

Call for Papers

Special Issue of *The International Journal of Action Research*

Process Facilitation in Action Research

Action research is inherently processual. Since the early work of Kurt Lewin, action research has been understood as a dynamic interplay between inquiry and action, between reflection and intervention, unfolding over time within complex social fields (Lewin, 1946). Yet, while the cyclical and iterative nature of action research is widely acknowledged, the role of *process facilitation* – how researchers and practitioners facilitate, engage with, and navigate unfolding processes, remains comparatively under-theorized and under-explored.

This special issue invites contributions that foreground process facilitation as a core, relational, and ethically charged practice in action research. Across different traditions of action research, facilitation is often described through tools, stages, or methods. However, action research is merely an orientation to inquiry, and the art of facilitating action research processes is perhaps primarily, about ways of being present, responsive, and engage with others in situations marked by uncertainty, plurality, power asymmetries, and competing interests. From a process-oriented perspective, it is crucial to pay attention to what is emerging in the moment, to how participants respond and experience their situation and as well pay attention to time, pace, and rhythm, and to the co-production of inclusion and exclusion in the interactive process.

Why process facilitation now?

Contemporary action research is to an increasing extend situated in contexts shaped by eco-social crisis and societal and institutional acceleration. Action research is built on fundamental principles such as dialogue, democracy and participatory orientations to knowledge creation, mutual learning and change (Bradbury et al., 2015; Hersted et al., 2020; Greenwood et al. 2025). It is often argued that action research must be understood as a democratic and participative orientation to knowledge creation – knowing *with*, not *on*, people – and that our practical and ethical choices as facilitators and dialogue partners shape whether inquiries contribute to meaningful transformations.

Bradbury et al (2025) point out a series of “quality choice points” that emphasize, among other things, intention and transformative purpose, partnership, participative processes, sustaining outcomes, developmental reflexivity, and writing that “shows” the lived realities of participation. In addition, John Shotter (2005, 2006, 2009) argues for “withness-thinking” versus “aboutness-thinking” and as well argues for “knowing from within” in relational-responsive processes of dialogue as crucial ethical principles in action research (see also Hersted et al., 2026).

Seen through this lens, process facilitation becomes a key concern where the quality of the action research process is sustained (or undermined) through the ways how process is facilitated—very much depends on how facilitators hold purpose, convene participation, negotiate power, support learning, sustain momentum, and craft accounts that carry multiple voices forward. This requires a highly developed sensitivity for process and ways how we as human beings interact and communicate with each other. Rather than linear and instrumental methods, we call for papers that are written from an orientation sensitive to process (Gergen, 2025).

Facilitation as situated work: participation, ethics, and power

Recent work in participatory and collaborative action research highlights facilitation as a form of *situated practical work* that shapes participation, learning, co-creation of knowledge and shared ownership across stakeholders (McNamee & Hosking 2013; Emke et al., 2024). Skilled and successful facilitators are not neutral conduits; they actively contribute to creating spaces for mutual learning that are experienced as safe, legitimate, and meaningful, while simultaneously navigating ethical dilemmas, paradoxes, power relations, and institutional constraints. Research has shown that even explicitly inclusion-oriented processes may produce subtle exclusionary effects, underscoring the need for self-critical and reflexive approaches to facilitation (Glimmerveen et al., 2021; Phillips, 2011).

Temporality, timely action and emergence

In times of social acceleration (Rosa, 2021), an important concern in action research is *temporality* and *timely action* (Torbert & Taylor, 2008). Action research often unfolds in tension between planning and preparing, between deadlines and responsiveness, and between institutional time and lived, experiential time. Drawing on dialogical and relational traditions, facilitation can be understood less as executing a plan and more as *preparing conditions* for inquiry and action to emerge through process (McNamee, 2012, 2020). This perspective resonates with calls for “slow science” as a response to accelerated research environments, emphasizing attentiveness, reflexivity, and sustained engagement with complex social processes (Iedema, 2021). In this spirit, we invite papers that explore how differing temporal sensibilities – such as slow research, emergence, and iterative learning – can inform facilitation practices and shape what becomes possible within action research processes.

Facilitation as relational-responsive practice

This special issue foregrounds facilitation as a relational-responsive practice (Shotter 2005, 2010). From this perspective, facilitation is not merely about applying methods, but most of all about engaging ethically and responsively with unfolding processes of meaning-making. This resonates with David Coghlan’s (2019) work on action research as inquiry *in action*, where attentiveness to process, reflexivity, and ongoing sense-making are central to both knowledge production and organizational change.

We are particularly interested in contributions that explore how facilitators in action research, navigate tensions, dilemmas, and multiple voices in action research processes, and how different traditions - such as dialogical, systemic, narrative, critical, aesthetic, multimodal or relational-constructionist approaches - inform facilitation as practice. We encourage authors to reflect on how theories can function as *conversational partners* rather than as explanatory frameworks that claim to account for the whole, and how facilitation practices may open, or constrain, participation, inquiry, and learning.

Topics of interest

We welcome a wide range of contributions, including theoretical, empirical, methodological, and reflexive papers that engage with process facilitation in action research, such as:

- Conceptualizations of process and process facilitation in action research
- Process facilitation in action research as relational–responsive practice
- Temporality, pacing, rhythm, and experiences of time in action research
- Preparing versus planning in facilitation practices
- Ethical standards, dilemmas, and responsibilities in facilitation
- Power relations, multiple voices, and issues of inclusion and exclusion
- Tensions, conflicts, and competing interests in participatory processes
- Facilitation traditions and dialogical orientations
- Reflexive accounts of facilitation that foreground uncertainty, emergence, unpredictability, imagination and creativity
- Facilitation and “quality in action research” (e.g., how purpose, partnership, sustaining, and developmental reflexivity are enacted in practice)

We particularly encourage contributions that critically reflect on facilitation practices *in situ* and that move beyond instrumental approaches to make room for inquiry, curiosity, and the unforeseen.

Important dates:

Actions	Deadline
Distribution of the call	Feb. 2026
Submission of extended abstract*	May 15, 2026
Acceptance/rejection of extended abstract	June 15, 2026
Submission of full article**	Oct. 1, 2026
Peer review process	Oct. 2026 – Mid Jan.2027

Peer review sent to the authors	Mid Jan. 2027
Final article submitted	April 12, 2027
Expected publication	Fall 2027

* Extended abstract: maximum 1200 words (Format: extended summary, outlining headlines and sections for the content plus 3-5 theoretical references).

**Full article: maximum 7500 words (incl. references but excl. abstract and keywords).

The editors of this special issue are Søren Frimann (Aalborg University, Denmark), Ottar Ness (Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Norway) and Lone Hersted (Aalborg University, Denmark).

Submissions should be sent to: ijar@ikl.aau.dk with the following heading in the mail

IJAR-SI 2027 Facilitation in AR.

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