

Approaching (P)AR based on an idea of ‘action’ as the only activity that goes directly in-between human beings without the intermediary of things and from which new beginnings are possible, provides a different lens to understand ‘the political’ in (P)AR in higher education. My answer to the main research question of this study is structured on the basis of (P)AR practitioners’ approaches to two tensions identified through the new stories I have told in Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 and my preliminary reflections upon ‘the political’ of (P)AR presented in Chapter 7. These tensions concern, on one side, an inherent ontological conflict in (P)AR as a type of research to advance social justice, and, on the other, the tension that emerges from the coexistence of contesting views of ‘the political’ in (P)AR university communities. (P)AR practitioners are challenged to face these tensions in their attempts to engage university community members in advancing social justice, democracy and citizenship in higher education. Finally, I approach the answer to the main research question from a view of ‘action’ as the human activity linked most closely to the human condition of natality. I illustrate what the new beginnings brought about by the (P)AR university communities to which I once belonged and currently belong look like, as well as what sorts of political lives emerged from these particular (P)AR projects.

8.1. Controlling action or allowing action? A challenge for (P)AR

Claim 1:

We (P)AR practitioners are promoting political lives in higher education that differ from one another as a result of our approaches to the ontological tension in the notion of ‘action’ embedded in (P)AR.
It seems that a double-sided understanding of ‘action’ is embedded in (P)AR, in regard to what an ‘action’ is and what role it plays in the political realm. On the one hand, ‘actions’ are expected to be intentional, planned and systematic for (P)AR participants to fulfil their political commitment. These are some essential characteristics for any piece of work to be called research. This expectation is mainly connected to an understanding of ‘action’ as a decisive means for (P)AR participants to appear and enter into the world in order to make history ‘here’ and ‘now’. From this perspective of ‘action’ as linked to the human condition of mortality, the political lives that (P)AR practitioners promote in higher education are especially related to an idea of ‘action’ as an empty case that, after being ‘filled in’ with a goal, is transformed into a ‘step-by-step project’ that will lead to making history in the form of improvement, innovation or social change.

This idea of ‘action’ has prevailed in the social sciences for a significant period of time. It was put forward by social phenomenologist Alfred Schutz (1967, p. 61), and was based, in turn, on Heidegger’s claim that ‘action’ always has the nature of a project, as I have mentioned in Chapter 2. From this view, it makes sense to carry out a (P)AR process, whose planning is aimed at ‘filling-in’ human actions with noble goals; the scientific research method serves this purpose well. In this way, concrete realisations of ‘actions’, namely, ‘acts’ (Schutz, 1967, p. 60) can be achieved; this ‘step-by-step’ execution of a projected act is what Schutz states is the main difference between ‘action’ and mere ‘behaviour’.

From this idea of ‘action’, a reading of (P)AR can be drawn. It can be said that (P)AR is a type of research aimed at advancing social justice by supporting the individual or collective enterprise of ‘filling actions in’ with relevant social content so that the ‘being-in-the-world’ can occur. The set of research practices (P)AR has become during the last six or seven decades, as the historical accounts presented in Chapter 2 show, concerns particular doings oriented to achieve that goal. The epistemological spirals of (P)AR represent, in some way, the basic doings that (P)AR practitioners are expected to do according to the scientific community that practices (P)AR; doings such as planning, acting, observing and reflecting are among the most essential doings for a piece of research work to be considered as a (P)AR practice.
On the other hand, (P)AR practitioners simultaneously deal with ‘action’ as a type of doing that is hardly controllable or predictable and that usually changes their intentional, planned and systematic research enterprises. In this sense, we (P)AR practitioners cope with ‘action’ in ways such as I have presented in the four (P)AR stories in Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6, namely, as a type of doing that emerges every time human beings relate directly to other human beings (Arendt, 1998, p. 7). This way of experiencing ‘action’ is that which we have when we see (P)AR participants ‘acting’ or ‘speaking’ to one another in their urge to relate to those other human beings embedded in the web of relationships they have fallen into when they were born. ‘Action’ responds, in this sense, to their urge to reveal themselves in front of the others. It is because (P)AR participants are capable of ‘acting’ and ‘speaking’ that we (P)AR practitioners can expect from them the bringing about of new beginnings in the form of changes, innovations or improvements. This second view of ‘action’, namely, ‘action’ as linked to the human condition of natality, is what has been overlooked in the literature in the field of (P)AR, in general, and in the field of (P)AR in higher education, in particular.

‘Action’ as a ‘filled in step-by-step project’ and ‘action’ as an unpredictable and irreversible type of doing that emerges every time human beings relate directly to other human beings can be approached by (P)AR practitioners in different ways. These approaches can be located in a continuum that runs from total control over (P)AR participants’ ‘actions’ to no control over their actions. The location of (P)AR practitioners’ approaches in the continuum thus provides hints about their positioning in relation to how social changes, innovations and improvements occur. From this perspective, we can find (P)AR practitioners who believe, on one extreme of the continuum, that the more control they have over (P)AR participants’ actions, the more likely that social changes, improvements or innovations will emerge. On the other end, however, we can also find (P)AR practitioners who believe that (P)AR participants’ actions cannot be and must not be controlled for social changes, improvements and innovations to take place.

These approaches to ‘action’, which are embedded in the tension between the human condition of mortality and the human condition of natality, are also
connected to different ideas of ‘empowerment’. In relation to the notion of ‘action’ linked to the condition of mortality, empowerment is linked to an idea of power as an outcome of ‘the filled in step-by-step project’. This power is aimed at controlling the conditions under which my ‘being-in-the-world’ can occur. Power is individual and it is based on a means-to-an-end rationality. Yet in the notion of ‘action’ as linked to the human condition of natality, empowerment is connected to a notion of power as it emerges from acting in concert. In this sense, power does not belong to an individual but to a group of people; it exists while the group exists. Drawing from Arendt’s work, being ‘in power’ is being able to act in concert with other plural human beings and, while doing so, to be able to act in their name on the basis of the power conferred by those human beings to us (Arendt, 1970, p. 44).

The tension generated by the coexistence of the double-sided ontological character of ‘action’ embedded in (P)AR is exacerbated when this type of research is practiced in higher education. At this level of education, the dominant aspirations to notions of scientific rigour and systematicity that are connected to ideas of ‘controllability’ are firmly embedded in the accountability culture now operating as a powerful force in higher education. These notions and ideas challenge the nature of unpredictable and unexpected actions in (P)AR. The unpredictability of this type of doing can compromise the quality of the outcomes such that they are not what the accountability culture promotes, which can have undesirable effects for rankings purposes in current academic work, as I have discussed in Chapter 7. Competitiveness in contemporary higher education brings into university life demands for certain types of efficacy, efficiency and effectiveness that are consistent with the scientific rigour, systematicity and ‘controllability’ inherent in the accountability culture, and can be met only with more control over research enterprises. In this thinking, ‘the more controlled the piece of research work is, the better’.

This approach has promoted the now pervasive research practices in higher education shaped by funding schemes designed to fulfil requirements for certainty rather than uncertainty and therefore legitimise ‘control’ over the research process. For (P)AR proposals to be considered ‘value for money’, which is an important criteria when funding choices are made, they need to guarantee, i.e.
have a high degree of certainty about, the actions that will be carried out and their
capacity to achieve predetermined outcomes in a fixed timespan. This requirement
for ‘controllability of the unpredictable actions’ in (P)AR practices is also a
response to the existing tension between the social and the political realms, as I
observed in Chapter 7. Control of (P)AR participants’ actions is particularly
important for differentiation purposes as (P)AR participants do belong to specific
groups of *individuals who resemble* each other and want to be acknowledged for
who they are. However, (P)AR participants are also inserted in webs of
relationships woven by groups of *individuals who are different* from each other
but are associated on the basis of their commonalities. In this latter realm, ‘the
political’, (P)AR participants need to be free to be able to reveal their unique
distinctiveness.

8.2. ‘Being-in-the-world’ or ‘being-in-our-world’?

Claim 2:

*We (P)AR practitioners are promoting political lives in higher education according to our understandings of politics.*

Returning to the two notions of ‘action’ embedded in the carrying out of (P)AR,
we can broadly identify two types of political lives. These political lives
 correspond to two ideas of ‘politics’ linked to the human conditions of mortality
and natality. Although here I describe both types of political lives in general
terms, most of this section concerns the political life connected to the human
condition of natality.

As I noted earlier in this chapter, socio-phenomenologist Alfred Schutz provided
the idea of ‘action’ that prevails in the social sciences. His view of ‘action’ as a
project drew from existential phenomenologist Martin Heidegger’s understanding
of ‘action’ as linked to the human condition of mortality. This idea of ‘action’ is
attached to a particular view of ‘politics’ in which ‘action’ plays a role as a means
on the other hand, from the human condition of natality, was proposed by
existential phenomenologist Hannah Arendt whose thinking has very usefully informed my study of ‘the political’. The bringing about of new beginnings was that what captivated her most about ‘action’ in relation to ‘politics’. From these two experiences and understandings of ‘politics’ and ‘action’, at least two possible ways of living ‘the political’ in higher education can be identified. Let us consider these two possibilities through the (P)AR practitioners’ positionality and the type of relationships that this positionality generates.

Claims 2A:

*We (P)AR practitioners are promoting political lives in higher education mainly informed by an idea of ‘action’ aimed at (P)AR participants’ appearing and entering into the light through their ‘being-in-the-world’.*

Claim 2B:

*We (P)AR practitioners are promoting political lives in higher education mainly informed by an idea of ‘action’ aimed at (P)AR participants’ appearing and inserting into ‘our-being-with-others world’.*

Before addressing these two types of political lives, it is important to clarify the words I have emphasised in these two statements. First, when I say “we (P)AR practitioners are promoting…””, I mean: “we (P)AR practitioners are encouraging participants to become engaged in…”. This implies a reading of these two statements in relation to the (P)AR practitioner’s positionality and intentionality. Second, the phrase ‘mainly informed’ refers to the possibility that, in spite of the tension that exists in (P)AR due to the contesting views of ‘action’ embedded in the idea of (P)AR itself, a (P)AR practitioner’s positionality and intentionality can be more aligned with a particular ontological view of ‘action’, while managing the other view of action in pragmatic terms. This approach to the answer is different from an account of the kinds of political lives all (P)AR participants, including (P)AR practitioners, are bringing about in contemporary universities. In this sense, this second section of this chapter focuses attention on the (P)AR practitioners’ positionality, while the third section provides an account of the
political lives as seen from the lens of the new beginnings brought about by (P)AR participants, as illustrated in the stories in Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6.

Taking these two considerations into account, we may say that the first possible scenario implies that, in spite of the awareness about the irreversibility and unpredictability of actions, (P)AR practitioners are especially informed and moved by their conviction to advance social justice through intentional, planned and systematic actions aimed at supporting (P)AR participants’ ‘being-in-the-world’. In this respect, my (P)AR practice in the four-year process in Story 4 (Chapter 6) was mainly informed by this idea of ‘action’. In fact, the four members of the (P)AR leading team agreed that we were more concerned in encouraging (P)AR participants’ engagement in what ‘we’ considered ‘needed to be done to make the social change happen’, and less concerned about ‘our-being-with-others world’. We were so embedded in finding out how to make our envisaged social change happen that we overlooked some of our colleagues’ feelings. Some of the intense reactions against our actions and words, as well as to other (P)AR participants, were, in some way, also informed by ‘their-being-in-the-world’. This way of living ‘politics’ can be highly fraught practically and emotionally.

While I left that university community and tried to make sense of such a destructive reaction, the (P)AR practitioners who stayed at the university understood at a deeper level, which I may have been too embedded in the (P)AR project to perceive. As they expressed it to me, beyond the foregrounded struggles for power was a community of academics that we (P)AR practitioners challenged to make a change that they were not really prepared to face. The new type of ‘academic’ needed in the social change making process that we had initiated put their work stability at risk.

The (P)AR practitioners who stayed at the university advised me that it took them some time to overcome both the pain of the (P)AR leading team breaking up – or being broken up – and the fear of potential violent reactions against them. They revised their thinking again and again about how we had interacted with that group of academics. We all concluded that we were so focused on understanding our emancipatory theoretical alignment and discourse to make social change
happen that we had detached from some of our colleagues and their realities and perceptions. Little wonder, then, that in the eyes of these colleagues we drew the ‘trouble maker’ rather than ‘miracle worker’ label. The (P)AR project had located the ‘higher’ character of this educational level in a place that some participants feared or did not want to enter. Some of our colleagues shared our views about the need to address the social injustice around us and that we as a department could take action to help address this injustice. However those academics whose worldviews were rooted in values quite different from ours responded to the environment that they perceived to threaten them with their own destructive struggles for personal power. They used the department’s communicative spaces to ‘make public’, in a private and safe space, their perceptions of the social injustice that ‘all’ had experienced through the (P)AR project.

Although our view of ‘action’ rejects notions that it must be planned, controlled and predictable, and that it is not a means to ‘being-in-the-world’, it was not hard for us to move to a different understanding of ‘action’. This was an idea of ‘action’ as part of a chain of unexpected actions and reactions that, in our case, brought undesirable realities into existence. What happened in 2002 made us all approach action through a different lens.

The second possible scenario can be read as follows. In spite of the formal requirement that we fulfill commitments in the scientific community to advance social justice through intentional, planned and systematic actions, (P)AR practitioners are especially informed and moved by their conviction to do it through (P)AR participants’ appearing and inserting into ‘our-being-with-others world’. Stories 1, 2 and 3 in Chapters 3, 4 and 5, respectively, can provide some reflections about what this means. What happened to me in the (P)AR project about construction of an emancipatory curriculum for teaching and learning foreign languages in Story 4 (Chapter 3), helped me to gain a new understanding of important issues related to ‘the political’ in (P)AR that I had overlooked.

From here I decided to be more careful in my (P)AR endeavours in higher education. My reasons were neither strategic nor pragmatic. I did so because I now understood much better the importance of caring about the web of relationships we weave. It sounds like a truism, but this is an essential basis on
which any engagement in advancing social justice relies. In addition, I was more aware and knowledgeable of ‘action’ in (P)AR in relation to bringing uncertainty to the research enterprise. My most valuable reflections through this period concerned what constructing ‘our-being-with-others world’ implies as a (P)AR practitioner and as a citizen.

My awareness about ‘care’ in (P)AR in higher education helped me to approach in a different way the ‘action’ in the (P)AR project aimed to construct a competency-based curriculum in harmony with institutional philosophy (Story 3 in Chapter 5). Again there were actual struggles for power, but I could remain tranquil in the knowledge that this time I had been more careful with the web of relationships compromised. I could recognise the merging of real struggles for power and some circumstances that favoured resolution of these struggles. In this sense I left with the certainty that, as a member of that university community, I had given the best that I was able to give. Five years later I was very happy to hear through a former (P)AR practitioner that, in spite of my forced departure, groups of university community members had continued their journey to advance social justice through (P)AR. I felt that, regardless of what had happened, the (P)AR project had brought something new to these groups of university community members.

Some other reflections about ‘action’ in relation to ‘the political’ of (P)AR in higher education emerged while I was coordinating construction of the model to self-evaluate graduate courses at my current university (Story 2 in Chapter 4). These reflections concerned the ways in which we (P)AR practitioners are inserting ourselves into the webs of relationships where we fail to achieve our project goals. Care, but also respect for ongoing processes, fears, interests, dislikes, disputes, suggestions and compromises at all levels, is essential. Not only did I have a clearer idea of ‘action’ as linked to ‘our-being-with-others world’, I was also aware of the importance of approaching ‘actions’ as a participant who had been called to bridge a huge range of perspectives, experiences and debates in this university community in order to construct something of interest to all. Although I was in a high level managerial position here, I was aware of my positioning, in political terms, as one participant performing one particular role. While doing so, I tried to be sure that any new person coming into the process, especially with my upcoming departure to Australia, could have all the
information that s/he may need. This would be important for her/him to understand not only the organisation that had emerged from discussions and agreements but also the stage and state of the ongoing process. The website about the project would serve well to provide this information and insight. The former Director of Graduate Studies who had become Academic Vice-Rector, and the former coordinator of the project both advised when I spoke with them at the start of 2012 that what emerged from this project has allowed the university community members to keep on carrying out different academic processes, besides accreditation ones, on the basis of the self-evaluation of the graduate courses.

Finally, the (P)AR project about the academic writing of Indigenous and Raizal students in Story 1 (Chapter 3) has widened my understanding of the implications of appearing and inserting in ‘our-being-with-others world’ for higher education. Particularly this project has challenged the (P)AR participants’ views about the academic world. Working with Indigenous and Raizal students in this university community has brought to our attention the various ways we have been exacerbating social injustice in contemporary universities. In front of academic lives run on the basis of competitiveness, accountability and performativity, we have been contesting academic practices informed by constrained views. Some of these have positioned some university community members under the label of ‘not value for money’ since they do not meet ‘appropriately’ the expected standards established by particular sectors of the scientific community, for example, in relation to ways of knowing, ways of communicating knowledge, and languages in which to publish, among other criteria. Because rankings and award systems continue to enhance performativity, and with it, establish new ways of relating to and doing things at the university, this (P)AR project will continue working with university community members to ‘widen access to higher education’ but from a different perspective.

As illustrated above, the political lives we (P)AR practitioners are promoting in higher education are mainly, but not exclusively, informed by our own ontological views of ‘action’ and, therefore, our views of ‘the political’. Notwithstanding, what tells much more about the kinds of political lives we (P)AR practitioners are promoting in higher education is what our own ‘actions’ and ‘words’ reveal. My
acceptance of Arendt’s invitation to stop and think about what I have been doing in higher education through (P)AR during the last two decades of my life was an acceptance of my political commitment with the university communities I am working with now and will work with in the future. What I did and said and what other (P)AR participants did and said in the (P)AR projects in the stories in Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 concern a political commitment I have made. It is a commitment to remind with and through my storytelling that the world that we have, in political terms, is what we have constructed through ‘our’ actions and words during the time we have lived together.

However, the political realm that we have constructed through (P)AR in higher education is not just a world for us to live in while we are temporarily in this world but, especially, for those who will come after us. This is the power of the notion of natality. Individual fame and glory in the contemporary academic world as a result of our ‘being-unto-death’ urge means nothing if we do not become aware of the sort of ‘our-being-with-others world’ we have been helping to construct in contemporary universities. However, what do the new beginnings that we (P)AR practitioners were involved in look like? The following are some examples I have drawn from the stories presented in Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6.

8.3. ‘New beginnings’ with and without clashes

Although sometimes traumatic for (P)AR participants, the constant flowing of the social and the political realms into each other bring about new beginnings. These new beginnings appear in unexpected forms, just as unexpected and unpredictable are (P)AR participants’ actions and words. The following are some characteristics of the new beginnings in the (P)AR projects in higher education as they appeared in my stories in chapters above. I introduce these characteristics in relation to particular stories from the four chapters, although I am conscious that these characteristics feature across all the stories I tell in this thesis about the political of my (P)AR in higher education.

The story I told about the (P)AR project aimed at supporting the academic writing of Indigenous and Raizal students (Story 1 in Chapter 3) provides several
interesting insights in relation to ways in which ‘the new’ occurs in (P)AR. For example, the ‘actions and ‘words’ recalled in this story highlighted the ‘new beginnings’ linked to the revelation of who (P)AR participants are as a result of the interactions triggered by and through this (P)AR project. And speaking personally, the inter-university (P)AR project I began leading in 2006 with Indigenous and Raizal students and lecturers has left an important mark upon my cultural identity. For the first time I was not just a ‘Mestiza’ with a blurred link to my uncertain Indigenous past. The communicative space created through this (P)AR project opened up a living linkage in this sense. The abstract existing link with our Indigenous ascendancy became a more real type of relationship through our relating with our Indigenous and Raizal students and colleagues. Although not necessarily presenting a direct connection to our Indigenous ascendancy, our interaction with Indigenous students and lecturers enabled the (P)AR team to have a deeper understanding of what belonging to an ethnic and linguistic community means nowadays in our Colombian higher education system. This awareness has helped us to identify new ways to contest academic practices imposed by socio-cultural majority groups in contemporary universities. These ‘new beginnings’ linked to what is revealed about the (P)AR participants, derived from acknowledging the human condition of plurality in the academy and the actual influence of the inter-actions among its members.

This remembrance of ‘actions’ and ‘words’ inspired by the notion of ‘natality’ also helps me to approach ‘difficulties’ in a different way. Many ‘difficulties’ in (P)AR are related to the lack of appropriate conditions or the existence of inappropriate conditions to advance social justice and democratic and citizenship practices in higher education. But some of these difficulties emerge when (P)AR participants reveal who they are. From my perspective, the more we (P)AR practitioners can encourage (P)AR participants to appear and reveal in the realm of human affairs, the more alive the political realm will be. We must not avoid this happening.

Another of my reflections from Story 1 (Chapter 3) concerns the ‘new beginnings’ in (P)AR as a result of the clash between ‘unpredictable actions’ and ‘planned
actions’. (P)AR as a set of research practices is likely to be expected to be validated against the carrying out of a set of planned actions that needs to be observed and reflected upon in a systematic way. But it is also likely that a (P)AR project will be assessed as a failure if those validation requirements are not met in a rigorous way. In Story 1 the various ‘breaks’ in the weaving of relationships I was attempting to make through some of the planned actions were initially assessed as failures. However, some of these breaks actually became unexpected opportunities for community building. This is the case of our ‘planned action’ to join the international collaborative research group that started the discussion about the geopolitics of academic writing in the United Kingdom. Their rejection of our (P)AR initiative from the international research group led us to find our own route to fulfil our political commitment, and in this sense, the ‘failed’ attempt became a new beginning for us. The actions of the (P)AR practitioner leading the British (P)AR project need to be judged politically. But what matters for us at this point is to reflect upon what ‘we’ did in relation to her unexpected ‘actions’ and ‘words’. That is another, positive, reading of this clash.

The impossibility for us to work with the graduate students or to start collaborative research with the institute attached to the Ministry of Culture can also be considered as ‘failures’, if the political ream is built on ‘my-being-in-the-world’. However, this is not the case. As I perceive it, the political realm surely emerges from acting and speaking ‘together’. Based on my analysis in Chapter 7 of these breaks in Story 1 (Chapter 3), we see how each (P)AR experience falls into existing webs of relationships. In this view, a failure is not linked to an ‘action’ that could not be ‘filled-in’ with a goal on my behalf. The failure of the political realm at this level in this (P)AR project concerned, on the one hand, the inappropriate conditions under which ‘our’ actions and words were brought to life (i.e., lack of clear guidelines in the Master degree course to engage graduate students in ongoing research projects). And, on the other, the actual social struggles for power and public reputation involved in (P)AR processes, just as in any research processes performed under the conditions then prevailing in the academy (i.e., academics’ struggles for territory in talks with colleagues in the Master degree course and talks between the Faculty Sub-Dean and the Director of the Institute).
Notwithstanding these circumstances, and in spite of the reality of both inappropriate conditions and personal struggles for power in this university community, some of the (P)AR participants’ unexpected actions and words did break through to bring about new beginnings. This is the case for the graduate student who persisted with his dissertation linked to this project, and for the Indigenous student and lecturer who wrote their stories to increase awareness in this university community about their experience with academic writing. It was also the case for myself when trying out many other routes to increase colleagues’ awareness and engagement in these discussions. These new beginnings were possible thanks to another essential of (P)AR in contemporary universities: participants’ courage.

To be sure, ‘difficulties’ can emerge when (P)AR participants appear in the public realm and reveal themselves through their actions and words in unexpected ways, and when (P)AR participants face the real failures in the political realm. In front of all these difficulties, courage is one fundamental quality of the human spirit required to bring about the new beginnings to which we are committed. It was particularly inspiring for me as a (P)AR practitioner to observe how for the (P)AR Indigenous participants, courage came together with humbleness. In spite of the many socially unjust situations they had passed through historically, their ‘actions’ and ‘words’ still revealed their strong belief in the importance of ‘connectedness’ to advancing social justice in contemporary times. Courage and humbleness were also the main qualities I observed in the academic in charge of the Office of Undergraduate Curriculum Affairs. After coming to understand what writing in Spanish means for Indigenous university community members, he made the changes needed in an institutional curriculum policy to advance social justice from within the university.

Story 2 (Chapter 4), telling some meaningful episodes about the (P)AR project aimed to construct a self-evaluation model, offers some other reflections about ‘the new’ in (P)AR in higher education. It appears that some university community members believe that backing academic managerial endeavours with research is not simply unnecessary but, worse, is a complete misplacement of valuable time that management staff cannot afford. On the other hand, some other university community members do believe in the potential value of research to...
back institutional processes such as curriculum development and policymaking. Yet there is a possible potential danger that types of research such as (P)AR can be self-defeated in their noble goals. In this sense, (P)AR is in a type of twilight zone that apparently few researchers are willing to enter. This project enabled me to understand that sometimes ‘the new’ emerges when we decide to take this risk. The project I discussed in this story became a new beginning as a result of entering into this zone.

‘The new’ in (P)AR was revealed in its doubleness in the story about the construction of a competency-based curriculum from a critical perspective (Story 3 in Chapter 5). On one side, (P)AR participants brought about a unique moment in the life of educational (P)AR in Latin America. Completely outside of any plan, the symposium to pay tribute to Orlando Fals Borda’s life and work was the result of engaging many expected and unexpected people. ‘The new’ appeared to me in its overwhelming virtuosity. Beyond the original idea of carrying out an academic event to familiarise and engage the university community members with (P)AR as a curriculum development option, this event meant something different to every participant. All these different meanings were aligned with a shared celebration of a (P)AR community committed to advancing social justice through education. In a way, the event became a ritual to renew publicly this commitment.

In spite of the sort of spiritual force this renewed commitment generated, ‘the new’ also appeared to me in its compelling force to re-establish the social relationships where ‘this new’ was brought about. Particularly in this case, the public character of this unique moment in this educational (P)AR community challenged the public positioning of the participants within the social order of the university community who were directly involved in bringing about this academic event. Public recognition of ‘the new’ appeared as an important factor for disintegration of the leading (P)AR team and project. Unpredictable reactions emerged from some participants’ need for public recognition in relation to an existing social hierarchy.

This doubleness of ‘the new’ can also be seen in Story 3 (Chapter 5) when new institutional staffing and research policies were put in place in this particular university community. By design, the new’ proposed for the research practices in
this university community completely annihilated ongoing research processes like this (P)AR project. While it was said that ‘the new’ policy was introduced to help fulfilment this university’s commitment to advancing social justice in Colombian society, this ‘new’ and the way that it was implemented undermined community members’ trust from within.

Finally, Story 4 in Chapter 6 led me to reflect upon the different levels of ‘the new’ and their corresponding paces and implications. It was not enough to have agreed on the common goal to be pursued with these (P)AR participants. In fact, everybody involved thought it was urgent to revise the existing curricula for teaching foreign languages at this university. ‘The new’ then appeared to me as a shared interest and intention. On this basis, the (P)AR participants moved into understanding and interpreting ‘the new’ perspective we had also agreed to adopt in order to revise the existing curriculum practices for construction of ‘the new’ curriculum. The theoretical perspective adopted here also appeared as a sound option for these (P)AR community members. This entailed the collective building of a ‘new’ common language that could help us all to gather together without being detrimental to the different traditions of language teaching that converged in this collaborative endeavour.

Although we could develop some ‘new’ necessary material and immaterial conditions for the participants to move through this journey, ‘the new’ was approaching a level where the most traumatic events were about to unfold. The new words and actions were challenging the teaching, research and managerial practices linked to the existing curricula. In the first case, lecturers were facing a situation in which the new shared intention, the new theoretical perspective adopted, and the new discourse being constructed were becoming a menace to the comfort provided by the stability of the familiar teaching practices they had used for a long time and that had become part of who they were. ‘The new’ was demanding them to give up being the ‘teachers’ they knew they were. Likewise, ‘the new’ was implicating changes to those academics in charge of managerial tasks for curriculum development; who they thought they were was also being challenged. Finally, in the case of the (P)AR practitioners leading the project, we also found ourselves being challenged in our own views of teaching and researching.
The four years that the (P)AR process had taken was, for us, an indicator that we were respecting this university community. However, the more the ongoing ‘new’ was being understood and lived by the community members, the more ‘the existing’ trembled. The new words and actions suddenly were colliding with the existing practices and the university community members were no longer sure that they wanted to leave their ‘familiar’ behind, as they had agreed at the beginning of the (P)AR journey. Some (P)AR participants’ new actions and words now revealed their disagreement with the changes they once had backed. In short, four years later ‘the new’ was perceived as an inconvenient path, especially for those whose curriculum management practices were linked to a particular positioning in the social order of this university community.

Finally, in relation to the main research question of this thesis referring to the kinds of organisations we (P)AR practitioners are encouraging university community members to become engaged in and contribute to their growth, the four stories in Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 lead me to make several observations. We, those (P)AR practitioners who are involved in these (P)AR projects, are encouraging university community members to become engaged in organisations that acknowledge the plurality of their people. Also, we are encouraging our university communities to find in the existing conditions in higher education those who can help to address and solve situations of social injustice in and outside the universities. We are also encouraging (P)AR participants to contribute to create new conditions under which all in the university community can lead a more plural life. As well, we are also encouraging university community members to be aware of the diverse meanings of actions and words as well as of inactions and silences. We are encouraging (P)AR participants to become engaged – or more deeply so – in enhancing democratic and citizenship practices. We are promoting (P)AR participants’ respectful and responsible positions in relation to agreements and disagreements. Finally, we are encouraging university community members to engage more actively in taking care of relationships. These are just a few practices that (P)AR practitioners are promoting in higher education.

‘The new beginnings’ brought about in higher education through (P)AR are not always linked to joyful experiences, but they definitely are always linked to
meaningful enterprises. Like our first birth, our second births as political beings are sometimes painful. But in no case are they worthless. These second births need some conditions to be in place so that they can take place. They also require courage and humility as I discussed above. We (P)AR practitioners have idealised the bringing about of ‘the new’ due to, precisely, what ‘we do not tell’ in our published stories. Into these existing gaps in our written history, the newcomers in this political endeavour of (P)AR construct an idea of ‘the political’ that may be far from what is depicted in (P)AR publications. Certainly this is not an easy route to follow, and as such it is another challenge that we (P)AR practitioners must address.

8.4. Concluding words

Twenty years ago, when I was enthusiastically starting my (P)AR personal journey, I rarely found anything that could give me a hint of the painful episodes I would come to pass through. It is true that actions cannot be predicted and cannot be undone. Yet I would have found it very useful to read and hear others’ reflections about how careful we must be with the web(s) of relationships into which we fall through (P)AR. The problematic issues addressed in the (P)AR reports or journal articles I read almost always made reference to ‘undesirable’ outcomes in relation to actions planned and the plans then needed to be adjusted, corrected or controlled more firmly. On other occasions, the ‘wrong doings’ were said to be ‘wrong’ because they were different from the (P)AR practitioners’ perspective. The notion of ‘action’ attached to the desirable revelation of the distinctiveness of the (P)AR participants, and the challenge that this brings into our own actions and words, were not necessarily present or foregrounded in such publications. Maybe I did the wrong reading. Or maybe at that time, the type of readings I needed were yet to be written. Twenty years later, I still do not find these types of stories. Most of the stories I have found deal more with (P)AR as a set of practices and less with (P)AR as a set of stories through which (P)AR participants’ reveal and bring about a new ‘our-being-with-others world’ together.
Chapter 9 Implications

Based on my analysis in this thesis, I do not argue here that higher education has lost its compass. Rather, I claim that it has a compass – one with multiple mounted magnetic needles that indicate not one but multiple ‘ideas’ of the north. In their attempts to understand such ideas, many university community members have engaged in overloaded and confusing research and teaching agendas that have left them with a sense of attrition and loss of their autonomy. Such conditions have challenged members of these communities who do (P)AR to talk about social justice issues while they are themselves affected by some situations of social injustice. I have argued in this thesis that Arendt’s notion of natality can usefully underpin (P)AR theoretical and practical foundations to enhance practitioners’ understand of what doing (P)AR in contemporary higher education implies in political terms.

In the final section of this thesis I present some implications of the claims I have made across the preceding chapters. First, I state that the human condition of natality can contribute to deeper understanding of what people refer to as the ‘participation’ component in (P)AR, politically speaking. On this basis, I suggest, in second place, that (P)AR can become a site of renewal of social research practices in higher education. Third, I claim the importance of reorienting the storytelling of (P)AR so that we are better enable to make political judgments, and for this purpose I present some reflections based on Arendt’s proposal for storytelling. Finally, I finish this section and this thesis by highlighting the relevance of the notion of the ‘newcomer’ for (P)AR in contemporary higher education.

9.1. Participation as ‘partaking in being together’

As I reveal in the literature reviews in Chapter 1, participation has been transformed into an idea that gives ‘value’ to the governance, research and teaching practices in contemporary universities. According to Grundy (2007, p. 77), engaging university community members in what the university has now become – a multi-million business – has led this higher education institution to
overshadow what the university really is: a site of participation. Neoliberal agendas have transformed participation into a means to achieve particular economic ends. This instrumental approach to participation has come with distributive ideas of social justice and, as Apple (2005, p. 276) suggests, depoliticised notions of democracy and citizenship in current marketised and corporatised higher education. From this perspective, competition for funding in universities and the demand for researchers to generate research income have affected participation in (P)AR more widely than Greenwood and Levin (2007, p. 15) claim in their historical account of (P)AR. Under these conditions, it is important to re-think ‘participation’ in (P)AR. In this endeavour, Arendt’s political thought, and particularly the notion of natality, can be helpful.

I stated at the beginning of this thesis that the different historical accounts of (P)AR provide some evidence to assert that the initial experiences of J.L. Moreno and Kurt Lewin in the first half of the twentieth century defined two different approaches in the field of (P)AR. One of the features that they approached differently was precisely ‘participation’. While J.L. Moreno in 1913 was more concerned about drawing in lay people to participate in improving the social injustices that affected them then (Altrichter & Gstettner, 1997, p. 48), Kurt Lewin was more interested in people’s participation as a means to carry out the ‘natural experiments’ that would bring about the desired social outcomes (Greenwood & Levin, 2007, p. 16).

From my perspective, (P)AR practitioners’ understandings and approaches to ‘participation’ have varied according to the ways in which they have dealt with the tension between ‘the social’ and ‘the political’, as well as between different and contested ideas of ‘action’ and ‘politics’. In Chapter 1 of this thesis I discussed the possibility that ‘the political’ of (P)AR has been overshadowed by an excessive influence of ‘the social’. To return to that discussion here, we might now conclude that the political character of ‘participation’ in (P)AR has been eclipsed by a dominant understanding of ‘participation’ as mainly linked to the performance of social roles in research. This understanding of participation is associated with Schutz’s (1967, p. 61) idea of ‘action’ as ‘a filled in step-by-step project’ and a Heideggerian view of ‘politics’ as linked to the human condition of mortality. This view is based on the assumption that ‘the political’ realm is the
site of history, where human beings can ‘be’, namely, they can use power to ‘enter into the light’ as creators, in the ‘here’ and ‘now’ of their temporary existence in the world (Jones, 1998, p. 180). In short, this is a view of ‘politics’ as ‘being-unto-death’.

A pervasive trend in higher education mainly approaches ‘participation’ from the view that, for a university community to make a social change in the here-and-now and through (P)AR, existing and new social organisations need to be put in place so that planned actions can work effectively. This requires that university community members link, in an effective way, the educational tasks and roles they perform as students, lecturers and administrators with, for example, the research tasks and roles they perform as members of the scientific community. The features of participation in (P)AR initiatives in higher education have therefore resulted from a mix of the characteristics of the roles university community members perform in those two co-existing social orders (that of the university as an educational institution and that of the scientific community). Participation, in this way, has become more socially oriented as it has been understood as ‘partaking of existing social orders’ to achieve social goals through (P)AR. Drawing from Arendt’s notion of natality, I suggest a more politically oriented view of ‘participation’.

In Arendt’s observation from which I draw throughout this thesis, ‘action’ is the human activity connected most closely to the human condition of natality. This is so because it is through ‘action’, first, that human beings can reveal their unique distinctiveness as newcomers in the world and, second, that they can bring the possibility of new beginnings to the already existing webs of relationships into which they arrive. From Arendt’s perspective, what makes this web of relationships different from any other web of relationships is precisely the human beings’ condition of plurality that brings this web into life. Politically, it is in this type of web of relationships constructed by plural human beings that ‘participation’ makes sense. Drawing from Arendt’s understanding of ‘action’, I state that participation can be understood as a type of action through which plural human beings make sense of their ‘being-with-others’ when they arrive into a web of relationships with other plural human beings. In other words, when a human being participates in this particular intangible world of human affairs, s/he ensures
through this particular action, first, that s/he ‘partakes of’ the web s/he has arrived into and, second, that s/he ‘partakes’ in the weaving of that ‘being together’.

In a more socially oriented approach to ‘participation’ in (P)AR, social organisations determine the features of the web of relationships. Yet in a more politically oriented approach, other ways of organising emerge when plural university community members act and speak together about what lies between them, namely, their inter-*est* (Arendt, 1998, p. 182). These types of organisations can emerge when (P)AR plural participants can appear in the public realm and can reveal who they are at the same time that they partake in the construction of a world of ‘our-being-with-others’. In short, what prevails in a more politically oriented view of ‘participation’ is recognition of the human condition of plurality. Under this condition, the social roles that people perform due to their belonging to particular social groups become no more than another feature of people’s equality based on their unique distinctiveness.

Notwithstanding, whoever isolates himself or herself and does not partake in such being together, loses power and becomes impotent, no matter what the reasons are, says Arendt (1998, p. 201). About this power she adds:

> Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together. When we say of somebody that he is ‘in power’ we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name. The moment the group, from which the power originated to begin with (*potestas in populo*, without a people or group there is no power), disappears, ‘his power’ also vanishes. (Arendt, 1970, p. 44)

So, an action such as participation is essential for a group of plural people to be able to act in concert or, in other words, to have power. Thus, when we make reference to (P) in (P)AR, we are referring to plural people who partake in ‘being together’ and create, through this partaking, the necessary conditions for the organisations that emerge from their words and action to exercise power.

I stated in the first part of this thesis that I would use the parentheses in the acronym (P)AR to point out two problematic situations identified in the literature in relation to the ways in which the notion of ‘participation’ is referred to. First, I

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65 Arendt’s italics.
said that I would use parentheses would to indicate pieces of action research work where ‘participation’ is considered an essential component, whether or not their practitioners describe this research as PAR. Second, I expressed the view that because different ideologies inform (P)AR discourses and practices, I would also use parentheses to indicate that ‘participation’ is understood in several ways.

Resorting, once again, to Arendt’s suggestion that it is more plausible that the relevant and the meaningful can be located precisely on the surface (Arendt, 1978, p. 27), for example, in the way we compose and use acronyms, I claim that the relevance and the meaningfulness of ‘participation’ is different in those research experiences referred to in the literature with the acronyms AR, P(A)R or PAR. I will return to Arendt’s suggestion soon to use the acronym I developed in this thesis to point out the intermittent appearance of the component of ‘participation’ in the literature, namely, (P)AR, to present my stance in relation to ‘participation’.

While the acronyms PAR (participatory action research) and PR (participatory research) denote that ‘participation’ is an essential component of this type of research, whether the ‘action’ or the ‘research’ is the participatory activity, the absence of this component in the acronym AR (action research) may denote something different. The omission of (P) in the acronym AR can be linked to positions that range from views in which ‘participation’ is not of relevance for the achievement of the research objectives to positions in which ‘participation’ is understood to be embedded either in the notion of ‘action’ or in the notion of ‘research’. From this perspective, it is possible to say that these differences in relevance and meaningfulness of ‘participation’ can be also related to contested understandings of ‘action’ and ‘politics’ in (P)AR, such as those presented in Chapter 7. These can go from views of ‘politics’ in which ‘participation’ is understood mainly as a means to an end, to views in which ‘participation’ is the main goal to attain.

Considering the range of coexisting ideas of ‘participation’ in the field of (P)AR, it is important, from my viewpoint, that we (P)AR practitioners reflect critically upon the notion of ‘participation’ that is underpinning our own practices for (P)AR university communities to be able to bring new beginnings into existence in contemporary higher education, politically speaking. In the meantime, I will
keep the acronym (P)AR as a reminder of the multiple (P)AR practitioners’ approaches to the permanent flow of the social realm into the political realm in contemporary higher education. This will also serve to remind us that the intermittent appearance of ‘participation’ in this acronym is linked to the existence of different views of ‘action’ and ‘politics’ and also of plural (P)AR practitioners in the field.

9.2. Re-search and politics: (P)AR as a political action

In spite of the contested views of ‘action’ and ‘politics’ in the field of (P)AR and the differences among (P)AR practitioners, it seems that there is still a conviction among us that (P)AR started, continued to be, and intends to keep on being a political activity. This conviction shared by a group of people is what Arendt (2005) calls the ‘principle of action’ which, together with the ends, the goals and the meaning of the ‘action’, are the four fundamental elements of every political action. Based on a reflection upon (P)AR as a political action, I argue that (P)AR can become a site of renewal of social research practices in higher education.

According to Arendt, every political action has at least four elements:

The meaning\textsuperscript{66} of a thing, as opposed to its end, is always contained within the thing itself, and the meaning of an activity can exist only as long as the activity continues. This is true of all activities, and of actions as well, whether they pursue an end or not. It is just the opposite with ends; an \textbf{end} does not begin to become a reality until the activity that produced it has been concluded – just as the existence of any given produced object begins at the moment when its producer has put the final touch to it. The \textbf{goals} by which we orient ourselves set the standards by which everything that is done must be judged; they go beyond or transcend what is done in the same sense that every yardstick transcends what it has to measure. The goals of action have in common with ends the fact that they lie outside action and have an existence independent of whatever action is undertaken; they have in common with meaning the fact that they are much less tangible than ends, although unlike meaning they can continue to exist past the completion of any particular action. [...] In addition to these elements of every political action – the end that it pursues, the goal which it has in mind and by which it orients itself, and the meaning that reveals itself in the course of the action – there is a fourth element, which although it is never the direct cause of action, is nevertheless what first sets it into motion. Following Montesquieu in his discussion of politics in \textit{L’Esprit des lois}, I would like to call this element the \textit{principle of action}, and in psychological terms, one might say that it is the fundamental conviction that a group of people share. (Arendt, 2005, pp. 193-194)

\textsuperscript{66} Bold italics are mine.
Arendt claims there is a difficulty with the ‘principle of ‘action’, since what inspires a group of people to act varies with polities and periods in history. She also says that what was a principle of action in one period can in another become a goal or, even, an end (Arendt, 2005, p. 195). Taking into account Arendt’s insights into political actions, I would suggest that (P)AR in higher education is passing through a critical stage as its meaning, goals, ends and ‘principles of action’ are being threatened by undermining trends. The (P)AR stories I have told and reflected upon in this thesis lead me to claim that we, (P)AR practitioners as a collective, need to ‘stop and think’ about what doing (P)AR in higher education means these days, what our main goals are, and which ends we are to pursue. This is essential to make sense of our current political commitment with our university communities. To start this collective reflection process, Fals Borda’s (2006a, p. 353) first-person assessment of 30 years of doing (P)AR can give us some starting points to think about.

Fals Borda (2006a) claims that although there are now signs of the existence of a world different from that which (P)AR practitioners had to face in the 1970s and the 1980s, it is possible that (P)AR has begun to lose some of its meaning due to its institutionalisation. He recognises that this has been the result of (P)AR proving its worth, but he wonders if this institutionalisation of (P)AR is progress or regress (Fals-Borda, 2006a, p. 353). Fals Borda also states that since the first (P)AR World Congress in 1977, there have been substantial advances in relation to the goals that were then proposed. In this respect, he reviews some of the (P)AR practitioners’ contributions in terms of theory and practice. However, Fals Borda (2006a) concludes that there is plenty of work to do in relation to encouraging (P)AR communities to appreciate their own knowledge and their own ways to communicate it so that they do not depend on exogenous theories and practices (pp. 356-357). Finally, he states that:

our societies appear to be discovering how to withstand the homogenizing onslaughts of globalization so as to protect their identities and lives as autonomous nations and peoples. Moreover, as part of our scientific task, we have the political, objective and non-neutral duty to fostering the democratic and spiritual dimensions throughout more satisfying life systems (Fals-Borda, 2006a, p. 357).

From my perspective, Fals Borda tells us a lot here about (P)AR as a political action at the dawn of the twenty first century. He tells us that although what
inspired the creation of (P)AR still prevails, and many advances have been achieved concerning its theoretical and practical goals, there is much more to do to help create more ‘satisfying life systems’.

Specifically in relation to contemporary higher education, it is important to consider that the yardsticks against which our actions as university community members are being measured in more marketised and corporatised universities can be misleading in terms of our goals to advance social justice from within. The more individualistic ways of being and living that university community members are encouraged to adopt in higher education are challenging the democratic and spiritual goals that (P)AR practitioners are committed to advancing. Since human beings are capable of bringing about new beginnings in the (P)AR community, I suggest that the ‘research’ component of (P)AR also needs to be resignified.

This process of resignification of ‘research’ in (P)AR started when (P)AR practitioners began to question ‘the fetish-idea of science as truth’ and to appreciate that science is subject to “reinterpretation, revision and enrichment” (Fals-Borda, 2006b, p. 29). Despite these advances, and partly because of them, there is much more work to do. Taking into account that the goals and ends of (P)AR as political action, and even its meaning, are being threatened by the current conditions under which research can be and is done in universities, this search for a renewal of (P)AR must include a reconsideration of the meaning of research itself. Aligned with Appadurai’s (2006, p. 168) claim that social researchers need to de-parochialise the idea of research to foster democratic citizenship, I suggest here that (P)AR practitioners can do this by giving a new meaning to those aspects of the research process that could be excluding the possibility of action, and, therefore, excluding the possibility of bringing about new beginnings in our university communities.

Based on a wide understanding of ‘research’ as ‘intensive search’ (re-cercher) and Arendt’s distinction between knowledge and meaning, we can advocate for university communities to broaden their views of research as intensive searches.

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67 According to Harper (2012), research comes from the French word *recherche* (1530s). It is composed of re-, intensive prefix, + cercher "to seek for". The first record in which this word was linked to scientific inquiry is from 1630.
not only for knowledge but also for meaning. According to Arendt (1978, p. 14), the distinction between knowledge and meaning is linked to the distinction between cognition and thinking. She says that we resort to cognition when we want to grasp what is given to our senses (p. 57). In this enterprise, thinking plays the role of a means. (Arendt, 1978, p. 61) The knowledge that we create becomes part of the world as any other product or object we make (Arendt, 1978, p. 62) Thinking, on the contrary, leaves nothing tangible behind since, as thinking beings, we do not ask “what something is or whether it exists at all – its existence is always taken for granted – but what it means for it to be (Arendt, 1978, p. 57).\(^{68}\)

From this view, while political endeavours need the knowledge that human beings construct about the world, they especially rely upon the meaning that a community and its members give to such a knowledge-based enterprise. Thus, to advance social justice through (P)AR, we need to enlarge our understanding of research so that we can eradicate rooted ideas of research as ‘devices’ exclusively devoted to ‘produce’ knowledge. Only when plural intensive searches for meaning and for knowledge can take place in our universities will we be able to reinstate research in the political realm.

Resignified ideas of ‘participation’, ‘action’ and ‘research’ can bring new possibilities for university community members to advance social justice and democratic citizenship in higher education. My personal stance in relation to how to resignify ‘participation’ is aligned with Arendt’s political thought. In this sense, I suggest to resignify the P of (P)AR on the basis of six imbricated P-notions: people, plurality, publicity, participation, power and politics. *Plural people’s participation* can carry out a type of research aimed at advancing social justice on the basis of *plural people’s actions*, to put new beginnings into motion in the public realm. In this way *plural people’s participation* can bring powerful communities to act together to make such realities ‘real’, and *plural people’s intensive searches* for meaning and knowledge can re-humanise and renew universities from within. For this political goal to be attained, some other contributions drawn from Arendt’s notion of natality can serve usefully to underpin the theoretical and practical foundations of (P)AR.

\(^{68}\) Italics are Arendt’s.
It has been suggested in Chapter 8 that excessive concerns for controllability in mainstream scientific research and for performativity in universities have resulted in interpretations of the doings of (P)AR, such as planning, acting, observing and reflecting, as doings through which such controllability and performativity can be achieved. One consequence of this has been the uncertainty about the types of conditions that (P)AR practitioners are creating for new beginnings to emerge in these higher education communities. The more control the (P)AR practitioner leading a (P)AR process exerts in the planning, acting, observing and reflecting processes, the less likely it is that the (P)AR participants will be able to reveal who they really are. Although (P)AR participants can achieve the objectives of the (P)AR initiative in this way, they reach such goals with a high degree of heteronomy rather than autonomy. On the contrary, the less control the (P)AR practitioner exerts in the (P)AR process, the more likely the (P)AR participants will be able to appear and reveal themselves in the public realm. In the latter case, there is always the possibility that an organisation emerges from (P)AR plural participants to discuss and decide what material and immaterial conditions they have and what they require to achieve the common good. This will set the initial scenario for the new beginnings to happen.

To contend that the set of doings (P)AR is about serve controllability and performativity purposes, we can approach these moments of (P)AR resorting to one of the most powerful mental faculties: imagination. From an existentialist phenomenological perspective, Arendt (1978) points out that imagination is a unique gift as it allows human beings to make present what is absent to their senses. “Only because of the mind’s capacity for making present what is absent can we say ‘no more’ and constitute a past for ourselves, or say ‘not yet’ and get ready for a future” (Arendt, 1978, p. 76). (P)AR participants can approach the planning moments of (P)AR, for instance, as attempts to imagine the material and immaterial conditions in higher education under which they would like ‘to live together’ during, through and after (P)AR. Rather than considering (P)AR as a process of co-optation to achieve an expected outcome, (P)AR can serve to generate a journey of co-creation, an intensive search for making real an imagined better and more socially just world where the unexpected is welcome.
Thus, (P)AR practitioners in higher education are called not only to explore the
epistemological dimension of the spirals of (P)AR to construct knowledge, but
also to make sense of what they are doing. This will help enable them to continue re-humanising and renewing the webs of relationships upon which the new beginnings rely. (P)AR practitioners, in this sense, are called to explore the political dimension of these spirals.

9.3. (P)AR, storytelling and political judgement in higher education

Imagination is also very important when we deal with the political dimension of the spirals of (P)AR in the moments such as ‘observation’. Politically, these moments are related to what Arendt calls the position of the spectator. Thanks to the faculty of imagination, the spectator can obtain a “viewpoint from where to look upon, to watch, to form judgements, or, as Kant himself says, to reflect upon” (Arendt, 1992, p. 44).

Imagination, therefore, which transforms a visible object into an invisible image, fit to be stored in the mind, is the condition *sine qua non* for providing the mind with suitable thought-objects; but these thought-objects come into being only when the mind actively and deliberately remembers, recollects and selects from the storehouse of memory whatever arouses its interest sufficiently to induce concentration; in these operations the mind learns how to deal with things that are absent and prepares itself to ‘go further’, toward the understanding of things that are absent, that cannot be remembered because they were never present to sense experience. (Arendt, 1978, p. 77)

So imagination in (P)AR is not only necessary for making present a world that does not exist yet, but also for judging the existing world. From this phenomenological perspective, since human beings cannot have first-hand experiences of everything, they cannot live without prejudices and, consequently, have to use their imagination to understand things that are absent because they have not been objects of their sense experience. In other words, they have to use their imagination to judge. According to Arendt, the task of politics is to contribute to dispelling such prejudices (Arendt, 2005, p. 99). From this perspective, for (P)AR participants in higher education to be able to observe, politically speaking, they need to withdraw from their positions as actors. This withdrawal makes sense only if they want to understand what the whole spectacle in which they are involved is about. To achieve this understanding, (P)AR
participants in their position as spectators have to ‘go through’ their first-hand experiences, as well as their prejudices, to be able to obtain a viewing position from where they can form their own judgements about the world. This ‘going through’ to obtain one’s own viewpoint is what Arendt calls ‘critical thinking’. As Arendt observes, “It is […] closely connected with particulars, with the particular conditions of the standpoints one has to go through in order to arrive at one’s own ‘general standpoint’” (Arendt, 1992, p. 44).

Arendt suggests that critical thinking “exposes itself to the ‘test of free and open examination’, [meaning by this] that the more people participate in it, the better” (Arendt, 1992, p. 39). Critical thinking, from this view, implies communicability (Arendt, 1992, p. 40). She claims that the art of critical thought cannot be learned without publicity, “without the testing that arises from contact with other people’s thinking” (Arendt, 1992, p. 42). Impartiality, then, is not the result of some higher standpoint that resolves a dispute:

impartiality is obtained by taking the viewpoints of others into account […] it is a viewpoint from which to look upon, to watch, to form judgements, or, as Kant himself says, to reflect upon human affairs. It does not tell one how to act. It does not even tell one how to apply the wisdom found by virtue of occupying a ‘general standpoint’, to the particulars of political life (Arendt, 1992, p. 42/44).

It can be inferred from Arendt’s understanding that for (P)AR participants as spectators to be prepared to judge, they have to think critically, that is, to ‘go through’ their first-hand experiences and prejudices in a public way. Only by taking into account the viewpoints of others can they obtain a viewpoint that allows them to judge. Because of the unpredictability of actions, and what they can bring about in the political realm, we are always confronted with things that we have not seen before. According to Arendt,

[t]his judgement that knows no standards can appeal to nothing but the evidence of what is being judged, and its sole prerequisite is the faculty of judgement, which has far more to do with man’s ability to make distinctions than with his ability to organise and subsume (Arendt, 2005, p. 102).

This is especially important in (P)AR as its participants have to make distinctions about what is right or wrong, good or bad, and appropriate or inappropriate, among other things, on the basis of what is being judged.
If we (P)AR practitioners are politically committed to advancing social justice from within higher education, we have to promote critical thinking in our university communities so that participants can dispel their prejudices and form their own judgments about the world. It is precisely the faculty of imagination that makes it possible to ‘enlarge our minds’ so that we can be prepared to compare “our judgement with the possible rather than with the actual judgement of others, and by putting ourselves in the place of any other man” (Arendt, 1992, p. 43).

Storytelling is an expression of human critical thinking, which, thanks to the faculty of imagination, allows us to bring back what happened in the past but is not present anymore (to remember) as well as to obtain a viewpoint based on the viewpoints of others who are not present. Through storytelling, we, (P)AR participants, can judge the world the way it is presented to us. Storytellers as critical thinkers in and about (P)AR in higher education have to expose publicly their standpoints about ‘the political’ in our university communities so that, in putting their fellow spectators in the (P)AR storytellers’ place, they can enlarge their minds and make judgements about what can be happening in contemporary higher education. If my stories can contribute to this process, I will be pleased.

Taking into account that a political commitment comes together with a collective responsibility, namely, the responsibility that a community takes “for whatever one of its members has done, or whether a community is being held responsible for what has been done in its name” (Arendt, 1968, p. 149), we (P)AR practitioners need to reflect upon what we are examining and publishing in relation to the political of (P)AR. Although competitive cultures such as those already installed in our universities are challenging academics’ attempts to publicly expose their viewpoints about higher education, we, (P)AR practitioners have to keep on finding new ways and paths to do it. This is a political commitment we have – not only to those with whom we live in this world and those who attempted to do so before we arrived, but also to those who come to our university communities in the future.
9.4. A final word about newcomers

While I was writing this thesis, I remembered when I arrived as a newcomer to the field of (P)AR in 1992. I also recalled the many times I have been a newcomer since then. Twenty years ago, I fully trusted what (P)AR practitioners told me in their books and journal articles about (P)AR. I tried to make sense of what I read about (P)AR in such publications. However, I found out that what those (P)AR practitioners were telling me was only part of the (P)AR story. By doing (P)AR with different university communities, I began to realise that (P)AR was not only about knowing how to do (P)AR but especially about what living with other human beings through (P)AR can mean. A very painful experience in a (P)AR initiative ten years after I started practising it gave me lots of things to think about on that matter. Drawing from my reflections during these last ten years, I have been trying to be more careful with the web of relationships I arrive into as well as to be more humble with what I know and what I don’t know. I have tried to understand much more and more deeply the viewpoints of the other human beings with whom I have been living my life. This way of approaching (P)AR has been helpful to live a better life with other people in various university communities at the same time that it has brought meaningful experiences into my life as a human being.

(P)AR practitioners embody, in some way, the permanent conflicting tensions between ‘the social’ and ‘the political’, and ‘the new’ and ‘the old’ in our university communities. While dealing with the tensions brought about by the winds of ‘change’ in contemporary higher education, (P)AR practitioners have been embedded in different types of struggles. We are challenged by struggles that range from trying to create discourses that are coherent and consistent with our own practices, to contesting undermining trends in higher education. I have understood through those struggles that the power of our words and actions always gives us the possibility to start again in various ways and moments in life. We are newcomers in relation to the new groups of university community members with whom we interact, in the debates we partake of in the field of sciences or elsewhere in academic life, or in the reflections we share in our publications. Due to the human condition of natality, we continue to be able to bring new beginnings to this never ending-changing world.
With this thesis I want to share the relevance of Arendt’s political thought and, particularly, her notion of natality for (P)AR in contemporary higher education. Personally, I want to acknowledge the new beginnings her words generated in my life as a (P)AR practitioner, an educator, a citizen and a human being. When people ask me what I was doing at the time I started my PhD thesis and I answered that I was reflecting upon kidnapping in Colombia from Arendt’s political thought, they were surprised. My answer generally prompted further questions about what motivated an educator like me to reflect upon kidnapping in my country and, afterwards, to write a thesis about (P)AR in higher education. My answer is quite simple. Holding Arendt’s hands, I realised that, like the victims of kidnapping, we, contemporary university community members, are living the sorts of lives lived by those under the yoke of external forces. However, through Arendt’s words I also realised that, different from the victims of kidnapping, we university community members have the possibility to bring about new beginnings through our actions and words as (P)AR practitioners. We can do this because, in contrast to the victims of kidnapping, we university community members can still appear in front of others in the public realm as a necessary condition for keeping ‘the political’ alive.
References


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