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Action Research: A Brief Overview

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Abstract: This contribution outlines several variants of teacher / action research, describing some of the different "tools" and "intentions" of a number of prominent qualitative researchers.

Keywords: *action research, teacher research, practice as inquiry, narrative inquiry, critical inquiry, case studies, reflective practice, critical incidents, AR overview, AR tools, AR assumptions*

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1. Introduction

Over the last decade, as people have moved from quantitative research methodologies toward naturalistic inquiry, many new and interesting forms of research have emerged. Various identified as teacher research (COCHRAN-SMITH & LYTLE 1993), action research (WINTER 1987, CARR 1989), reflective practice (SCHÖN 1983, 1987), at the heart of all of these investigative enterprises has been a common focus on practice-as-inquiry (NEWMAN 1992). There are as many variants of practice-as-inquiry as there are people exploring its possibilities. There is no one 'right' way of doing action research, of being a teacher researcher, of engaging in critical reflection. Practitioners engaging in these more open, reflective ways are inventing methodology as they go along. [1]

2. Practice as Inquiry

There are huge differences of opinion about what actually constitutes practice-as-inquiry; I encourage teachers to explore the research literature widely in order to acquaint themselves with the range of possibilities. Stephen NORTH (1987), for example, contends practice becomes inquiry only when practitioners identify a problem, search for possible causes and solutions, test those solutions in practice, validate their observations and then disseminate their findings. For NORTH, the making of new knowledge requires some distanced systematic investigation, done primarily as an end in itself. The researcher/practitioner is essentially detached from practice. In North's opinion, inquiry isn't research unless it follows the rules of traditional quantitative methodologies. [2]

Donald SCHÖN (1983, 1987), on the other hand, sees practice-as-inquiry conducted principally to inform and change on-going practice. For SCHÖN, inquiry occurs when the practitioner reflects both while engaged in action and subsequently on the action itself. [3]

Surprise, says SCHÖN (1987) is at the heart of any reflective activity.

Surprise leads to reflection within an action-present. Reflection is at least in some measure conscious, although it need not occur in the medium of words. We consider both the unexpected event and the knowing-in-action that led up to it, asking ourselves, as it were, "What is this?" and, at the same time, "How have I been thinking about it?" Our thought turns back on the surprising phenomenon and, at the same time, back on itself (p. 28). [4]

3. Tools and Assumptions

There are many different forms of teacher/action research. Each version provides useful tools for taking a critical look at our professional work. [5]

Narrative inquiry (CONNELLY & CLANDININ 1988) allows us to explore our personal histories in an effort to understand how who we are impacts on what we value and what we do. The 'evidence' consists of narrative accounts of significant moments in our past which helps us understand our values and provides insight into current decision-making. There may be elements of documentary evidence, but on the whole the evidence consists of the narrative reconstruction of incidents which we believe to be important for understanding who we are. [6]

More traditional 'teacher research' (RUDDUCK & HOPKINS 1985) compiles different sorts of evidence. It doesn't ignore narrative accounts, but it includes documentary evidence of various sorts-journal entries, students' work, policy documents from school divisions and province, newspaper accounts. In this kind of work, the tensions of teaching are examined by identifying the constraints and pressures which impact on people's daily work. Here, too, the point of this inquiry is to understand the various influences on our decision-making as teachers and education professionals. [7]

Critical inquiry (SMYTH 1992, BOOMER 1987) has a more overt political flavour from the outset. Narrative inquiry and more traditional teacher research are also political, in that we are working to uncover the pressures that impact on what we do and how we do it. But normally people don't see that aspect of their work until they're well into the later stages of putting things together. With critical inquiry, we know we're going to be exploring political issues from the outset. The evidence can consist of policy documents, correspondence of all kinds, newspaper sources, students' work. The difference, here, is that the analytic tools are openly those that take a political view of schooling, learning and teaching. [8]

There are also case studies (WINTER 1986). A careful examination of an individual student or a small group of students, can be the basis of a teacher/action research project. Here, the point of the work is to learn from the situation how to act in it-to discover the kinds of decisions we make and to think about the theoretical reasons for making them. Evidence can consist of personal reflections, lesson plans, students' work, student/parent/colleague interviews, etc. In case study work, which would qualify as teacher/action research, the gaze is on attempting to uncover the assumptions which are driving our teaching; to learn from the learners how to make teaching a learning enterprise. [9]

SCHÖN's reflective practice (1983, 1987) offers a variety of techniques for exploring one's own professional work. In SCHÖN's view, the teacher/researcher is attempting to make his or her own understanding problematic to him or herself. He makes it clear that

there is no given, preobjectified state of affairs waiting to be uncovered through inquiry. All research findings are someone's construction of reality. And yet the researcher must strive to test his or her constructions of the situation by bringing to the surface, juxtaposing, and discriminating among alternate accounts of that reality. The point is to see the taken-for-granted with new eyes. [For other views on SCHÖN's work see: [Online Conference on the Reflective Practitioner](#)—dedicated to the memory of Donald SCHÖN; ACTlist March 1 - April 3, 1998.] [10]

Then there are [critical incidents](#) (NEWMAN 1987, 1991). Critical incidents are those moments which allow you to stand back and examine your beliefs and your teaching critically. They are stories used as tools for conducting research on yourself. Critical incidents can be triggered in the midst of teaching, but they can occur in a variety of other ways. They can arise through reading, or overhearing a comment, or noticing how someone else is doing something you've always taken for granted, or suddenly seeing your own learning differently. Latent critical incidents are everywhere, not just in the classroom, and they offer important opportunities for learning about professional practice. [11]

Notice that in all of these variations of teacher/action research, the gaze is ultimately on the researcher. It doesn't matter which 'methodology' we elect to use, in the end the account becomes a laying out of our personal understanding, our sense of the political realities which support or constrain our work with students. We come out of all of these experiences with an expanded appreciation of the complexity of learning, of teaching, and a stronger sense of how external realities affect what we can really do. [For further discussions of teacher / action research see: "[Action Research: Exploring the Tensions of Teaching](#)" and "[Tensions of Teaching](#)."] [12]

4. Interpretation

The tough thing about this whole interpretive framework is trying to find ways of balancing individual interpretations with the interpretive community. All meaning making is embedded in our cultural history and most of who we are is tacitly absorbed both from our immediate community as well as the wider community. Every understanding is mediated to a large extent by the culture of the times, by what we see on TV, what we read, by the conversations we engage in and eavesdrop on every day. Our ways of making interpretations are influenced by the various interpretive communities to which we belong. But in spite of these communities and the social influences on our interpretations we do, in some senses, still make sense as individuals. [I have written an indepth discussion about validity in this kind of inquiry in "[Validity and Action Research: An Online Conversation](#)".] [13]

Such a theoretical perspective is important as a basis for action research. It focuses our attention on interpretation—it makes us think about contexts and how they affect our judgements and our interpretations upon which those judgements are based. For me, it grounds the research in the ongoing narrative of our professional activity. Because our judgements are based largely on our tacit theories, on values and beliefs that are culturally determined and not explicitly articulated, the act of creating a narrative permits us to distance ourselves from our judgements a bit and affords an opportunity to make the basis of our work open to inspection. The act of creating the narrative sets us up to be detectives; the narrative offers clues to the kinds of cultural values affecting our

judgements. Hence the need for critical incidents, for tracking the surprises in the daily work we are doing. [14]

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