

Richard Ennals: An Itinerant Scholar Who Found His Home in Action Research

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Abstract: This article traces the intellectual journey of Richard Ennals, situating his wide-ranging work within a coherent, action-oriented framework. Although describing himself as an academic “tourist,” Ennals’ contributions reveal a consistent commitment to dialogue, social engagement, and learning across differences. Drawing on influences from Ludwig Wittgenstein, Stephen Toulmin, and Scandinavian workplace research, he developed an approach that integrates language, practice, and organisational development. His early work on socially useful artificial intelligence evolved into a focus on both tacit knowledge and language games. Through extensive collaboration in Sweden and Norway, he helped advance dialogue conferences, development coalitions, and participatory organisational change. Ennals’ later writings highlight the role of silence, denial, and performance in understanding work-life practices. The article argues that his legacy offers a powerful conceptual and methodological toolbox for contemporary action research, grounded in humanistic values, practical engagement, and a commitment to democratic dialogue.

Keywords: Social engagement; artificial intelligence (AI); learning from differences; language games; democratic dialogue

Richard Ennals: Un erudito itinerante que encontró su hogar en la investigación-acción

Resumen: Este artículo traza la trayectoria intelectual de Richard Ennals, situando su extensa obra dentro de un marco coherente y orientado a la acción. Aunque se describe a sí mismo como un académico „turista“, las contribuciones de Ennals revelan un compromiso constante con el diálogo, la participación social y el aprendizaje basado en la diversidad. Inspirándose en Ludwig Wittgenstein, Stephen Toulmin y la investigación escandinava sobre el entorno laboral, desarrolló un enfoque que integra el lenguaje, la práctica y el desarrollo organizacional. Su trabajo inicial sobre inteligencia artificial socialmente útil evolucionó hacia un enfoque en el conocimiento tácito y los juegos de lenguaje. Mediante una amplia colaboración en Suecia y Noruega, contribuyó al avance de conferencias de diálogo, coaliciones para el desarrollo y el cambio organizacional participativo. Los escritos posteriores de Ennals destacan el papel del silencio, la negación y el desempeño en la comprensión de las prácticas de conciliación entre la vida laboral y personal. El artículo sostiene que su legado ofrece un valioso conjunto de herramientas conceptuales y metodológicas para la investigación-acción contemporánea, fundamentada en valores humanísticos, la participación práctica y el compromiso con el diálogo democrático.

Palabras clave: Participación social; inteligencia artificial (IA); aprendizaje basado en la diversidad; juegos de lenguaje; diálogo democrático

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1. Introduction

I worked with Richard Ennals² for over twenty years. He was a generous individual of wide intellectual curiosity. Peter Totterdill's (2025) obituary offers a tribute to Richard with which I fully concur. He was particularly supportive when I was working on my PhD in the late 1990s, *Involvement at Work: A Study of Communicative Processes and Individual Involvement in Organizational Development* (2001). In the mid-2000s, we were both faculty members in the NTNU PhD programme EDWOR (Enterprise Development and Work Life Research). Over the years, we edited several books together: *Creating Collaborative Advantage: Innovation and Knowledge Creation in Regional Economies* (2012), *Higher Education in a Sustainable Society: A Case for Mutual Competence* (2015), *Applied Social Science Research in a Regional Knowledge System: Balancing Validity, Meaning and Convenience* (2016), and *Coping with the Future: Rethinking Assumptions for Society, Business and Work* (2018). The cited titles serve to demonstrate the breadth of our convergent intellectual interests. Together, we also initiated the *European Journal of Workplace Innovation*, where Richard served as Editor-in-Chief until the very end.

When Richard passed away just before Christmas 2024, following a prolonged period of declining health, I immediately felt the desire to pay him a tribute. During the year since, I have reflected on whether it might be possible to capture the essence of his thinking in a single sentence or concept. This has proven difficult, as Richard was a person of remarkably wide interests. Should I emphasise his concept of learning from differences, his engagement with socially useful AI, his activism, or his strong international outlook? None of these, on their own, seemed sufficient to capture the core of his thinking. However, there still is such a core.

In addition to the intellectual core that I will argue below, I believe that what bound his diverse engagements together was a deep humanistic conviction—a belief that informed his scholarship, his activism, his moving from one disciplinary field to another, and his social engagement and relationships with others. The itinerant nature of Ennals' scholarly trajectory resonates strongly with the core commitments of action research that emphasizes situated inquiry, the integration of theory and practice, and knowledge generation through collaborative engagement within specific contexts. For a scholar working across multiple institutional and disciplinary settings, action research provides a consistent methodological framework—one that enables continuity of purpose while remaining responsive to local conditions and practices. To this I think Richard's oeuvre is a consistent and relevant contribution, as I will seek to outline in this article.

2. Background and engagement

2.1 Family and education

Richard Ennals was born on September 16, 1951, in Bath, Somerset, England, to David Hedley Ennals (1922–1995) and Eleanor Maud (Caddick) Ennals. Richard was the eldest of four children. Richard's father, David Ennals, was a prominent British Labour Party politician who served as Secretary of State for Social Services from 1976 to 1979, in addition to holding

2 Richard Ennals (September 16, 1951 – December 10, 2024)