



Value creation through teacher-researcher collaboration in action research: engagement, agency and knowledge co-production

Ulrika Bergmark, Maria Löfgren, Lena Manderstedt & Annbritt Palo

To cite this article: Ulrika Bergmark, Maria Löfgren, Lena Manderstedt & Annbritt Palo (18 Dec 2025): Value creation through teacher-researcher collaboration in action research: engagement, agency and knowledge co-production, *Educational Action Research*, DOI: [10.1080/09650792.2025.2604653](https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2025.2604653)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2025.2604653>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 18 Dec 2025.



Submit your article to this journal 



Article views: 239



View related articles 



CrossMark

View Crossmark data 

Value creation through teacher–researcher collaboration in action research: engagement, agency and knowledge co-production

Ulrika Bergmark^{id}^a, Maria Löfgren^b, Lena Manderstedt^c and Annbritt Palo^c

^aDepartment of Health, Education and Technology, University of Technology, Luleå, Sweden; ^bDepartment of Culture and Media Studies, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden; ^cDepartment of Health, Education and Technology, Luleå University of Technology, Luleå, Sweden

ABSTRACT

This study is part of a larger action research (AR) project aimed at improving students' engagement with fiction and reading skills in Swedish and Swedish as a second language. In this paper, a theoretical framework of value creation in social learning spaces is used to critically explore teachers' professional learning and experienced value in AR in literature teaching. In total, 15 teachers from primary, secondary and upper secondary schools participated. Data included written teacher reflections and recorded focus group conversations. Reflections were collected at the start and end of the project. Focus group conversations were carried out once a month for three terms. The findings reveal that value was created through collaborative engagement of teachers and researchers, expanding teachers' professional knowledge on challenges, practice-informed adaptation of teaching and collective learning and shared knowledge. The study emphasises value creation in educational AR through sustained teacher-researcher collaboration, mutual engagement, agency and knowledge co-production. It highlights the role of long-term partnerships and calls for future research to challenge consensus, to include both quantitative and qualitative measures of learning and knowledge, and to engage with scientific texts as well as systematically explore professional learning throughout.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 11 July 2025
Accepted 23 November 2025

KEYWORDS

Action research; value creation; teacher professional learning; teacher-researcher collaboration; agency; knowledge co-production

Introduction

Teachers' opportunities for professional learning and development have varied over time, from single events such as lectures and workshops with external experts to initiatives based on collegial processes (Opfer and Pedder 2011). In Sweden, where this study was carried out, great emphasis has been placed on state-initiated professional development programmes, produced by the Swedish National Agency for Education in collaboration with researchers and enacted in the local context. Despite some positive results, challenges like lack of time, varying engagement, constrained flexibility and limited

CONTACT Ulrika Bergmark  ulrika.bergmark@ltu.se

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

continuation have been observed (Swedish National Agency for Education 2023), as well as meagre effects on students' learning (Holmlund, Häggbom, and Lindahl 2024). Research shows how the state-initiated initiatives mainly serve as a form of policy implementation (Kirsten 2020), primarily in line with the educational agendas of the OECD (Löfgren 2025). A mismatch between the teachers and the developed material has also been identified, leading to difficulties in engaging with the content and causing some teachers to distance themselves from the programmes (Johansson and Magnusson 2019). Randahl (2017) highlights that in these initiatives, the crucial initial stage, grounding the process in teachers' own identified needs, is absent.

However, there are other professional development processes, for example, action research (AR), creating opportunities for teacher and student learning, if the necessary conditions are met. AR represents a way of working together collaboratively, within a teacher group and with researchers. Such processes build on teacher-identified areas of development and are adjusted to the specific contextual situation, offering opportunities for value creation for teachers (Bergmark 2020a; Johannesson 2022). Marsh and Deacon (2024) report results from a longitudinal study exploring the impact on teachers' professional development through practitioner enquiry processes, closely related to AR. Such enquiry represents a valuable form of professional development as the teachers demonstrated greater confidence and competence in gathering and applying evidence as a result of participating. The teachers also gained insights into their own learning through reflection, which in turn influenced and changed their practice and contributed positively to teaching and leadership.

This paper draws on a theoretical framework of value creation in social learning spaces (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2020) to understand teachers' professional learning and experienced value when working with AR on literature teaching. On a general level, *value* in a social learning space is defined by the participants and relates to their care to make a difference for themselves and for others. Value can be about immediate outcomes and measurable results, as well as how learning creates meaning and change over time. Learning in social processes might have positive or negative effects. Therefore, value in this respect is not a benign concept, solely addressing positive outcomes (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2020). The value creation framework has been employed in other studies to theoretically understand teachers' professional learning in AR, for example, by Johannesson (2022) and Johannesson and Olin (2024).

The aim of this paper is to critically explore teachers' professional learning and experienced value in AR in literature teaching. The research questions are: How is value created? What are the challenges in the value creation process? How can different forms of value in a social learning space be understood?

Action research and knowledge creation

AR in schools often involves partnership between teachers, students and researchers, where teachers and students are seen as subjects and active participants. The purpose of AR is to create an understanding of teaching practice and to improve it, if needed (Kemmis 2009; Reason and Bradbury 2008; Scott, Clarkson, and McDonough 2012). It is collaborative in nature, integrated in teachers' daily work, teacher-driven, evolving over time and focused on enhancing students' learning (Lloyd and Davis 2018). Mentoring is

central to AR, and it is an ongoing process over an extended period and is based on teachers' development of their teaching by, for example, critically reflecting on their experiences (Bergmark et al. 2023; Henthorn, Lowden, and McArdle 2022). In AR, students may have a certain role by contributing valuable knowledge grounded in their experiences and by actively participating in the development of education (Bergmark and Kostenius 2018; Johannesson and Olin 2024).

Teachers' professional learning through AR can relate to different areas, such as teaching, research and collaboration. It may involve exploring new teaching methods, leading to increased teacher confidence in using research to enhance teaching and to promote collaboration with colleagues and researchers as a key driver of professional development (Bergmark 2020b). Johannesson and Olin (2024) found that building the work on research results and teacher-generated evidence contributed to an expanded knowledge of student learning. In AR, collaboration benefits from valuing and understanding the diverse competences and perspectives of the participating actors (Bergmark 2019). However, there can be problems with collaboration, for example, lack of time and resources and insufficient common understanding between key stakeholders (Allen, Howells, and Radford 2013; Bloomfield 2009). Collaboration with researchers plays a vital role in enhancing teachers' learning, yet it is often complicated by power imbalances and differing perspectives on what constitutes valuable knowledge (Aspfors et al. 2015). For collaboration to be effective, it is essential to acknowledge the expertise of all parties and to establish sustainable spaces for ongoing dialogue. Rather than imposing academic knowledge onto practice, researchers should focus on fostering mutual knowledge exchange (Bruce, Flynn, and Stagg-Peterson 2011). Johannesson and Olin (2024) emphasises the value of making learning goals explicit, especially when the content lies further from the teachers' existing experience, as in the case of working scientifically through AR.

Previous research has problematised the content and methods of AR in schools and central tenets such as knowledge and professional learning, collaboration and teacher-researcher roles. However, there is a need for deeper insight into how AR processes unfold over time when teachers actively collaborate with researchers throughout all stages of the process. This study seeks to contribute to that understanding.

Theoretical framework

A theoretical framework of value creation in social learning spaces is used (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2020). In contrast to communities of practice, which involve a stable group of people who share a domain of interest and learn by engaging in shared practice over time, a social learning space is a more open and fluid setting, where people from different backgrounds interact, exchange perspectives and create new insights without necessarily forming a lasting community. A social learning space is shaped by social dynamics as the relationships between individuals define and give meaning to the space; it is also characterised by participants' collective wishes to learn together, pushing knowledge forward. This occurs in a shared space where participants work together. According to Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2020), a social learning space can arise in various contexts and organisations where people engage in exchanging ideas, reflecting and learning together. In this paper, the focus is on an educational context

where researchers and teachers work together. The participants are part of the social learning space since they are *caring to make a difference, engaging in uncertainty* and *paying attention*. In this study, a social learning space relates to the teachers' wishes to enhance their literature teaching (caring to make a difference); teachers' willingness to challenge their teaching and professional learning, at the edge of their knowledge (engaging in uncertainty); teachers' attending to and learning from colleagues' feedback and support (paying attention). Three challenges in social learning spaces relate to understanding the difference participants want to make, elucidating worries to make them shareable with others and devoting to learn new things from others (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2020). In social learning spaces, learning involves agency, meaningfulness, and the value it creates. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2020) explain that social learning generates value when participants perceive that embracing uncertainty and being attentive enhance their capacity to make a meaningful difference. In this framework, the participants of a social learning space are the ones who define value (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2020).

The four learning modes inherent in social learning spaces comprise: framing, generating value, translating value and evaluating (see Figure 1). *Framing* entails intentionally forming a social learning space where people gather with the same initial sense of how they care to make a difference – collective agency. *Generating value* relates to participants exploring shared ideas and acquiring new understanding and knowledge, which leads to a group's further exploration. *Translating value* means to test and implement new ideas in practice. During this process, one value is translated into another based on a joint intention. *Evaluating* refers to judgement, smaller or larger: continuous reflections and adjustments as learning proceeds or as a separate activity of collecting and analysing data in a systematic sense, done by the participants or other professionals. The interaction between these four learning modes forms learning in social learning spaces. There might be a logic order of the learning modes: framing, generating value, translating value and evaluating, but according to Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2020) it is not a clear sequence as the processes can move in different directions. The modes can operate

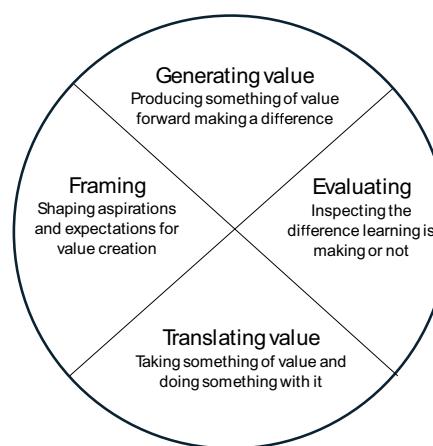


Figure 1. Four learning modes in social learning spaces (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2020, 63).

together, influencing each other mutually, but the authors argue for the value of seeing the modes as separate, being 'channels of agency' and representing 'different orientations to learning' (64). Accordingly, learning to make a difference is understood within each mode but also in relation to each other.

The value creation framework suits this study well, as it enables understanding of learning over time in AR. It captures how participants experience and create value, by focusing on both processes and results across multiple time layers. Since AR unfolds in cycles, the framework helps to document early value (e.g. ideas, reflections) as well as later changes in practice. Grounded in the participants' experiences, it aligns well with an AR approach that emphasises engagement.

Methodology

Context of the study and participants

This study is part of a larger AR project The Power of Reading, aimed at improving students' engagement with fiction and reading skills in Swedish and Swedish as a second language. The starting point of the project were teacher-identified challenges within three groups: primary (Grades 1–3), secondary (Swedish as second language) and upper secondary school. The project was a way to achieve teaching building on *research* and *proven experience*, promoted by the Swedish government (2010). This paper focuses on teachers' professional learning and perceived value, while other studies within the larger AR project examine student learning and effective teaching methods.

As part of the AR project, three groups were formed with five teachers each from primary, secondary and upper secondary schools, respectively. During three terms, they collaboratively explored and tested methods to enhance students' reading engagement and competence through shared literature in the classroom.¹ Around 300 students from 15 classes participated. The project was led by a project leader (first author) and three researchers (authors 2–4), each responsible for one teacher group. Researchers served as both mentors and researchers. Each group also had a lead teacher who coordinated the group and acted as a liaison with the researchers. Together, the four researchers and three lead teachers formed the project group, which met monthly (2023–2025) to plan the project, set focus group themes, share knowledge, analyse data and prepare publications.² Each teacher group met twice monthly for three terms, 2023–2024. One meeting, led by the lead teacher, focused on planning and discussing methods in relation to research and practice. The other, led by the researcher, included focus group conversations that generated empirical data. All 15 teachers agreed to participate in this study, which followed the Swedish Research Council's ethical guidelines (2025), including informed consent, confidentiality and the right to withdraw. Participants were informed orally and in writing and consent was obtained prior to the study. Ethical approval was granted Swedish Ethical Review Authority Dnr 2023-00409-01 (2023).

Data and analysis

Data included written teacher reflections and focus group conversations (see Table 1). Encouraging people to engage in written reflection can be an effective

Table 1. Description of empirical data.

Participants	Focus group conversations	Individual written reflection	Cross-group conversations
Primary school (5 teachers)	11 conversations for three terms (approx. 16 hrs)	Twice, beginning and end	Mixed groups, one occasion
Swedish as a second language (5 teachers)	11 conversations for three terms (approx. 16 hrs)	Twice, beginning and end	Mixed groups, one occasion
Upper secondary school (5 teachers)	11 conversations for three terms (approx. 16 hrs)	Twice, beginning and end	Mixed groups, one occasion

way to foster a deep understanding of a particular phenomenon. By putting thoughts into words on paper, writing helps make thinking more explicit and visible, facilitating clearer communication and insight (van Manen 1997). Reflections were collected at the start and end of the project. The first focused on prior experiences, challenges, successes and expectations regarding professional development, student learning and collaboration. The second addressed changes in teaching, student outcomes, alignment with initial expectations and possibilities for sharing results.

Focus group conversations are characterised by participants engaging in mutual discussion on a specific topic. It enables the examination not only of the content of the conversation but also of the dynamics of interaction among participants (Bryman 2016). Each teacher group participated in 11 focus group conversations where topics such as prior experiences with reading instruction, challenges and opportunities during method testing, student learning, professional development and future improvements were processed. Sessions lasted about 1.5 hours and was recorded and transcribed verbatim. In addition, at the end of the three terms of testing methods in the classroom, focus group conversations were conducted in cross-group constellations (teachers mixed from all groups) on experiences, lessons learned and how the project result will impact future teaching. The focus group conversations were conducted in Swedish and when quotes are used as examples in the findings section, they have been translated into English.

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022) was used to analyse the data, following their six-phase approach. Such analysis provides a structured, yet flexible approach, where phases overlap and there can be movement back and forth between the phases. The authors first familiarised themselves with the data through individual reading and note-taking, then collaboratively coded key elements related to value creation, its challenges and forms of value. Codes were grouped into nine initial themes, using tools like Excel and mind maps. These were refined and merged into four final themes, linked to the theoretical framework and supported by selected excerpts. The themes were discussed with lead teachers for validation. The final write-up integrates quotes and analysis, with Table 2 showing the connection between initial and final themes, example quotes and learning modes.³

Findings

The exploration of teachers' professional learning and experienced value in AR on literature teaching resulted in four themes, which will be presented below.

Table 2. The connection between initial and final themes, example quotes and learning modes.

Initial themes	Example Quotes	Final themes	Learning mode
Joint effort Formulating expectations	To me, <i>The Power of Reading</i> seems like the perfect professional development opportunity. I believe it will give me a great chance to refresh my subject knowledge and gain valuable didactic tips through collegial learning (written reflection 1, US, teacher 3).	Collaborative engagement of teachers and researchers	Framing
Building on practice-based experience Deepening engagement with challenges	A challenge I have encountered is finding the right type of text for the group of students I work with. They are primarily newly arrived youths with limited previous schooling. They have read some descriptive texts but have rarely engaged with fiction to any significant extent. There is also considerable variation within the group, so a text that is very challenging for some students may be far too easy for others in the same group (written reflection 1, S2, teacher 4).	Expanding professional knowledge on challenges	Generating value
Flexibility and care in adapting teaching methods Openness to student-initiated methods	Exit tickets have been beneficial for me as a teacher, as they provide quick feedback on how the students perceive the learning activities. They have also been important for the students, as they get to give immediate feedback and feel that I listen to them and that their opinions matter (written reflection 2, P, teacher 5).	Practice-informed adaptation of teaching	Translating value
Developing a scientific approach The power of the group Spreading of knowledge and ideas	The collegial learning, where we as teachers have jointly engaged with current research in the subject and relevant literature and then discussed it and exchanged experiences with colleagues in similar situations has been extremely valuable. It has given me the opportunity to reflect on my own practice, consider what I can improve, and think about how I can best provide my students with the conditions for joyful, engaging and well-structured reading development (written reflection 2, P, teacher 3).	Collective learning and knowledge sharing	Evaluating

Collaborative engagement of teachers and researchers

The first theme elucidates the value of cooperation and collaborative engagement between teachers and researchers in setting shared goals, addressing the importance of joint effort and formulating expectations. This theme relates to the learning mode *framing* (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2020) as it entailed deliberately creating a social learning space where the teachers and researchers came together, with a shared commitment to make a meaningful difference.

Teacher-identified challenges constituted the baseline of the AR project. For *primary school*: students who enjoy fiction when read aloud, but do not progress to independent reading; for *Swedish as a second language*: many students have never encountered fiction in school or at home and for *upper secondary school*: teachers face student resistance when introducing older literary works. To further frame the project, all participating teachers were, at the start of the project, invited to formulate individual expectations for their participation, which highlighted anticipation of professional development and improved student outcomes. Regarding professional development they wished for an understanding of teaching

practices in a deeper sense and through that, finding ways of improving their practice. A teacher wrote:

I hope to grow in my role as a teacher, with increased knowledge about teaching of reading, I may be able to identify aspects of my teaching that are worth keeping as well as those I can let go of. (written reflection 1, P, teacher 2)

Teachers also expected opportunities to try out new teaching methods. 'I expect to gain new tools for my toolbox, tools that have been tested by several colleagues and in a variety of student groups' (written reflection 1, US, teacher 1).

Collegial learning and to be inspired by colleagues were also anticipated by the teachers. 'I look forward to an exchange of experiences between colleagues. Hopefully, we can find keys to spark students' interest and curiosity about older literature' (written reflection 1, US, teacher 5). In addition, there was a wish for spreading the results to other colleagues. 'I also hope that my colleagues will have the opportunity to take part in the project's conclusions, so that the lessons learned do not remain isolated islands but instead create ripples that support our students' continued reading development' (written reflection 1, P, teacher 2).

The teachers hoped that the project would lead to enhanced learning and more specifically, a higher degree of motivation and engagement for reading and literature. One primary school teacher expressed. 'I also hope that the students will be given tools to further develop their reading skills and to build greater patience when it comes to reading slightly longer texts' (written reflection 1, P, teacher 2). In the Swedish as a second language group, it was important to promote students' reading of fiction, as they have limited previous experience. 'I want the students to gain access to the world of fiction and also be able to read books at home' (written reflection 1, S2, teacher 1). In upper secondary school, it was anticipated that the students would be inspired to read and understand older literature. 'I also expect a different kind of engagement from the students, and that they will feel it is meaningful and important to work with classic literature in school' (written reflection 1, US, teacher 1).

In addition to expectations of professional development and enhanced student results, another aspiration was the opportunity to partake in research, which would enable teachers' voices and experiences to be heard. 'To be involved in contributing empirical data to this important field, and thereby gaining insight into successful approaches, feels like a great privilege' (written reflection 1, P, teacher 1). More specifically, to participate in research would create opportunities for articulating teacher experience. 'By participating in *The Power of Reading* I believe that teachers' tacit knowledge about teaching can be illuminated from different perspectives' (written reflection 1, P, teacher 2).

Expanding professional knowledge on challenges

The second theme reveals how value was created by expanding the professional knowledge on the teacher-identified challenges through elaborating on practice-based experience. It illustrates how the challenges were explored through collegial reflections, laying the foundation for further development of teaching. This theme relates to the learning mode *generating value* (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2020) as the teachers investigated their thoughts on a shared topic, leading to new understanding and knowledge. This development prompted the group to continue their exploration of the subject.

As not all teachers were part of formulating the research application, the three groups, in the initial phase of the project, discussed the challenges stated in the application and how to handle them. Together, the teachers reflected on shared challenges but also on lessons learned from previous experiences, which could be relevant for the work ahead. One teacher wrote:

One way to reach all students is to read a shared book together through so-called guided reading. We discuss and process the book both before, during, and after reading ... Another effective method is group reading followed by book presentations in the form of PowerPoint presentations. (written reflection 1, S2, teacher 2)

In collegial conversations, by reconnecting with project goals (framing), the teachers also formulated what kind of result they envisioned in their classrooms.

Teacher 1: Like I said, we know what we want. We really want to see ...

Teacher 2: Engagement and that they read longer texts ... with sustained comprehension.

Teacher 1: Yes, exactly, to see ... that they really get hooked on a book. That moment when they're like, 'I just have to finish reading.' And you see it's break time, but 'Wait, wait, I only have three pages left.' That kind of immersion. That's what we'd love to see. (FG 2, P)

This quote represents a way to visualise what progress the teachers expected to happen by methods tried. Further, relating to the teachers' engagement and willingness to invest in the process, it was important that the topic of the AR would be decided by themselves, thus being relevant and at the core of their teaching. 'These are exactly the questions that are relevant to us, we've identified a problem: it's difficult to get the students engaged in older literature' (FG 5, US, teacher 2).

The teachers explored their previous experiences, shared and critiqued methods used, identified what worked or not, thereby learning from each other and forming a shared platform which would be important for the upcoming work in the classrooms. The teachers also problematised their previous experiences, underscoring that teaching is a complex business where different approaches are needed.

Practice-informed adaptation of teaching

The third theme illustrates how value was created when teachers adapted their teaching based on their practice-based experience and knowledge of the student group. This theme relates to the learning mode *translating value* (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2020) as the teachers tested and implemented new ideas, whereby one type of value was converted into another, guided by a collective intention.

Noticeable in this process, was a sensitivity to students' needs and preferences, which in turn fostered flexibility in adjustments. For example, in the Swedish as a second language group, as the students come from various cultural and religious traditions, literature was utilised to discuss ethical and moral questions. 'They did a dating role-play ... a reality-based conversation ... it's so much easier to talk about these things when it's based on a fictional character ... Otherwise, the discussion becomes quite constrained, people don't want to expose themselves' (cross-group conversation 1, S2, teacher 5). The teachers also expressed how the students needed time to engage in new methods.

'Allowing things to take time, some students need several opportunities to observe before they dare to try something new, such as drama. It's about trusting the process and not rushing' (written reflection 2, P, teacher 2). These examples of adaptations enabled the students to perform at their best, not restricted to one particular method, but multiple.

In addition, the teachers used different evaluation methods to capture student perspectives, for example, exit tickets. Such short evaluation was a valuable tool for the teachers to be informed about the students' perceptions as well as promoting student participation. Exit tickets also represented a method for elucidating students' learning progress, important for teachers' possibilities to adjust their teaching to the students' different preferences and knowledge. Various methods to process the literature were used: oral, written and creative.

We've alternated between discussions and creative activities ... I've received feedback through exit tickets and other forms of input. One student said: 'It was so heavy to read that book. I can't believe we made it through. Thank you for making it creative' ... It became incredibly clear how much they miss this kind of creative work. (cross-group conversation 1, US, teacher 2)

Another aspect that created value in the AR process was joint reflections during focus group conversations on the student's reactions, experiences and learning. As an example of the latter, artefacts created by students were uploaded to a digital platform, that was also accessible to the researchers. During a focus group conversation, a researcher initiated a reflection on student work uploaded on the digital platform.

What struck me when I looked at the materials, especially the films, was ... that to even dramatise an event, or an entire book for that matter, you really should have engaged with the book in some way. You need to have developed a sense of the tone of the book. (FG 9, US, researcher)

Being open to student-initiated ideas and methods created value. An example is where the students formed their own method of reading to each other. The teacher explained: 'So, it started with one student's initiative to read aloud ... and that became a trigger to what we do now' (FG 6, P, teacher 4). Accordingly, shared reflection on students' reactions, experiences and results became part of the AR process.

Collective learning and knowledge sharing

The fourth theme portrays how value was created through collective learning and knowledge sharing, grounded in a scientific approach and strengthened by collegial collaboration.. This theme relates to the learning mode *evaluating* (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2020) which encompassed both informal, ongoing reflections during the learning process, and more formal, structured evaluation involving systematic data collection and analysis, carried out either by the teachers or by the researchers.

In the AR project, different scientific tools for evaluation were used, for example, as previously mentioned, exit tickets, but also interviewing and observing. The teachers studied and reflected on interview transcripts together with the researchers. Initiating a conversation, one of the researchers said: 'Based on the interviews, I feel like the students seem incredibly stressed. Do you get that feeling too? ... many of them say they can't relax, that they prefer listening to audiobooks so they can multitask' (FG 3, US, researcher). The teachers confirmed the results from the student interviews by giving

additional examples of students listening at a faster speed and struggling to maintain focus on the same task for a longer time span: 'When they listen on YouTube, they have speed 1,5 but often 3' (FG 3, US, teacher 5). Through the insights gained by the interviews, the teachers learned about the students' perspectives and learning, which created opportunities for adapting their teaching, still with the goal of curricula and syllabi in mind. Using interview data resulted in data-driven school development.

Scientific methods of evaluating potential progress in students learning initially presented itself as a challenge to the teachers as illustrated by this example:

That's something we talked a lot about, that we probably won't be able to measure or clearly see whether their actual skills have improved or not. We don't have any measurable data to compare with. Instead, it's more of a sense, like noticing that they want to read more often, or that their stamina improves, those kinds of things that we hope we might be able to observe. (FG 3, P, teacher 1)

In dialogue with the researchers both within and across the groups, the ambiguities were somewhat cleared up. The teachers found it more feasible to assess change qualitatively through their observations, for instance, by noting whether students showed a greater desire to read, demonstrated increased perseverance in their reading and exhibited higher levels of engagement with literature during lessons. Measuring change quantitatively, particularly in terms of student learning, was a challenge that persisted throughout the project.

Despite initial challenges in measurement, the teachers soon engaged themselves into both formal and informal ways of following up. In order to track students' changes concerning their reading, not only quantitatively measurable evaluations were needed, but also qualitatively oriented assessments, which were largely based on teachers' documentation as well as their professional interpretation and assessment skills. Hence, in addition to methods for assessment established at the start of the project, interviews and exit tickets, other methods for evaluating were added. For example, the teachers in primary school read about and decided to implement a model of observing the children whilst reading.

You create something like a visual map of how the students are seated in the classroom ... you take notes on things like: is it always [Name] who runs to change their book three times during independent reading? And is it always [Name] who sits completely absorbed? Or does it vary? You end up with a clear observation tool, basically, that shows the reading situation in your class. How well do they seem to be able to concentrate. (FG 5, P, teacher 1)

Teachers' observations and evaluations in the classroom led to deep reflection on teaching and student learning, which also affected the ongoing progress. 'It has been valuable for us as teachers to observe, to really observe, take notes, document, and it has also led to a different kind of reflection on the lessons' (FG 10, P, teacher 1). The data from focus group conversations during the ongoing AR process showed many examples of informal methods of follow-up, performed by individual teachers. 'I asked, how many of you enjoy your current reading and almost all arms were raised in the air ... out of 20, maybe 17 were up. I can observe that ... not as many exchange books as frequently' (FG5, P, teacher 6). The example demonstrates a spontaneous quantitative (counting raised arms) and qualitative measurement (observation during individual reading).

Adhering to a scientific approach also means basing the teaching methods on previous expertise and research. The teachers read scientific and practice-based articles and books throughout the project. The reading and discussing of educational literature was experienced as valuable for the teachers. 'Being able to read educational literature and sit together like this, discussing it with colleagues, that's positive for oneself as well' (FG10, P, teacher 3). However, the texts were often practice-based and written in a popular science style, not original research. The teachers found scientific articles more challenging, partly due to language barriers (often written in English), academic style and a high level of abstraction. Despite the feeling that academic texts sometimes could be difficult to read, the teachers still engaged with the educational literature and when discussing findings, the content often confirmed teachers' experiences: 'The starting point was quite similar to our own dilemma' (FG 2, P, teacher 1). There were few examples of the opposite, that the texts challenged the teachers' work.

Part of the scientific approach was also the impact of the participating researchers. In the focus group conversations, the researchers confirmed and clarified teachers' experiences and posed challenging questions to the teachers to reflect on. In addition, they gave relevant examples from their research and teaching experience, mostly from teacher education. They initiated meta reflection, for example, 'You mentioned assessment, as a student may feel like you are being judged and that can make them nervous ... have you experienced that?' (FG 7, US, researcher) or summarised the focus group conversation: 'What type of knowledge do you think this represents?' (FG 8, US, researcher). In addition, the researchers brought their own research or other's research into the focus group conversations. For example, one of the researchers brought in theory part of the research application: 'We're using the concept of affinity space as a theoretical lens... We believe this approach might be beneficial, but we don't know for sure, that's exactly why we're doing this project. We want to test it and see' (FG 1, US, researcher). The input from the researchers led to reflections on students' learning and knowledge development.

As previously described, a scientific approach was important to develop collective learning and shared knowledge. In addition, the teachers emphasised the power of the group and agency. Each group met twice a month to discuss different themes. Group routines included a consistent structure: reflection on previous meetings, a review of the current situation and then a forward-looking plan. Each focus group had a selected topic for discussion, for example, 'Signs of student engagement'. This approach helped direct the focus of the discussions and clarified what to concentrate on between meetings, which created continuity and highlighted various issues. To hold on and persevere was especially important to maintain focus over time.

First, it went really bad. So, I quit, just like that. But now, I need to be part of a project to persevere, so I keep trying one more time or approach it from a different angle. And then suddenly it works ... The real challenge, I think, lies within myself: I need to understand that I shouldn't give up just because it doesn't go well the first time. (cross-group conversation 3, US, teacher 1)

The group conversations were built on democratic dialogue methods to ensure all teachers had a voice. A culture of sharing was developed where the teachers confirmed and supported each other, which supported agency, both collective and individual.

Teacher 1: Together, we became wiser,

Teacher 2: ... and stronger to face difficulties. You can laugh about how miserable and hopeless everything feels sometimes and that's such a relief. (FG 6, US)

To be inspired by the fellow teachers in the group was also central, giving opportunities for spreading of knowledge beyond the immediate project.

Another very positive aspect has been the ongoing conversations with colleagues, where we shared various activities, materials and challenges throughout the project. I believe these discussions and exchanges have the potential to enhance Swedish as a second language instruction across the entire municipality. (written reflection 2, S2, teacher 4)

At the end of the project, the teachers shared insights from the project, both in individual written reflections and in cross-group conversations. Certain aspects stood out, for example, the value of regular conversations, 'one insight is the power of regular conversations between subject colleagues. Meetings in schools are not always perceived as meaningful, but personally, I find that every single session during this project has been a real boost' (written reflection 2, US, teacher 5). The teachers had previous experiences of professional development initiatives, including state-initiated (mentioned in the introduction), but this AR project made a difference and became a game changer in their teaching. 'There's no comparison between my reading instruction before and after this project. From now on, I will always work with shared reading whenever possible. I've learned not to be afraid to try out different creative approaches' (written reflection 2, S2, teacher 5).

The fact that the project encouraged the teachers to be bolder in their teaching and not to shy away from challenges, was also reflected on in the final cross-group conversations at the end of the project.

Could this have happened without *The Power of Reading*? In my case, I don't think so. Many of us have said, during our conversations, that without *The Power of Reading* we might not have been as persistent in reading older literature. I've learned to stay on course and persevere, to not give up and to trust that it will work out. To dare taking on a challenge. (cross-group conversation 1, US, teacher 4)

Although the teachers gained many insights and lessons learned throughout the project, challenges in reading and teaching literature remained, for example, disparities in students' knowledge levels still existed: '... those who were already readers have become even better readers, so the gap is still there' (cross-group conversation 1, P, teacher 5). And literary terms were still difficult to grasp for the students. 'What I find challenging ... is the use of literary concepts. Things like theme, motif ... it's meant to be seamless, but it's difficult to incorporate them' (FG 7, US, teacher 1). Yet another lasting challenge was: 'Creative tasks in the classroom tend to take more time than a traditional book discussion' (cross-group conversation 1, US, teacher 2). However, the teachers have developed new methods to address and manage many of these challenges. 'My expectation was to gain more tools for my toolbox, and I certainly have. I'm absolutely delighted that I've had the

chance to try out these tools several times and now feel very comfortable working in this way' (written reflection 2, US, teacher 1).

Discussion

The aim of this paper is to critically explore teachers' professional learning and experienced value in AR on literature teaching, using the theoretical framework of value creation in social learning spaces (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2020).

The four themes were presented as a linear value creation process, from framing to evaluation via generating and translating value, but overlaps and movement between modes existed (see [Table 3](#)). For instance, in the generating process when the teachers shared their previous experience, they revisited the project's goals, reflecting a renewed framing. During translating, ongoing follow-up of students' responses affected how methods were adjusted, linking the process to evaluation. Thus, the modes interact dynamically while also following a linear sequence. This aligns with Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2020), who highlight the value of viewing the modes both independently and in relation to one another.

In relation to the first research question on *how value is created* in AR, the groups represent social learning spaces, signifying the characteristics of a such a space (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2020). The teachers adopted diverse approaches to enhance their teaching in their *caring to make a difference* for their students, starting with various teacher-identified problems they wished to address in the AR process. As the teachers wanted to make a difference for their students, the students in turn influenced the teachers' professional learning and development of teaching by articulating their experiences and suggestions of student-initiated methods. Therefore, the students played an important role in the development of teaching in this AR project, in line with other studies (Bergmark and Kostenius 2018; Johannesson and Olin 2024). Moreover, the teachers were *engaging in uncertainty* as they questioned previous experiences and were open to reframe and change their teaching, without knowing the result beforehand. They were *paying attention* when they learned from each other and from researchers, thereby trusting the process. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2020) emphasise that 'combined with the care to make a difference, the engagement of uncertainty provides an opening for agency' (57). In this study, agency was enhanced through the joint effort of

Table 3. Summary of experienced value presented in the four themes in relation to learning modes.

Themes	Summary of experienced value	Learning mode
Collaborative engagement of teachers and researchers	Engaged prospect of participation in professional learning Contributing to research Spreading the results to colleagues and beyond	Framing
Expanding professional knowledge on challenges	Sharing and exploring practice-based experience Extensive experiences – a strong foundation for work ahead	Generating value
Practice-informed adaptation of teaching	Adjusting and finetuning of methods based on teacher knowledge and students' needs Openness to student-generated ideas	Translating value
Collective learning and knowledge sharing	Adapting a scientific approach Reflection and collegial work Collective agency	Evaluating

teachers and researchers and the fact that the project was built on teachers' expectations, experiences and expertise. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2020) claims that *learning with agency* is especially important when a learning process is creative, innovative and responsive to the unknown (as in this study). Accordingly, *how the process was carried out in the AR* created value for teachers and researchers.

Research shows that AR can present challenges, such as limited time and resources, as well as a lack of shared understanding among key stakeholders (Allen, Howells, and Radford 2013; Bloomfield 2009). Power imbalances may also complicate collaboration (Aspfors et al. 2015). With this in mind, researchers and teachers worked deliberately to minimise asymmetrical power relations. For example, the project emanated from teacher-identified teaching challenges and the researchers responded to these challenges through their expertise. It made the project relevant for both parties. Also, teachers and researchers collaborated extensively, from pre-project to the end of the project, resulting in creating close relationships and learning about each other's needs and competences. In addition, teachers' and researchers' differing expertise were at the core of the project, for instance, teachers shared their previous teaching experiences, while researchers contributed their knowledge on the use of scientific tools. Different competences enriched the process and balanced the power dynamics, creating a space for collective learning and knowledge sharing, something previous research finds vital for collaboration to work well (Bergmark 2019; Bruce, Flynn, and Stagg-Peterson 2011).

Regarding the second research question on *challenges in the value creation process*, the findings emphasise ambiguities around scientific measurement and evaluation, at least initially, but also barriers to embrace original scientific research. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2020) present three key challenges in social learning spaces: clarifying intended impact, sharing concerns and engaging in mutual learning. The different challenges were evident in this study, but they were as showed in the analysis, paid attention to and handled throughout the process. Further, engagement with challenges was deepened in all four learning modes of the value framework. Challenges framed the project when teachers addressed issues and articulated the anticipated outcomes (framing), they informed the project's goal setting and in sharing experiences and motivated testing methods collectively (generating and translating value). The challenges were furthermore the point of reference when evaluating the success of tested teaching methods (evaluating).

Based on the data analysis, there were also new challenges that arose during the AR. The focus group conversations were practice-oriented, often confirming teacher experiences and leading to consensus, as the teachers did not question each other's thoughts and experiences. In the data, we have found very few examples, if any, of direct confrontation and explicit questioning. This may imply that engaging in uncertainty (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2020) sometimes is problematic even if a social learning space is functioning well. However, the researchers posed challenging questions and gave another perspective on matters, as they have a kind of outsider perspective in comparison with the teachers who are colleagues. In addition, the researchers are used to critical questioning through their academic training, which enriched the meta reflection on experiences.

The challenge of reading original research persisted throughout the project. The participants preferred practice-based literature or popular science texts where research

was presented in a more accessible way. Furthermore, the researchers presented their work in a popular format in oral presentations. The teachers' hesitancy to read original research in English remained an ongoing challenge, and it might be problematic, given that education is expected to be based on scientific evidence and proven experience, promoted by national mandate (Swedish government 2010). In relation to Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2020), it may be suggested that this area did not appear to generate much value. However, the authors claim that it is the participants in a social learning space who define if value has been realised or not. The teachers never explicitly brought up this challenge, but it appeared in the data analysis across all groups. This finding emphasises the importance of practicing the art of reading original research texts and collaboratively processing their content in action research, with the aim of potentially translating research into teaching practice.

In response to the third research question on *how different forms of value in a social learning space can be understood*, the findings highlight how value was created in different areas such as teacher-researcher collaboration and teachers' professional learning. According to the value creation framework (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2020), learning is understood as experiences of making a difference and is produced within a social space. In this study, what counts as value is based on the participants' experiences. Relating to collaboration, engagement between teachers and researchers was vital as was the shared goal setting, underlining the value of a joint effort and expressing aspirations at the beginning of, and throughout, the process. The teachers expanded their learning of how to build on practice-based experience to handle challenges in teaching. Their professional learning was enhanced through teachers' and researchers' use of scientific tools, such as, exit tickets, observations, interviews and reading of educational literature. The results from the reflections and evaluations impacted the ongoing process of developing teaching methods, adjusted to students' needs and knowledge. This is in line with Marsh and Deacon (2024) and Johannesson and Olin (2024) who found that teachers strengthened their ability and confidence in both gathering and applying evidence in practice, when working with AR. The teachers in this study found the AR meaningful and relevant for their teaching, compared to other professional development initiatives they previously participated in that did not lead to real change. The value of the project also related to the collective learning and knowledge sharing that occurred. The collective processes were important as driving forces and for perseverance, to focus the goal to develop teaching according to expectations. These findings echo previous results in AR (Bergmark 2020a; Johannesson and Olin 2024; Marsh and Deacon 2024), highlighting that AR is an effective form of professional development.

Conclusion

The study reinforces key principles of educational AR as value creation, particularly the importance of teacher-researcher collaboration, mutual engagement, agency and knowledge co-production. It adds to the field by emphasising the value of long-term partnerships between teachers and researchers, building on both teacher and researcher expertise. The findings highlight the significance of collaboration throughout the entire process, from identifying challenges, project planning and implementation to analysis and dissemination. However, the study points to the need for future AR to challenge

group consensus, to include both quantitative and qualitative measures of learning and knowledge based on teachers' observations and professional judgements and to promote engagement with scientific literature as well as systematically explore professional learning throughout the process.

Notes

1. Methods included book talks, paired/group reading, reflective journals, drama, creative activities and film, all adapted to students' age and reading levels.
2. The AR project was formed jointly by the four researchers and the three lead teachers, resulting in a research application which was approved.
3. Participating teachers from the three action groups are labelled P (for Primary, Grades 1–3), S2 (for Swedish as second language, Grades 4–9) and US (for Upper secondary school).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The work was supported by the Skolforskningsinstitutet [2022-00023].

ORCID

Ulrika Bergmark  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7952-5111>

References

Allen, Jeanne Maree, Kerry Howells, and Ruth Radford. 2013. "A 'Partnership in Teaching Excellence': Ways in Which One School–University Partnership Has Fostered Teacher Development." *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education* 41 (1): 99–110. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2012.753988>

Aspfors, Jan, Mikael Pörn, Lisbeth Forsman, Petri Salo, and Gunilla Karlberg-Granlund. 2015. "The Researcher as a Negotiator – Exploring Collaborative Professional Development Projects with Teachers." *Education Inquiry* 6 (4): 27045–27416. <https://doi.org/10.3402/edui.v6.27045>

Bergmark, Ulrika. 2019. "Rethinking Researcher-Teacher Roles and Relationships in Educational Action Research Through the Use of Nel Noddings." *Ethics of Care Educational Action Research* 28 (3): 331–344. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2019.1567367>

Bergmark, Ulrika. 2020a. "The Role of Action Research in Teachers' Efforts to Develop Research-Based Education in Sweden: Intentions, Outcomes, and Prerequisite Conditions." *Educational Action Research* 30 (3): 427–444. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2020.1847155>

Bergmark, Ulrika. 2020b. "Teachers' Professional Learning When Building a Research-Based Education: Context-Specific, Collaborative and Teacher-Driven Professional Development." *Professional Development in Education* 49 (2): 210–224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2020.1827011>

Bergmark, Ulrika, Ann-Charlotte Dahlbäck, Anna-Karin Hagström, and Sara Viklund. 2023. "Leading with Care: Four Mentor Metaphors in Collaboration Between Teachers and Researchers in Action Research." (Translated from the Swedish and revised by the authors). *Educational Action Research* 32 (3): 475–492. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2023.2229870>

Bergmark, Ulrika, and Catrine Kostenius. 2018. "Appreciative Student Voice Model - Reflecting on an Appreciative Inquiry Research Method for Facilitating Student Voice Processes." *Reflective Practice* 19 (5): 623–637. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2018.1538954>

Bloomfield, Di. 2009. "Working Within and Against Neoliberal Accreditation Agendas: Opportunities for Professional Experience." *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education* 37 (1): 27–44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13598660802530503>

Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. 2022. "Conceptual and Design Thinking for Thematic Analysis." *Qualitative Psychology* 9 (1): 3–26. <https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000196>

Bruce, Catherine D., Tara Flynn, and Shelley Stagg-Peterson. 2011. "Examining What We Mean by Collaboration in Collaborative Action Research: A Cross-Case Analysis." *Educational Action Research* 19 (4): 433–452. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2011.625667>

Bryman, Alan. 2016. *Social Research Methods*. 5th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Henthorn, Rachel, Kevin Lowden, and Karen McArdle. 2022. "It Gives Meaning and Purpose to What You Do': Mentors' Interpretations of Practitioner AR in Education." *Educational Action Research* 32 (2): 169–185. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2022.2106260>

Holmlund, Helena, Jenny Häggblom, and Erica Lindahl. 2024. "The Boost for Reading: Effects on Classroom Practices and Student Outcomes." *Working Paper No. 2024:6*, Uppsala: Institute for Evaluation of Labour Market and Education Policy (IFAU). <https://www.ifau.se/Forskning/Publikationer/Rapporter/2024/leder-laslyftet-till-battre-skolresultat/>.

Johannesson, Peter. 2022. "Development of Professional Learning Communities Through Action Research: Understanding Professional Learning in Practice." *Educational Action Research* 30 (3): 411–426. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2020.1854100>

Johannesson, Peter, and Anette Olin. 2024. "Teachers' AR as a Case of Social Learning: Exploring Learning in Between Research and School Practice." *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 68 (4): 735–749. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2023.2175253>

Johansson, Maria, and Peter Magnusson. 2019. "Läsläuftet I Praktiken: Analys Av Ett Textmaterial Och Ett Lärarlags Samtal [Reading Promotion In Practice: Analysis Of A Text Material And A Teaching Team Conversation]." *Acta Didactica Norden* 13 (1): 6. <https://doi.org/10.5617/adno.5632>

Kemmis, Stephen. 2009. "AR as a Practice-Based Practice." *Educational Action Research* 17 (3): 463–474. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650790903093284>

Kirsten, Niels. 2020. "A Research Review of Teachers' Professional Development as a Policy Instrument." *Educational Research Review* 31:100366. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2020.100366>

Lloyd, Margaret, and James P. Davis. 2018. "Beyond Performativity: A Pragmatic Model of Teacher Professional Learning." *Professional Development in Education* 44 (1): 92–106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2017.1398181>

Löfgren, Maria. 2025. "Literacy and Multimodality for All. Swedish Educational Policy for Reading and Writing in the Age of Global Assessments." *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2025.2493321>

Marsh, Brian, and Mark Deacon. 2024. "Teacher Practitioner Enquiry: A Process for Developing Teacher Learning and Practice?" *Educational Action Research* 33 (3): 508–527. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2024.2313085>

Opfer, V. Darleen, and David Pedder. 2011. "Conceptualizing Teacher Professional Learning." *Review of Educational Research* 81 (3): 376–407. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654311413609>

Randahl, Anna-Charlotta. 2017. "Läsläuftet Och Lärarnas Lärande: En Studie Av De Kollegiala Samtal." In *Svenskans Beskrivning 35 [The Swedish National Literacy Initiative and the Teachers' Learning. A Study of the Collegial Conversations]*, edited by Eva Sköldberg, Maria Andréasson, Eva Adamsson, Helén Lindahl, Frida Prentice, Sofie Lindström, and Maria Sandberg, 287–300.

Reason, Peter, and Hilary Bradbury, eds. 2008. *The SAGE Handbook of AR: Participative Inquiry and Practice*. 2nd ed. London: Sage.

Scott, Anne, Philippa Clarkson, and Andrea McDonough. 2012. "Professional Learning and AR: Early Career Teachers Reflect on Their Practice." *Mathematics Education Research Journal* 24 (2): 129–151. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13394-012-0035-6>

Swedish Ethical Review Authority. 2023. "Läskraft: Framgångsrika arbetssätt och undervisningsmetoder för att främja elevers läsengagemang och läskompetens." *Dnr*.

Swedish Government. 2010. *Swedish Education Act, SFS 2010:800*. Stockholm.

Swedish National Agency for Education. 2023. *Kollegialt Lärande Fyra år Efter Skolverkets Lyft: Rapport 2023:1 [Collegial Learning Four Years After the Swedish National Literacy Initiative by the Swedish Ministry of Education]*. Stockholm: Skolverket. <https://www.skolverket.se/download/18.61b3fbe71870b8fd1c1380/1680096049995/pdf11347.pdf>.

Swedish Research Council. 2025. *Good Research Practice*. <https://www.vr.se/english/analysis/reports/our-reports/2017-08-31-good-research-practice.html>.

van Manen, Max 1997. *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*. Ontario: Althouse Press.

Wenger-Trayner, Etienne, and Beverly Wenger-Trayner. 2020. *Learning to Make a Difference: Value Creation in Social Learning Spaces*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.