

## REVIEW ESSAY

# ACTION RESEARCH: BOUNDARIES, TENSIONS, AND DIRECTIONS

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Hollingsworth, Sandra, ed. (1997) *International Action Research: A Casebook for Educational Reform*. London: The Falmer Press, 337 pp. ISBN 0 7507 0605 8 (paperback).

Carson, Terence R. and Dennis Sumara, Eds. (1997) *Action Research as Living Practice*. New York: Peter Lang, 358 pp. ISBN 0 8204 3865 0 (paperback).

While thematic and rhetorical continuities exist, these two volumes explore the boundaries of the theory and practice of action research in highly individual ways; this, despite editorial efforts to introduce umbrella headings and suggest itineraries. The Hollingsworth collection (hereafter *IAR*) distributes its twenty-seven texts unequally into four broad perspectives on action research: historically constituted discourses, political/epistemological debates, personal/pedagogical perspectives, cross-professional approaches; there is a final chapter overview. The Carson and Sumara texts (hereafter *ARLP*), on the other hand, eschew boundaries or milestones. Sustained attention is given to personal narratives and other genres in an attempt to 'reconceptualize' action research as a living practice where 'epistemological concerns are conflated with ontological ones' (*ARLP*, p. xviii).

While I am not yet convinced that post-structural approaches that ignore critical meta-narratives should have unique access to educational reform, the debate regarding the horizons of educational research in a post-modern world is a very necessary one. My approach to this review is thus to consider the ways in which educational action research is represented in these volumes, especially where critical and post-structural approaches are thrown into contrast or opposition.

### Politico-historical reconstruction

Susan Noffke flags the recurrent historical theme of the 'contradiction' between democracy and social engineering in the US. Noffke, though, has nothing to say about the current political and industrial agendas schooling in her country. Is this absence real or a product of her 'humanistic' (see below) stance to teacher research, or due to some other factor? In an earlier paper Noffke (1994) also has little to say about the emancipatory role of action research in the US. David Hursh, however, suggests not only the existence of a socio-economic efficiency model of education in the US but also suggests how it must be combated by local initiative and political awareness and discourses. He describes two local collaborative efforts between teachers and schooling management to create alternatives to government led reform.

Social and political inequalities are definitely on the agenda of John Elliott's discussion (*IAR*) of curriculum developments in Britain. Propelled by Lawrence Stenhouse's Humanities Project in the mid-1970s, change is now being arrested by a new ethos of economically sanctioned schooling controlled by school managers, cost-efficiency and standards-driven models that has emerged since the implementation of a prescriptive national curriculum in 1989. This had had an impact on the academy, 'academics appear to be caught between merchandising action research as a form of personal salvation from the woes of life in schools and merchandising it as a way of optimizing performance in a functional role' (*IAR*, p. 27). The practical reality of this mercantilistic approach and the academic dilemma signalled above are explored in the chapter by Adams et al. (*IAR*) on university-school collaboration in urban inner city UK. The authors show how the School Effectiveness Movement in the UK (under the impetus of the 1989 national curriculum) has brought pressure to bear on schools and individuals attempting to implement the bureaucratic discursive frameworks of government education policy. Adams et al. look at successes, tensions and failures in their own project to bridge gaps in social justice and heighten appreciation of individual teacher efforts.

The threads of managerialism, political debate and academics are also present in Kemmis and Grundy's chapter. An emergent centralised managerialism in education and a discourse-practice non-correspondence in the academy is threatening the vitality of action research in Australia. Government pursuit of central control does not hold sway universally. While still lacking a coherent discourse, it has been paradoxically the growing public recognition of the limits of centralised government control of schooling (fed also by local initiative) that have contributed to the somewhat fragmented development of action research in Austria as depicted by Herbert Altrichter (*IAR*).

### Political commitment or professional growth

Noffke and Brennan refer to two options in action research: one informed by emancipatory approaches and the other sensitive to local circumstances and personal growth. The authors plump for the latter as more sensitive to the individual circumstances of practitioners and as a palliative to marginalising those who refuse to take up globalised political concerns (*IAR*, p. 67). Gitlin and Hadden also refer to the political (Kemmis) or humanist (Zeichner) contrast, linking 'educative research' to the latter and preferring its chalk-face approach to emergent awareness and its avoidance of 'a priori political commitment' (*IAR*, p. 73). The paper by Chayanuvat and Lukkunaprasit (*IAR*) on an initial project in classroom-centred research is politically 'light' in this sense.

Now, I think the suggestion that emancipatory approaches are top heavy with political discourse and too distant from classroom concerns is wrong. Both in ideological terms (Carr and Kemmis 1986) and practical terms (cf. Grundy and Kemmis 1981) this is simply not the case. A number of other authors refer to broader social and political issues as central to the action research paradigm. Thus, in his discussion of action research on environmental education in Italy, Mayer (*IAR*) suggests that one of the central problems for 'facilitators' of action research is to induce practitioners to engage in debate about the relationship between their practice and broader social constructs. By so doing, they will be able to 'deconstruct their common sense' (p. 120). The 'dynamic networks' created through school and community in the Environment and Schools Initiative Project (ENSI) alluded to by Mayer, are outlined in the paper by Mair and Posch (*IAR*). Recorded against the backdrop of the current social and educational malaise of political change in South Africa, Davidoff (*IAR*) openly acknowledges the discrepancies and the palpable effects of macro-social political decision-making. The enormity of the problem facing schools does not allow simplistic classroom-centred awareness raising of first local and then global issues; the macro-social issues are patently obvious and discourses of change are only beginning to be written.

### Collaborative voice: Discourse on method

Collaborative writing has an increasingly important place in the panoply of educational research genres as 'a genre that lingers between the cracks between an academic essay and a personal letter' (*IAR*, p. 49). Houtekamer, Chambers, Yamagishi and Striker (*ARLP*) explore 'sacred' and culturally distinct personal histories beyond the pale of 'orthodox' action research parameters in an 'effort to reflect upon what we do without becoming paralyzed with self-consciousness' (p. 141). A disposition to question publicly the status quo within a community of

fellow practitioners and to do so in a sustained fashion also appear as criterial features of teacher as 'sojourner' in Oberg et al. (*ARLP*). 'The complexities between the experiences of engaging in action research, the shifting results of those experiences and appropriate means of representing them' (*IAR*, p. 49) are the questions Hollingsworth, Dadds and Miller address in their collaborative response to the notion of the divide between personal and professional change. The constraining and liberating power of available discourses for meanings of research (*IAR*, p. 57) discussed here are then picked up by Luce-Kapler (*IAR*), who explores the notion of these constraints as she struggles to reconstruct the 'human' essence of a three-person dialogue where her own 'voice' predominates; Kapler also attempts through poetic reframing to question feminist conceptions of research process.

### Cross-cultural tensions

Liberatory and transformative discourse are not the intellectual property of the industrial West. For example, Fals Borda (1979) has articulated a sensitive critique of colonialist tendencies in applying action research in third world contexts. Geoffrey Smith (*ARLP*) gives perspective to this dialogue in his reflections on the West's ideological impasse at the fiction of personal autonomy (p. 266). For Smith, social constructionism and interpretive approaches fall into the homocentric fallacy of 'world erected and focused on man' (p. 270). John Willinsky refocusses the religious undertones in Geoffrey Smith's piece in his suggestions for 'accountability' in action research. Willinsky sees a need to investigate notions of 'causality' in schooling and educational reform as part of a program to overcoming undemocratic prejudices.

Eastern reports of action research show little awareness of an ideological conflict. The overview of environments of action research in Malaysia provided by Phaik-Lah (*IAR*) makes no mention of this, however, the paper is generally thin on substantive discussion of epistemological, ethical and methodological issues. Yatta Kanu's (*ARLP*) observation on action research in Pakistan is equally thin on the notion of ideological conflict. However, Kanu finds indigenious, colonial and neo-colonial obstacles to educational development requiring consideration in applying methodological principles to local contexts (*ARLP* p. 183). The same absence of ideological conflict is present in Fosas (*IAR*) on the implementation of collaborative teacher education in rural Mexico. To my mind, it is only in the discussion by Socket and Zeller Mayer (*IAR*) of the specifics of implementing a critically oriented US-based course of teacher education in Israel that anything approaching explicit cultural conflict surfaces. Zeller Mayer points to the importance of the role of historical context in the construction of identity in

Israel and the lack of a stable notion of social homogeneity as distinctive features for negotiating the import of educational programs in Israel (p. 389).

### Theory and adhesion

In focusing on the need to avoid the recycling of common sense and 'romantically' celebrating practice (see also Huberman 1996), Melanie Walker (*IAR*) reminds practitioner-researchers that so-called common experiences are always 'structured by particular cultures and settings' (p. 138). Theory can provide frameworks and categories to recapture 'the good sense in common sense' (p. 138) and this discourse of good sense needs to be articulated jointly by practitioner and academy to avoid merely celebrating difference. Wells and Wells (*IAR*) see this joint discourse being created through 'negotiation among equals' requiring change in traditional orientations and participant roles (p. 158) for students, teachers, and community and attention to writing which 'serves as a more powerful tool than oral discourse in the maintenance of social networks and structures' (p. 152).

However, even attention to theory and equal discourse will have no effect unless the individual is personally motivated to change; as Day (*IAR*) points out, 'Teachers change or do not change according to whether they perceive a need, diagnose a problem, and conceive of a response to the problem that is both within their intellectual and emotional capacity, and appropriate their personal, educative and ideological perspective and the context in which they work' (p.201). This 'imperviousness' of the individual to 'better' models also appears elsewhere in papers that attend less to global discourses and more to the situated individual perspectives of collaborative action, especially those in the Sumara and Carson volume. It is not, therefore, simply the case that a rational/textual view (*read, discuss, be convinced*) can operate as sufficient commitment for some practitioners. Nor, in fact, as Goodson (*ARLP*) points out, will some objective notion of personal resonance do. Notions of identity or lifestyle 'shopping' certainly will operate for others. Goodson sees in the emerging discourses of teacher as intellectual, scientist, and researcher, three selves of the practitioner: educative, ideological, and personal. These selves are revealed in verbal and non-verbal responses to teaching situations and react in distinct ways to notions of adhesion as discussed above. The academy may thwart the movement to clarification of these roles by presenting research in the romantic light of 'escape and transcendence' (p. 217).

### Text as catalyst: Commonplace locations

Text as commonplace location for interpretive inquiry and deconstruction of self is visualised by a number of authors. Mary Doll describes the self and other transformations achieved as non-reading undergraduates reluctantly grapple with oral recorded readings of Virginia Woolfe's *To the Lighthouse*. The struggle with text and self becomes a locus for 'flight' for teacher and students and transforms a solitary (reading) experience into a communal discovery. Similar reluctance is present in Clifford and Friesen's chapter (*ARLP*), where a text whose narrative of a dying community partly mirrors local school and community experience helps restore some to the joy of abandonment in literature. Dahlia Beck, meanwhile, tackles this notion of memory—personal and collective—around the notion of curriculum teaching and constitution. Through excerpts from a children's text, *Something from Nothing*, Dahlia questions the role of memory in the transmission and transformation of curriculum to her elementary school teachers-in-training; questions which link to her own desire for continuity and location.

The notion of text as catalyst for community reflection and action in social contexts is crucial also for Brennan and Noffke's paper where data is a 'catalyst for mutuality and reciprocity... to further the communicative action of members of the group' (*ARLP*, p. 26). Student teacher textual biographies reveal the semantic spread of key culture terms, e.g. *discipline*, whose validity and emergence must be contested in socio-historical contexts. Thus, the notion of diachrony or memory, if you will, returns to situate discourse and text in social history and the issue of mentor-like relationships in educational contexts mediated by text surfaces in strikingly similar fashion in all three accounts.

For Sumara and Davis text as 'commonplace location' (*The Giver* by Lois Lowry), becomes the focus of a collaborative school-community reorientation. Involving community in choices of text for school students which discuss culturally 'marked' practices, e.g. sexuality, becomes a powerful tool in overcoming institutional fears of provocation, rebuke, and alienation of parents. The authors also invoke the notion of complexity and complicit systems, articulated in the Gaia hypothesis and other post-Kuhnian approaches to ecological scientific thought and practice, to describe the nature of the human sub-systems involved in socio-educational processes. Expectations are also at issue in Lock and Minarik (*IAR*) who mediate student-oriented exploration of gender as socially constructed through the playground interactions and prejudices of boys and girls in school. Open discourse on reciprocal attitudes reveal not only the existence of induced stereotypes but also the potential for renegotiated contacts and encounters.

### Freud, Lacan, Brecht and pedagogy

History, semantics, and text genres also find a place in the interface of psychoanalysis, drama, and pedagogy that articulates the next group of chapters. Derek Britton revisits his own earlier text and finds not only 'truths' about his unconscious self but new meaning in his re-reading of himself through the Lacanian notion of the divided 'I'. Educational practice generates an inexhaustible potential for learning and involves 'not the transfer of knowledge but the creation of conditions that make it possible to learn, the creation of an original learning disposition' (*ARLP*, p. 55); educational action research becomes psychoanalysis as living practice.

Freud's voices (Anna and Sigmund) also feature in Britzman and Pitt's article on transference in pedagogy. Teachers must learn about and control their own conscious and subconscious conflicts and not allow them to be reenacted in new situations. Without critical examination identities, desires and difficulties of students become dissociated from those of the educator. This situation is reenacted for Britzman and Pitt themselves as they find student-teacher responses to texts embodying powerful social taboos regarding sexuality do not match their 'assumed' interpretation—a powerful reminder that texts can be mere stages for posing problems not content for cure of pre-conceived problems. There is a need to resist 'our own impulse to self-mastery that seems to require us to view the students as in need of our correction' (p. 74).

Terence Carson (*ARLP*) relates the experience of teacher educators engaging students in reflective discourse through journal writing as an instrument for fathoming the relationship between the development of teaching skills and self-conscious understanding of self; overcoming resistance both individual and institutional to reflective practice is a parallel historical and synchronic issue. As O'Hanlon (*JAR*) points out, texts types vary across and within the professional journal, responding to the local contingencies and experiences of the individual. While useful as a tool for examining identities and constitutions of self, the journal has limits as Carson indicates. Lacan's notion of divided self and dynamically reconstructed ego has two implications for teaching: the desire for professional identity can never be fulfilled (since the unified self is an illusion) and one's identity as teacher is largely constructed unconsciously, that is, beyond one's control.

Paula Salvio (*ARLP*) adds a distinct coda to this particular discussion about notions of self in educative contexts with her recourse to Brechtian *geste* to produce moments of interruption and estrangement 'so teachers can insert political, pedagogical, or epistemological commentary on the emotional life in their stories' (p. 254). Theatrical improvisation based on a selective re-symbolising of critical moments in narrative autobiographies help teachers 'begin

to recognize emotions as a viable path toward understanding the relationships between their pedagogic intentions and the curriculum in their classrooms' (p. 261). The notions of self identified through dramatic or psychoanalytic technique draw inspiration from the force of analogy to provide models of interpretation in educational inquiry.

### **Discourse and practice: Non-correspondences and hermeneutics**

A series of critical incidents articulate a set of reflections on self and identity as Couture, Grimmet and Miller note significant non-correspondences between discourse and practice enunciated by a shifting self. The critical incident in Jean-Claude Couture's narrative is the sacking of a colleague and a sense of his personal betrayal. This event provokes a flood of reflections on the notion of self and selves set in the visual context of the day-to-day journey from home to school. Couture's piece is partly cathartic and partly evocative; memorable stories of whatever ilk will resonate for others (p. 116).

The critical incident in Peter Grimmet's piece comes through an attempt to transform 'didactic professor' into 'learner-focused' teacher educator. This practice-what-you-preach question resurfaces in other narratives in this volume, including Miller's (see below. Critical reflection on apparently successful practice reveals a number of non-correspondences between discourse and practice, including the realisation that 'what I had characterized "communal discourse" was, in fact, classroom talk about a series of disconnected ideas' (p. 127). Moreover, the activism of group work when exposed to the open critique of student journals reveal individuals who do not necessarily wish to be forced into communal collaboration.

The need for academics to critically re-read their normalised discourse is apparent also in Janet Miller's contribution to the conversation. Here academic self-criticism stems from her collaboration with five classroom elementary teachers and her own ongoing concern to avoid her 'academically induced tendencies to romanticize, generalize, or technologize the purposes and forms of collaborative action research' (p. 199). It is in the reciprocal 'disruptive' interpretations of teacher and researcher concerning classroom realities that the dynamics of transformative research are realised. A critical incident serves to crystallise for the researcher her intellectual role as guide and mentor. Her cohort's apparent willingness to adopt a packaged curriculum stuns Miller into silence; their decision-making ignores all the 'theoretical positions and collaborative research goals' (p. 209) she believed she had inculcated. Though the outcome is the happy recognition that the dialectic of the decision making

process had in fact reflected the lived experiences of negotiated interaction between teacher and researchers, there was also a realisation of the distance that potentially separates abstract notions of critical discourse and practical teacher realities (p. 206).

Notions of textual hermeneutics married to action research inform Hans Smits' recall of the five aporias present in the narrative restoration of self. Dissatisfied with the theoretical notion of reflection and the procedural aspects of action research (p. 283), Smits searches for a method to cope with the multi-layered narratives essential to identity, 'one's self and identity grow not out of self-reflection but rather out of a narrative possibility, that is, of story that has the potential to be told' (p. 284). The problematic issues (aporia) that emerge in response to this program all refer in direct or oblique ways to notions of truth, validity, authority, and responsibility. Smits identifies aporia of reproduction, authority and emancipation, conversation, theory and practice, and ethics as genuinely problematic issues in the constitution through discourse of meaning, understanding, action, and knowledge, concluding that 'To the extent that action research can contribute to solidarity, to developing spaces for conversation and dialogue in order to support the creation of self and identity, then that is indeed a living practice, one inspired by hermeneutics' (p. 293).

## Metaphors

The power of action research to animate fields other than education is now a sufficient commonplace as is the role of metaphor (see Oldfather & West 1994), both of which surface in the report by Montgomery-Whicher (*ARLP*) on analogies between art and phenomenological research. The grounding of artistic observation and research in the everyday lived world, the orientation toward a 'renewed' contact with the world, and the aim to relearn to see, constitute for the author three parallels across both fields (p. 217).

Metaphor as tool for re-focussing is also discussed in Thaler and Somekh (with contributions from Draper and Doughty *ARLP*) who address the notion of agency in organisational change noting particularly how professional roles are explored through recourse to metaphor as a technique to identify and 'figure' identities 'allow the starting of a process of clarification without freezing conceptions in a definition' (p. 324). Losito and Pozzo (*IAR*) find metaphor a useful tool in delineating their respective researcher roles in a collaborative project with heads of schools (under the auspices of the European-funded MOHD, see below).

### **Cross-professional perspectives**

Action research has had an increasingly positive reception in nursing and health care, including cross-cultural contexts of political and social inequality and women's empowerment (Khanna 1996). Less stridently political accounts in industrialised contexts point to other individual and social tensions in the micro-social contexts of the nursing community. Learning to re-see brings its own pains and emotions as David Jardine's (*ARLP*) shows in a critical encounter between nursing researcher and patient in an interview context which throws up unexpected emotions, reactions and fears as the human reality of suffering is exposed under 'clinically' inappropriate attitudes and methods. Angie Titchen (*IAR*) adds social depth to the notion of transformative nursing practice and education in her documentation of the tensions, events, and encounters of a collaborative approach to patient-centred nursing in a British hospital ward where power relationships craft expectations and behaviours.

Somekh and Thaler contribute texts to both volumes on the nature on organisational change under the auspices of a European funded Management of Human and Organisational Development (MOHD). In looking at organisational hierarchies and agency for change in different management contexts, the authors note that those advocating and promoting change tend to operate outside of traditional roles and thus position themselves politically within their respective organisations. Overcoming resistance to change requires that change agents, whether externally facilitated or not, have principled access across hierarchies to all players. In economically oriented environments such as company sites, transforming existing power relationships brings with it its own tensions. That vocational contexts are not anathemic to collaborative research methods is also illustrated in the paper by Winter *et al* who show how competency-based assessment, a guiding principle for the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (UK), may be happily married to an action research approach in developing personal competency statements.

### **Conclusions?**

We seemed to have touched every possible base in the ball park. What is educational action research? Sumara and Carson attempt to answer this question: 'We have come to believe that any form of inquiry that seeks to learn about the complexly formed, ecologically organized relations of lived experience are, of course, forms of inquiry, forms of research. When these forms of research are specifically organized around questions of learning, understanding, and/or interpretation, they are, in the broadest sense, concerned with education and, thus, may be considered educational. When they self-consciously attempt to alter

perception and action they are transformational. Any form of inquiry that fulfills these three criteria, we believe, constitutes a form of action research' (*ARLP*, p. xxi). This definition in its broad scope naturally embraces both critical and post-structuralist responses to the demand for educational reform in a post-modern context of dynamically constructed identities. Does it respond in its texts to the needs of practitioner-researchers trying to locate personal and professional growth in the myriad of conflicting pressures they experience? Does it allow for a community response to social injustice and democratic educational reform? Critical theorists will contest the nature of post-modern scepticism to the meta-narratives of social injustice and democratic goals. They will also contest, I believe, the efficacy of personal narrative for educational reform. I question also the assumption that methodological, epistemological, and ethical boundaries are reified fictions but that conclusion remains to be authenticated by further encounters with action research as living practice.

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