Action Research: Traditions and Perspectives

Mark Smith and Michele Doyle

In the literature, discussion of action research tends to fall into two distinctive camps. The British tradition - especially that linked to education - tends to view action research as research oriented toward the enhancement of direct practice. For example, Carr and Kemmis provide a classic definition:

Action research is simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out (Carr and Kemmis 1986: 162).

Many people are drawn to this understanding of action research because it is firmly located in the realm of the practitioner - it is tied to self-reflection. As a way of working it is very close to the notion of reflective practice coined by Donald Schön (1983).

The second tradition, perhaps more widely approached within the social welfare field - and most certainly the broader understanding in the USA is of action research as 'the systematic collection of information that is designed to bring about social change' (Bogdan and Biklen 1992: 223). Bogdan and Biklen continue by saying that its practitioners marshal evidence or data to expose unjust practices or environmental dangers and recommend actions for change. In many respects, for them, it is linked into traditions of citizen's action and community organizing. The practitioner is actively involved in the cause for which the research is conducted. For others, it is such

commitment is a necessary part of being a practitioner or member of a community of practice. Thus, various projects designed to enhance practice within youth work, for example, such as the detached work reported on by Goetschius and Tash (1967) could be talked of as action research.

Origins

Kurt Lewin is generally credited as the person who coined the term 'action research':

The research needed for social practice can best be characterized as research for social management or social engineering. It is a type of action-research, a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, and research leading to social action. Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice (Lewin 1946, reproduced in Lewin 1948: 202-3)

His approach involves a spiral of steps, 'each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action' (*ibid.*: 206). The basic cycle involves the following:

This is how Lewin describes the initial cycle:

The first step then is to examine the idea carefully in the light of the means available. Fre-

quently more fact-finding about the situation is required. If this first period of planning is successful, two items emerge: namely, "an overall plan" of how to reach the objective and secondly, a decision in regard to the first step of action. Usually this planning has also somewhat modified the original idea. (*ibid.*: 205)

The next step is 'composed of a circle of planning, executing, and reconnaissance or fact finding for the purpose of evaluating the re-

sults of the second step, and preparing the rational basis for planning the third step, and for perhaps modifying again the overall plan' (*ibid.*: 206). What we can see here is an approach to research that is oriented to problem-solving in social and organizational settings, and that has a form that parallels Dewey's conception of learning from experience.

The approach, as presented, does take a fairly sequential form - and it is open to literal interpretation. Following it can lead to practice that is 'correct' rather than 'good' - as we will see. It can also be argued that model itself places insufficient emphasis on analysis at key points. Elliott (1991: 70), for example, believed that the basic model allows those

who use it to assume that the 'general idea' can be fixed in advance, 'that "reconnaissance" is merely fact-finding, and that "implementation" is a fairly straightforward process'. As might be expected there was some questioning as to whether this was 'real' research. There were questions around action research's partisan nature – the fact that it served particular causes.

The decline and rediscovery of action research

Action research did suffer a decline in favour during the 1960s because of its association with radical political activism (Stringer 2007: 9). There were, and are, questions concerning its rigour, and the training of those undertaking it. However, as Bogdan and Biklen (1992: 223) point out, research is a frame of mind – 'a perspective that people take toward objects and activities'. Once we have satisfied ourselves that the collection of information is systematic, and that any interpretations made have a proper regard for satisfying truth claims, then much of the critique aimed at action research disappears. In some of Lewin's earlier work on action research (e.g. Lewin and Grabbe 1945) there was a tension between providing a rational basis for change through research, and the recognition that individuals are constrained in their ability to change by their cultural and social perceptions, and the systems of which they are a part. Having 'correct knowledge' does not of itself lead to change. Attention also needs to be paid to the 'matrix of cultural and psychic forces' through which the subject is constituted (Winter 1987: 48).

Subsequently, action research has gained a significant foothold both within the realm of community-based, and participatory action research; and as a form of practice oriented to the improve-

ment of educative encounters (e.g. Carr and Kemmis 1986).

Exhibit 1: Stringer on community-based action research

A fundamental premise of community-based action research is that it commences with an interest in the problems of a group, a community, or an organization. Its purpose is to assist people in extending their understanding of their situation and thus resolving problems that confront them....

Community-based action research is always enacted through an explicit set of social values. In modern, democratic social contexts, it is seen as a process of inquiry that has the following characteristics:

- It is *democratic*, enabling the participation of all people.
- It is *equitable*, acknowledging people's equality of worth.
- It is *liberating*, providing freedom from oppressive, debilitating conditions.
- It is *life enhancing*, enabling the expression of people's full human potential.

(Stringer 1999: 9-10)

The action research process works through three basic phases:

Look - building a picture and gathering information. When evaluating we define and describe the problem to be investigated and the context in which it is set. We also describe what all the participants (educators, group members, managers etc.) have been doing.

Think - interpreting and explaining. When evaluating we analyse and interpret the situation. We reflect on what participants have been doing. We look at areas of success and any deficiencies, issues or problems.

Act - resolving issues and problems. In evaluation we judge the

worth, effectiveness, appropriateness, and outcomes of those activities. We act to formulate solutions to any problems. (Stringer 1999 : 18; 43-44;160)

The use of action research to deepen and develop classroom practice has grown into a strong tradition of practice (one of the first examples being the work of Stephen Corey in 1949). For some there is an insistence that action research must be collaborative and entail group work.

Action research is a form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of those practices and the situations in which the practices are carried out... The approach is only action research when it is collaborative, though it is important to realise that action research of the group is achieved through the critically examined action of individual group members. (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988: 5-6) Just why it must be collective is open to some question and debate (Webb 1996), but there is an important point here concerning the commitments and orientations of those involved in action research.

Conclusion

One of the legacies Kurt Lewin left us is the 'action research spiral' – and with it there is the danger that action research becomes little more than a procedure. It is a mistake, according to McTaggart (1996: 248) to think that following the action research spiral constitutes 'doing action research'. He continues, 'Action research is not a 'method' or a 'procedure' for research but a series of commitments to observe and problematize through practice a series of principles for conducting social enquiry'. It is his argument that Lewin has been

misunderstood or, rather, mis-used. When set in historical context, while Lewin does talk about action research as a method, he is stressing a contrast between this form of interpretative practice and more traditional empirical-analytic research. The notion of a spiral may be a useful teaching device – but it is all too easily to slip into using it as *the* template for practice (McTaggart 1996: 249).

References

- Due to space limitations the exhaustive list of references for this article are not published however to obtain a full anecdotal reference list and to explore a variety of links and resources connected with this article visit the authors web page at www.infed.org
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Action Research Links

There exist numerous web sites, journals (print and electronic), information and studies presented by School Boards and Departments of Education and University Web Pages world wide devoted to various aspects of Action research, Collaborative research Reflective Practice and the various research tools most commonly associated with these models. Two very interesting starting points include ARExpeditions- Action Research at www.arexpeditions.montana.edu and Action Research Journal at Sage Publications <http://arj.sagepub.com> Both are easily accessible by typing the titles as printed above. Other links include The Collaborative Action Research Network at <http://www.did.stu.mmu.ac.uk/carn>, Teacher Leaders Network (South East Center for Teaching Quality) located at www.teacherleaders.org, ERIC Clearinghouse on Teacher Education at <http://www.eric.ed.gov/>, Teachers College Record at www.tccord.org Action Research International at www.scu.edu.au/schools/gem/ar/ari/arihome.html, Educational Researcher (American Educational Research Association at www.aera.net) HYPERLINK "http://www.aera.net" and Research Questions that Teachers ask at http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/go/clic/ques_r30.html

Participatory Action Research and Aboriginal Epistemology

Raven Sinclair

To our readers: I close my editorial responsibilities with *Teaching and Learning* by implementing an editor's prerogative to include in this issue selected passages from an article by Raven Sinclair. As an advocate for social justice within indigenous communities Raven continues to make strides within transformational challenge opportunities by implementing participatory action research in settings that require intervention and social change. I was introduced to this article by a friend of his at a conference I attended on aboriginal issues in education. The message contained therein has influenced my work as a teacher, counsellor, professor, researcher and storyteller. Unfortunately space does not permit a full reprint of Ravens article. I have tried to carefully select passages that do justice to the intent and message without disrupting the flow. In my life as a storyteller I borrow to share not claim to own. For the complete article and list of references refer to the web site described at the end.

PAR is guided by Paulo Freire's concept of 'conscientization' - this is a critical approach to liberatory education that incorporates helping the learner to move towards a new awareness of relations of power, myths, and oppression. By developing critical consciousness in this way, learners work towards changing the world.

The participatory action research approach (PAR) to community issues is a culturally rel-