

## **Teachers researching their educational practice through action research in Learning Lab Overvecht**

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### ***Learning Lab Overvecht***

Learning Lab Overvecht is a value-driven network organization in which teachers and students from Utrecht University as well as several local societal partners are involved in order to work on the multiple challenges that the city of Utrecht faces, particularly in underprivileged neighborhoods like Overvecht. Whereas Learning Lab originally started as a (social) setting to social entrepreneurship, it gradually shifted as a means to implement Community Engaged Learning (CEL). The challenge for us as academic staff is to generate impact on the long term through our presence in the neighborhood. We do so by collaborating intensively with local societal partners like local social welfare institutions, several local social entrepreneurs, and local citizens. The challenge for the students is to create impact, either by doing action research or by co-creating and testing a prototype of a value case for a social enterprise, in both cases in collaboration with a local partner. After completing the class their local partners might decide to further develop the change or the prototype into a viable local community trust. Over the years, over a dozen of social enterprises have been started that currently are still active and thriving. Recent years, Learning Lab moved around from Overvecht to other underprivileged neighborhoods in Utrecht (Lombok, Kanaleneiland) and beyond (i.e. to Schalkwijk in the city of Haarlem) and is now on the verge of entering a new phase in its development, in scaling up and transforming to StadsLab; i.e. an interface between students and teachers and those in Utrecht who normally have no access to academic knowledge and research.

### ***Learning Lab's educational concept***

The collective of teachers that makes up Learning Lab has gradually developed the Learning Lab concept as an educational praxis, much inspired by the work of anthropologist Ingold (2000). More specifically, inspired by his concept of 'dwelling', in which he theorizes that people develop knowledge by active inhabitation in an environment and by constant attunement to that environment (Ingold, 2000). In that sense, our approach resembles the type of community engagement that Butin (2010) models as antifoundational; i.e. one that fosters a state of doubt as a prerequisite for thoughtful deliberation. Building on Ingold, Ross and Mannion (2012) explored the implications for curriculum making as an 'enactment of dwelling in places'. Through their work, we as CEL teachers aiming to create impact in underprivileged neighborhoods, realized that, as learning occurs through being actively immersed in a material world, we should bring the students to these neighborhoods and submerge them and ourselves in the realities of these challenging areas. In line with Ingold's ontology of dwelling, we see learning and development as primarily experiential (Ingold, 2000). Therefore, action learning (Zuber-Skerrit, 2002) is a central organizing concept in the courses of Learning Lab Overvecht. In doing so we adhere to Ingold's (2000) principle 'knowing as you go' rather than 'knowing before you go', and this implies that we invite our students to take action and learn while doing so by reflecting on it. For a further elaboration of the features of the emerging Learning Lab concept and its impact, see our recently published White Paper (Linde et al., 2020).

### ***Learning Lab Overvecht as a space for inquiry and research of our own educational practice***

The collective of teachers that constitutes Learning Lab Overvecht forms a community of inquiry that questions and researches its own educational practice by means of first person action research (Coghlan, 2019; Mcniff and Whitehead, 2010). In the modality of action research that we adopt, we use action research as an emergent inquiry process which is simultaneously concerned with bringing about change in the educational setting, developing self-help competencies of ourselves and adding to scientific knowledge (Coghlan, 2019). This is all an evolving process that is undertaken in a spirit of collaboration and co-inquiry.

As a first element of the action research process as applied in Learning Lab Overvecht, all lecturers/co-researchers engage in first person research aimed at challenging one's assumptions, particularly assumptions about teaching and learning. Journaling and logging of our educational experiences, thoughts and feelings are central elements of this research process, helping to align our actions as lecturers with the values we adhere to, both as a professional and as a person. For example, one of us tends to stress the importance of students taking ownership of their own learning and learning space, in this sense being a proxy for the kind of ownership a (social) entrepreneur asserts of his or her business-in-becoming. Questions that guided his first person research were 'what does handing over ownership mean for my role as teacher and how can I be sure and held accountable for what I do and what I don't to make space for them to acquire ownership?'. Extensive journaling helped him to become aware of discrepancies in his espoused theories and theory in use and helped him to align his educational praxis with his values. Gradually these reflections merged into a living theory about his own praxis as a lecturer that allows both him and the students to engage in a continuous and mutual process of intergenerational learning (Linde, 2014).

As a second element of the action research process, all lecturers of Learning Lab Overvecht convene on a regular basis to engage in a process of second person valuing amongst the team as a whole. This again is a highly reflective activity, in which we question and co-investigate collectively how we act in Learning Lab Overvecht, and what this means for what and how students learn. The intent of our action research is to challenge the epistemology of the educational system in place by questioning its a priori truths. As a team, we regularly go through several subsequent action research cycles each consisting of four phases (constructing, planning, doing and evaluating; Coghlan, 2019) in order to develop, perform and evaluate new educational interventions. For example, over the years we have envisaged changing the role of academic literature in action learning, and have developed interventions that invite students to co-develop a common set of criteria for grading. As a research methodology, action research proved for us an important means for innovating Community Engaged Learning, which over time has led to the development of the Learning Lab concept as described above. Additionally, as action research is one of the methods the students employ in the courses of Learning Lab, we as lecturers have similar learning experiences as the students have, which deepens our understanding of the students' learning experiences.

Next to the first and second person voice, insider AR also caters for a third person voice in which the researchers state their contribution to science. The latter activity is currently in progress. Over the

years, Learning Lab Overvecht has manifested itself as a transitional space for participants, including not only students and the varying array of local stakeholders and partners, but also lecturers.

## References

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