

Chapter Three

How do I learn how to do Action Research?

Jean I think this is where this form of thought - our group - has a particularly strong contribution to make. I think the really powerful contribution lies not in the offering of this way of thinking as an orthodoxy. Some people could look at it like that - that we are requiring people to adopt this form of thinking. The power of this form is that it really is emancipatory, because of itself it lets people exercise their power of freedom to question the form, and in that I think it is unique. This is where the idea of the 'good order' of the form lies for me, in that it is not a coercive form.

Jack That is the difference I feel between what we're doing and what I experience in my dealings with other people in other parts of the country. At that conference I was telling you about, I felt that I was going back into the coercive form. Now, I think that the generative form, because it has got that break in the sense that it cannot rest upon what I, for example, say, is particularly powerful. We might agree that I've originated one idea about educational theory being constituted by the descriptions and explanations that you and I produce for our own practice. That is, I think, an original thought, but it is a liberating one in the sense that I can't impose on others to create a form of practice that is not grounded in their own intentionality.

Jean You see, this is the same problem that Gorbachev had. You enable other people to exercise their own freedom such that they can exercise that freedom against you. This is the old paradox of freedom, of liberating people, and you take on that responsibility when you enter the game.

This chapter is in two parts: first, what advice the literature offers in terms of how to do action research; second, advice on how to use the advice that the literature offers. I want to point out how the literature recommends that action research may be used as a form of critique, and then I want to encourage you to apply your own critique to those recommendations. I am endorsing my own view that action research is an approach that helps people to question. (My argument may be carried through to advise you to critique the fact that I am advising you in the first place. For that, however, we have to enter into personal dialogue, which is not immediately possible in the distance mode that printed documents impose. However, when we meet in person, or communicate directly, we may discuss just the issues I am raising here.)

1. GUIDANCE IN THE LITERATURE

The guidance in the literature on how to do action research does vary, and the specific methodology you choose will depend on which approach you find most appropriate to your way of thinking and your own situation. The literature offers us basically two approaches—the one developed at the University of East Anglia, and the other developed at the University of Bath. Both these efforts have been developed within the field of education.

Both initiatives share the same rationale—to put the practitioner at the centre of the research enterprise—and the same intent—to redefine educational theory whereby the reality of teachers' practices embody educational theory. My own view is that the two types also incorporate hidden agendas which are reflections of their originators' view of the power relations between teachers and teacher educators; but this is to anticipate.

It would be useful here briefly to trace the origins of action research as we know it, and to see how it has gained as a credible approach to professional development. This will be a brief review, for I have already covered this ground in detail (McNiff, 1988). I will then go on to show the difference between the approaches, how they may be applied, and point to the sort of practical advice they offer.

A brief history of the evolution of action research.

Action research was a term created by, among others, Kurt Lewin (1946), a social psychologist working in America. He offered a basic action plan for the improvement of practice through observation, a reconnaissance of any problems, a proposed solution to the problems, an implementation of the proposed solution, an evaluation to see if the solution was effective, and a subsequent modification of practice. This constituted an action-reflection cycle, which could then be applied repeatedly by the practitioner to move the situation closer towards the desired outcome.

Action research was popularised in Britain within the teaching profession. It has been said that academics ‘hi-jacked’ the idea to describe and explain their own practice in supporting classroom teachers. This appropriation by academics appears in fact to have secured a place for action research as a legitimate form of enquiry, and I now want to elaborate on the suggestion that the work that has been done mainly within education as a profession is eminently transferable in and across other professions. I will also make the point in Chapter 4 that education should not be seen as the exclusive territory of the teaching profession, but as a concept that overflows everywhere. Indeed, I do believe that the professions need to take on the responsibility for the continuing education (not only training) of their practitioners, with all the uncomfortable implications of the re-negotiation of power relationships and the agreement for intersubjective understandings. More of this later.

Action research had been going for some time in Britain before it was given the name ‘action research’, in the sense that, during the massive curriculum-change process that was under way in the 1960s and 1970s with a move towards comprehensive education, teachers began to question the ethos of a mainly academic curriculum that was geared towards the success for brighter children in public examinations at the age of 15/16 (Elliot, 1991). This led to substantial school-based reform. The curriculum reform movement generated new conceptions of teaching and learning, and evaluation began to become an exercise of discussing and justifying personal practice with colleagues, rather than looking to the judgement of an external observer.

In the 1970s, the movement was given focus and direction by the establishment of the Humanities Curriculum Project under the direction of Lawrence Stenhouse of the University of East Anglia. This project stressed the need for the practical wisdom of teachers to be at the heart of pedagogic practices; and gave prominence to the concept of ‘teacher as researcher’ (Stenhouse, 1975), a concept which has since been a central tenet in the action research enterprise.

Stenhouse gathered round him a band of academics who have since gone their separate ways, but who all shared a common sense of purpose in promoting the idea of professional development being grounded in practical learning (Rudduck, 1991). Some of these people articulated and formalised the principles of action research (as it came to us from Lewin) as a system that could reflect, in a theoretical form, the practical actions of teachers as they tackled problematic issues.

At the same time, Jack Whitehead at the University of Bath was working with groups of teachers in Local Education Authorities, supporting them as they tried to find the right questions that would help them to make sense of their problematic practice, questions of the kind, ‘How do I improve this process of education here?’

The benefit that this movement has brought to teachers is that, in principle, they are empowered to be in control of their own practice, and freed from the theory-driven model that imposes ideal standards towards which they must aim. Both schools of thought have translated this fundamental value into practicalities, in the sense that there are published schemes available to help teachers work through their practice with a view to improving it. The form of these action planners, however, is quite different, and I think this is a very important point. I think the way in which the planners are devised reflect the intentions of their authors, and that this is symptomatic of the wider issue of what counts as valid knowledge.

Let me take a brief look at the types of action plan available in the literature and the accompanying advice. One type of action plan offers clear guidance in the form of action steps: the sort of behaviour to adopt. The other type offers clear guidance in the form of questions to ask: the sort of attitude to adopt. All published forms of action planner follow the basic action-reflection sequence of ‘observe—reflect—plan—act—evaluation—modify’, this sequence to be repeated as the need of the individual practitioner impels.

Structured approaches

The best known plans of this kind are found in Kemmis and McTaggart (1982), ‘The Action Research Planner’, and Elliott (1981, 1991), which offer a step-by-step guide. They offer procedural guidelines for teachers and administrators interested in improvement and change in their schools. They provide a way of thinking systematically about what happens in schools or classrooms, implementing action where improvements are thought to be possible, and monitoring and evaluating the effects of the action with a view to continuing the improvement.

I have presented and critiqued the plans elsewhere (McNiff, 1988) on the grounds that this behavioural orientation is not intrinsically educational and does not necessarily lead to enhanced understanding. As a teacher-educator, I do not think I help my colleagues to develop their practical wisdom by telling them what to do, requiring that they model *my* pedagogical behaviour, or offering answers, drawn from my own experience, which I require them to apply to theirs (though I am happy to share the insights I have drawn from my own research). Rather, I encourage them to think with their own minds about their own situation, and to speak with their own voices about how they can improve it. I cushion them against the risk involved when their critical thinking makes them see things in a new, uncomfortable light, the sense of alienation when old assumptions are critiqued and rejected (Brookfield, 1987); but I do not cushion them against their experience of their own experience.

In order to work this way, I choose a strategy of asking opportunistic questions, supposing that the answers to the questions will be embodied in the transformations that practice undergoes. My procedure of questioning itself involves arranging for my clients to ask their own questions.

Dialectical approaches

(a) The work of Jack Whitehead

The second kind of action plan available incorporates this kind of questioning mentality. Jack Whitehead has developed a question-oriented approach that is now widely used in programmes of professional development.

He begins with his own action plan:

1. I identify a problem when some of my educational values are denied in my practice;
2. I imagine a solution to the problem;
3. I act in the direction of the solution;
4. I evaluate the solution;
5. I modify my ideas and my practice in the light of the evaluation.
(Whitehead, 1985, 1989a & b)

This action plan does not aim to offer substantive answers, but indicates a pathway along which certain gates may be opened to allow access to many new scenarios. The plan has been tried, tested and adapted by many practitioners (for example, Eames, 1990; Larter, 1989). It has also been incorporated into aspects of award-bearing courses of the University of Bath, in terms of a set of questions that can act as the basis for an individual's action enquiry:

1. What is your concern?
2. Why are you concerned?
3. What do you think you could do about it?
4. What kind of 'evidence' could you collect to help you make some judgement about what is happening?
5. How would you collect such 'evidence'?
6. How would you check that your judgement about what has happened is reasonably fair and accurate?

The plan, and variations of it, is being used extensively in programmes of teacher education (for example, Avon LEA, 1990). As noted above, most work here has been done in mainstream education, and Whitehead has focused his enquiry on the *educational* nature of

educational enquiry. The implication here is that the form of the plan itself is highly generalisable to the all-embracing concept of professional development (see also Chapter 4). We need to start with the notion, as Whitehead does, of what constitutes the 'good order' of a particular community of professionals; how they see the constitution, acquisition and use of the 'good order' as embodying the evolution of their society; and, through their personal and professional knowledge, how they attempt to make explicit for themselves the values that they hold implicitly within the notion of the 'good order'.

Because this book is part of the project to disseminate the ideas that have been developed at the University of Bath, it is worthwhile giving here a brief outline of the main features of Jack Whitehead's thought (for a fuller exposition, see McNiff, 1992, Chapter 3).

Whitehead places the individual enquirer at the centre of human enquiry. We need to acknowledge the living 'I' as the epistemic centre, he maintains, otherwise educational researchers are in danger of producing propositional theories which do not directly relate to educational practice. We need to acknowledge the force of the individual consciousness in interpersonal relationships in order to understand the nature of our commitments, and to work towards establishing the good order of a rational society.

I must also acknowledge myself as a living contradiction, says Whitehead. When I say that I believe in something, and then I do the opposite, I exist as a living contradiction. When I say I should not steal, and then I do, I am not living up to my own beliefs. I think we would all recognise this experience.

As an educator, I hold a number of educational values. Within my practical, everyday workplace situation, the potential which is embodied in those values is often denied. Educational enquiry, for Whitehead, is a way in which this negation may be overcome, with the

practical intent of enabling me to live out my educational values in my practice and realise my full potential.

It is worth noting here that the idea of realising and living out my educational values in my practice does not mean the imposition of my values on you. It means that each one of us recognises the quintessential integrity of our living 'I's', and, through airing and sharing our values, we make explicit a sense of vision that we may come to the position where we may develop a common sense of purpose and strategic Action (Habermas, 1981) to improve the quality of education for ourselves and for the people in our care. In this sense, action research works towards the best interest of the other, and its methodology is dialogue (see Chapter 4).

(b) The work of Jean McNiff

My own work is interlinked with that of Jack Whitehead, and equally focuses on the need for educators to enable practitioners to develop as critical thinkers. I am particularly interested in trying to characterise the nature of the cognitive forms that enable us to build theories about how understanding is facilitated. I have called this enterprise:

The generative order of educational knowledge

Imagine that you are a magician of infinite power. Imagine that, at a word, you could put into effect a process whereby every thing in the world started changing of its own accord into a different kind of thing, that was recognisably the same original thing, but that became more mature with each step in the process of change. Seeds started turning into plants, raindrops formed oceans, students became professors, one-man bands metamorphosed into orchestras.

The power that you have unleashed is called generative power (see also Chapter 6). The processes that it begins are called transforma-

tional processes. Imagine that each thing in the world contains its own blueprint of what it could be—a sunflower seed turns into a sunflower, left to its own devices—but no thing will actually fulfil its own potential unless the generative power is available. The transformational processes at work in the world are grounded in the power of generativity. The number systems of the world are really meaningless unless I start using them to calculate, and I can perform an infinite number of calculations. The rules of language are meaningless unless I use them to create new language.

Now imagine that you want to teach other magicians how to use their power of generative creativity. Your own generative power has to work actively within you, otherwise you deny your own potential as a magician of infinite power. You show them the secret of setting the power in motion, and, by inevitable implication, they return the compliment, showing you the secret of their power. This is truly a magic circle whereby the power within you itself transforms your own community into a better, more fully-realised version of itself.

Now, transfer the analogy to the real you, in relationship with others. Consider how your individual life is transformed into a better version of itself, provided you are part of a community, each of whom acts in the other's best interest. This sort of community may be encouraged by each of you because you want to improve your own community, and spread the word into the wider world to show that it can be done and that you have done it by working together. You know how you have done it by working together, and you share the knowledge.

These are the elements within my own project. I take the idea of generative power as the basic unity of energy whereby each thing may transform itself endlessly in the process of its own realisation of potential. In terms of the educational enterprise, I see the development of educational knowledge as being the process of an individual's ever-

expanding consciousness, which is encouraged by the parallel processes of other expanding consciousnesses with which I am in conversation. The development of our individual and collective understanding helps us to promote the evolution of our own society, each acting in the other's best interest. The generative power at work in me has the potential to transform the world, but only through the will of others who are equally aware of their own potential.

2. ACTION RESEARCH AS CRITIQUE

The idea of critique has been articulated intermittently throughout this text. I want to focus now on critique as a living element in a living theory—that is, to help you, the living reader, to develop your own power of rational thought so as to see other people's theories (and that includes this book, as it constitutes my present best thinking) for what they are: the product of thought that thinkers are offering as a resource to help colleagues develop their thought.

The idea of critique

Take the well-known example of Orwell's 'Animal Farm'. Mr. Jones ran Manor Farm in a brutal manner and oppressed the animals severely. Finally, the animals overthrew Jones, and set up their own government, maintained by the pigs, who then set out to strengthen their image of the ruling intellectual class. Over time, the pigs transformed the embryonic democracy that had been the spur to the revolution into a dictatorship where they oppressed the other animals severely.

This is the same process that could possibly happen in an ideology critique (the activity of questioning an ideological system that is already well established). A set of ideas (SI), incorporating a view of the human condition, is judged to be the 'right' way. Certain radicals disagree, and discredit and reject the set of ideas (SI), and propose instead

an alternative set of ideas (ASI). (ASI) becomes accepted as the norm, and, over time, its transitional character as a possible temporary alternative transforms into that of a fixed permanent way. The alternative that was offered with a sense of diffidence and caution is now reified (fixed), and abstracted from the consciousness of the radicals who created it, to exist as an impersonal system that assumes control over the society of which the radicals are a part.

Imagine now that a second group of activists propose yet another set of alternative ideas (ASAI), and instigate a revolution to discredit (ASI), and instal (ASAI) in its place. How do they check that (ASAI) will not go the same way to reification as (SI) and (ASI)? Where is the fail-safe mechanism that stops the process plunging into degeneration?

There are a number of ways of dealing with the problem, mainly:

1. The empiric-objectivist way, where a society agrees on norms and standards which are then used to test the truth claims within a given set of assumptions. This is the way of, for example, the logical positivists who held that truth conditions rest in verification: I can say something is true if I demonstrate through factual evidence the verification of its internal truth.
2. The relativist way, where a society agrees that its constituent members are entitled to establish their own truth relative to their particular circumstances and contexts. This truth is then put to the test of a factual analysis of the contexts which the claim to truth allegedly reflects.
3. The dialogical-dialectical way, where a society agrees the right of each of its constituent members to make his or her own truth claim. Members justify their claim by demonstrating their 'version of truth' through the way that they live—that is, they attempt actively to live out their values. They offer their way of life, as an embodiment of their truth claim, to be validated by the community of

which they are a part. This validation is through the process of dialogue.

The objectivist and the relativist ways are susceptible to reification. The dialogical way resists reification, because its substantive categories of concern (*what* people agree—the truth claims of its members) are in a process of constant transformation; and its forms of cognition (how people agree—the agreed process for reaching agreement)—is also inherently transformational. To expand: freedom of thought by definition must be free, in the content of the thought produced, in the forms of thinking employed, and in the right of the individual thinker to exercise his or her own freedom of thought. Dialogical communities must by definition be grounded in dialogue—that is, the process of reaching intersubjective agreement through rational argument with the practical intent of human betterment.

The idea of critique rests here. It does not rest in the imposition of one form on another, or in the rejection of one form in favour of another. Then the process of critique itself becomes a reified structure. The idea of critique rests in the openness of individuals who nurture the quality of openness throughout their society, and their agreement not to violate the integrity of the other through selfish moves towards closure.

These ideas enter into the consistent theme that, in order to enlarge upon our own ability to decide how best to develop our own professionalism, we need to develop our critical faculties, and to turn that faculty back on itself in order to understand our own practical intent in deciding to use this critical form. We need not only to construct our theories of professional development, but also then systematically to deconstruct them, with a view to reconstructing our actions as a reflection of the values that have underpinned the process of critical reflection, through critical dialogue.

In conclusion, let me say that action research is a way of using personal understanding to look at personal understanding. It is a way to question norms and taken-for-granted, but, in order to use it in this way, we have to turn action research back on itself and use it to justify our very use of it. We have to hold up to the mirror our decision to use action research, and use one reflected decision to justify the other.

In effect, for a research programme to be called educational, in the sense that I, the practitioner, may develop my own story as I go along, I need to develop insights into the process of developing insights, to be aware of my own process of awareness. I need to use my action enquiry to explore the process of action enquiry.

This, in my opinion, is the ultimate power of action research. As noted above, to try to reduce the idea of action research and present it as a method is to deny its very epistemological base, the pushing back of the frontiers of knowledge. It is not that action research offers a critique; it is that the *idea* of action research offers a critique. For it is in following through my sense of vision that I am able to develop that I actually *do* develop. Grasping the idea of action research helps me to appreciate that all doors are potentially open, and that I have the key that will open them.

This chapter is a reprint of "How do I learn how to do Action Research?" Chapter 3 of *Creating a Good Social Order Through Action Research*, by Jean McNiff, Jack Whitehead, Moira Laidlaw, and the Bath Action Research Group, pp. 27-38. Bath: Hyde Publications, 1992.

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