

William R. Torbert's Legacy in Transforming Doctoral Education through Collaborative Developmental Action Inquiry

An Intergenerational tribute

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Abstract: This article honors the legacy of William R. Torbert (1944–2025) through an examination of his final collaborative project: a three-year initiative to reimagine doctoral education through Collaborative Developmental Action Inquiry (CDAI). Torbert's final message, delivered three months before his death, serves as the point of departure for a reflexive exploration of an intergenerational research community of European doctoral students and faculty engaged in non-traditional action research dissertations. We show how Torbert's concepts of first-, second-, and third-person inquiry/practice, timely action, and developmental friendship shaped our collective work and enabled a more relational, reflexive, and practice-based approach to doctoral development. By reflecting on this emergent inquiry community, we illustrate how CDAI can deepen individual research processes while also supporting institutional shifts toward more participatory and developmental forms of doctoral education. The article concludes with implications and perspectives for universities seeking to cultivate action-research-oriented doctoral cultures.

Keywords: Bill Torbert, action research, collaborative learning, doctoral education, intergenerational learning

El legado de William R. Torbert en la transformación de la formación doctoral mediante la investigación-acción colaborativa para el desarrollo: un homenaje intergeneracional

Resumen: Este artículo rinde homenaje al legado de William R. Torbert (1944–2025) mediante el análisis de su proyecto colaborativo final: una iniciativa trienal para reimaginar la formación doctoral mediante la Investigación-Acción Colaborativa para el Desarrollo (IADC). El mensaje final de Torbert, pronunciado tres meses antes de su fallecimiento, sirve como punto de partida para una exploración reflexiva de una comunidad de investigación intergeneracional de estudiantes de doctorado y profesorado europeos que participan en tesis doctorales de investigación-acción no tradicionales. Mostramos cómo los conceptos de Torbert de indagación/práctica en primera, segunda y tercera persona, acción oportuna y amistad para el desarrollo moldearon nuestro trabajo colectivo y propiciaron un enfoque más relacional, reflexivo y práctico para el desarrollo doctoral. Al reflexionar sobre esta comunidad de indagación emergente, ilustramos cómo la IADC puede profundizar los procesos de investigación individuales, a la vez que apoya cambios institucionales hacia formas de formación

doctoral más participativas y orientadas al desarrollo. El artículo concluye con implicaciones y perspectivas para las universidades que buscan cultivar culturas doctorales orientadas a la investigación-acción.

Palabras clave: Bill Torbert, investigación-acción, aprendizaje colaborativo, formación doctoral, aprendizaje intergeneracional.

Bill's Final Message

In July 2025, William R. Torbert—hereafter Bill—was unable to travel to Copenhagen for what would have been his final Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management (AOM). Yet his presence was profoundly felt through a message he prepared for the Professional Development Workshop (PDW) entitled *Advancing Action Research for Doctoral Students and Early Career Faculty*. At the opening of the PDW, Carol Gorelick read the message aloud:

Action research is not merely a method; it is a way of life. It asks of you a first-person willingness to inquire into your own experience, a second-person commitment to mutual inquiry with peers and colleagues, and a third-person capacity to generate insight that may be of service more broadly. This is not an orthodox discipline. Its vitality lies in its ambiguity, in its invitation to learn from both alignment and error. Institutions may not always support this work, yet it is possible—and powerful—to pursue it nonetheless. You are called to cultivate a “super-commitment” to your own development, to your relationships, and to timely, transformative action. You will not get it “right”—and that’s precisely the point. May you engage this path not just for knowledge, but for wisdom-in-action.

The most important research question in our lives is the future—and yet most conventional research neglects it entirely. Action research invites you to live into this future now, by embracing the complexity of the present moment and the subtle lines of influence streaming in from both past and future. This is not simply about data collection. It is about becoming increasingly capable of timely action—of responding with awareness, presence, and care. Mistakes are not to be avoided but integrated; our methodology must include them. Inquire into your relationships, your legacy, your own death—not morbidly, but generatively. Begin repairing what is unfinished. Begin composing your life, not as a perfect product, but as a practice of ongoing inquiry. That, too, is action research.

The room fell into profound silence. Here was the voice of a scholar-practitioner who had devoted his life to action research, speaking about death near the end of his life—not as an abstraction, but as something he was actively composing through ongoing inquiry. His call to “begin repairing what is unfinished” and “begin composing your life” carried the weight of lived wisdom. This was Bill, engaging in first-person inquiry/practice throughout the final stretch of his life.

Just shy of three months later, on October 21, 2025, Bill passed away at his home in Boston at age 81, just as he had predicted he would.

Bill's Core Contributions to Action Research

Bill dedicated his career to developing and practicing action research as a way of simultaneously changing and understanding organizations. His work was, in the truest sense, heretical—challenging orthodox approaches to research, education, and organizational change and development while offering generative alternatives grounded in decades of lived practice.