

10 1992 - HOW CAN MY PHILOSOPHY OF ACTION RESEARCH TRANSFORM AND IMPROVE MY PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE AND PRODUCE A GOOD SOCIAL ORDER? A RESPONSE TO ORTRUN ZUBER-SKERRITT

SUMMARY

The purpose of this paper is to draw attention to a new form of educational theory for improving professional practice and producing a good social order. The recent literature on action learning and action research has focused on their appropriateness as methods to develop managerial and other professional competences. Theoretical frameworks of action research have emphasised conceptual rather than dialectical forms of knowledge. This paper questions the emphasis on method and conceptual theories and argues for a greater concentration on the creation and testing of a living and dialectical educational theory for professional practice within which one's own philosophy of education is engaged as a first person participant.

KEYWORDS

Living Educational Theory; Dialectics; Educational Development; Educational Knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

In my paper to the First World Congress I outlined a dialectical approach to educational action research and attempted to synthesise a process of personal development with a process of social evolution. I characterised the dialectical approach as a process of question and answer in which an individual 'I' exists as a living contradiction in questions of the kind, 'How do I improve my practice?', in the workplace. I gave two examples of action research. One on my own professional development in higher education and the other on my contribution, as Chair of Governors, to the educational management of a comprehensive school. To be consistent with my philosophy of action research I am now drawing your attention to an account of my own educational development which integrates this philosophy with my attempts to improve my professional practice and to contribute to a good social order. The account is grounded in my experience of my own 'I' existing as a living contradiction in that I hold certain values whilst at the same time experiencing their denial in practice. The inclusion of 'I' in my claim to educational knowledge establishes a non-conceptual form within the account. I will contrast the non-conceptual form of educational theory which is constituted by such an account with the theoretical, conceptual framework for action research proposed by Zuber-Skerritt (1991).

ACTION RESEARCH: A METHOD FOR THEORY GENERATION AND TESTING?

One point I would like to explore is the possibility that action researchers have given in too easily to the temptation to reduce their research to issues of methodology a

model building, rather than tackling the more fundamental issues of theory generation and testing. In educational research for example, the last decade has witnessed a crisis in that there is no discernable agreement about what constitutes educational theory. The view that educational theory was constituted by the theoretical frameworks and methods of validation of the disciplines of education, was abandoned by one of its creators (Hirst 1983) with the suggestion that we ought to be looking to 'operationally effective practical discourse' as a basis for theory generation.

The demise of the disciplines approach to educational theory has seen a corresponding increase in the adoption of action research approaches to professional development in teaching (McNiff 1988), nursing and police training. In the United Kingdom, Professor John Elliott (1989) has been particularly influential in promoting action research in a variety of professional settings. Dr. Pamela Lomax (1989) has also been most successful in institutionalising programmes of action research for the professional development of teachers at Kingston polytechnic. What has yet to emerge from these initiatives is a view of educational theory with widespread academic credibility. The accounts of the action researchers are judged for validity and academic rigour in terms of their methods (Winter 1989) rather than as contributions to the creation and testing of educational theory.

I can appreciate the importance of the methods which are used to ensure validity and rigour in a research paradigm with a well established theoretical base. Is there not a danger however, that in a period of crisis when there is a theoretical revolution in progress, the dominant concern with method is likely to be at the expense of encouraging the expression of the creativity of researchers in discovering new forms for the descriptions and explanations for the phenomena under investigation? What I am suggesting is that action researchers should, at this time in the development of the field, stress the importance of developing new forms of explanation rather than permitting their research to be dominated by method or by traditional forms of theoretical, conceptual frameworks.

To illustrate my point I will take the contents of a case report in which I explain my professional development in the workplace of a University and compare this with the contents of the theoretical framework for professional development in higher education proposed by Zuber-Skerritt (1991). My fundamental point is that my explanation contains a non-conceptual 'I', as a living contradiction, which cannot be adequately represented within a conceptual form. Therefore the conceptual form of theoretical framework of the kind proposed by Zuber-Skerritt below does not have the explanatory capacity to produce an adequate explanation for my professional development in higher education.

The text represented by bold type at the beginning of each part below, contains correspondences on the actions and judgements on my professional performance which were made with the power of the formal university structures. The text

represented by plain type are articles written at the time of being subjected to these pressures and subsequently published.

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The following extracts from the contents of Ortrun Zuber-Skerrit's text on professional development in higher education offer a theoretical framework for action research. They indicate how she approaches praxis and theory in higher education and the integration of theory and practice. In the section on praxis in higher education, Zuber-Skerritt discusses technical and practical reasoning and discusses the case in relation to the theories of Kelly, Leontiev, critical educational science and her own CRASP model. Theories of knowing and learning are described as behaviourist,

cognitive and holistic theories. **In the section on the integration of theory and practice the list of theories includes** Lewin's theory ,Kolb's experiential learning theory , Dewey's model of learning , Piaget's model of learning, Kolb's definition of learning, Boud and Pascoe's extensions of Kolb's model

My purpose in comparing the contents of an explanation for my professional development in higher education derived from action research, with the extracts from the contents of *professional development in higher education: a theoretical framework for action action research*, is to raise questions about the validity of both accounts. In criticising Zuber-Skerritt's theoretical framework I am faced with the kind of paradox I experienced in criticising the views of Professor Richard Peters, one of my teachers whose professionalism I valued highly and who stimulated a love of philosophy. In the 1960s and 1970s Richard Peters elevated the status of educational theory in programmes of professional development. In 1971, at the height of the acceptability of the disciplines approach to educational theory, I rejected the theory on the basis of reflections on my own classroom practice with my pupils and my own professional development. My reasoning was as follows. One of the tests of validity of a theory is that it has the capacity to produce an adequate explanation for the behaviour of an individual case. One of the influences on my explanation was the video-camera I had been asked to use by an Inspector to explore its educational potential in the science department of a comprehensive school where I was Head of Science. In looking at my performance I experienced myself as a living contradiction in holding two mutually exclusive opposites together. I held certain values whilst denying them at the same time.

I reflected on the logic of Richard Peters' philosophy of education with his commitment to the Law of Contradiction. This states that two mutually exclusive statements cannot be true simultaneously. I could see that the conceptual frameworks of the theories in the disciplines of education, all excluded contradiction. I followed Popper's (1963) rejection of contradiction in theories through the application of the simple laws of inference which he used to claim that dialectical forms of knowledge were based on nothing better than a loose and woolly way of speaking and entirely useless as theory. Yet, on the ground of my own experience of myself as a living contradiction, I wanted to find an educational theory which had the capacity to produce an adequate explanation for my professional development.

I decided to explore the nature of an explanation for my own professional development in higher education as I continued my educational enquiry, 'How do I improve my practice?'. The result so far over the period 1976-91 is the form and content of the above account of my educational development.

In comparing this account with the theoretical framework for action research proposed by Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt I am drawn to a similar criticism to the one I made of the ideas of Richard Peters. I recognise the professionalism in the work. I understand its value in raising the awareness and status of action research in higher education. In claiming that the theoretical framework is too limited to produce valid explanations for the professional development of individuals in higher education I do

not want to damage the growth of action research approaches in professional development. I want to see them strengthened by ensuring that a valid form of educational theory is emerging from the research. For this reason I want to put forward my own stipulative definition as an alternative to the theoretical framework above. Where Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt writes about *The Case* as if the case is independent of herself, I have taken myself to be the case and provided a case report on my own educational development between 1976 and 1991.

The alternative view I am proposing is that **educational theory is being constituted by the descriptions and explanations which individual learners are producing for their educational development in enquiries of the kind, 'How do I improve my practice?'**

I see my philosophy of action research in terms of first person engagement rather than from the perspective of second person participant or of a third person neutral observer. I value the traditional role of an academic in making original contributions to knowledge. I see the methodology and epistemology in my claim to know my educational development as an integral part of my educational development. I ground my justification of the values, whose meaning emerges in the course of my educational development, in the name of my own education and humanity. In attempting to live more fully my values within the context of my workplace I believe that I am helping to produce a good social order. This belief is based on the evidence of my responses in the contents of the above case report, to actions and judgements which, whilst legitimated by the University's procedures existing at the time, exerted pressure which, according to a University Senate Committee, might have discouraged and therefore constrained a less determined individual than myself. I see my philosophy contributing to the production of a good social order within the form of dialogical community represented in the work of Richard Bernstein (1991) and Alastair MacIntyre (1990),

I do not believe that my paper on its own should persuade you of the validity of my claims. What it can do however, is to draw your attention to where a living educational theory is being created and it may stimulate you sufficiently to want to test the validity of this new claim to educational knowledge. Those who are interested might also wish to see how I am developing these ideas in the context of my work as Chair of Governors of a comprehensive school (Whitehead 1990). I think of the significance of your commitment to test the validity of my ideas in MacIntyre's (1988) terms that the rival claims to truth of contending traditions of enquiry depend for their vindication upon the adequacy and the explanatory power of the histories which the resources of each of those traditions in conflict enable their adherents to write.

I suppose the main challenge to academics in the above views is the implication that their research should include a public account of their own educational development in an enquiry of the form, 'How do I improve my practice?'. To hold oneself accountable in this way, in the name of education and one's own humanity, may deter those who prefer the safety of conceptual structures. There is risk, a creative leap and an act of faith, involved in attempting to make original contributions to

educational knowledge. I am fortunate that I can share my work with students, teachers and colleagues in the conversational research community of the action research group of the School of Education of the University of Bath. I do hope that you will respond and help to test the validity of my ideas.

In Part Two which follows I describe the Action Research and Educational Theory Case Study Collection in the School of Education of the University of Bath. The dialogical and dialectical forms of presentation of these studies do appear to offer very strong evidence to suggest that the descriptions and explanations produced by individual learners of their own educational development could be constituting a new form of educational theory. I hope that you are now in a position to understand the explanatory principles in my claim to know my own educational development. I am thinking of an explanation which shows a relationship between the form of life of a living contradiction and the extension of cognitive range and concern in the process of answering questions of the kind, 'How do I improve my practice?'. I claim that this is a new form of educational knowledge. It has been created by a University Academic in a research programme spanning some twenty years from an investigation of his life as an educational researcher. The new form of educational knowledge combines both dialectical and propositional knowledge within the dialogical form of presentation. The reasons I am offering to explain my educational development include a commitment to live a productive life in education through contributing to educational knowledge. I hope that you will have understood the strength of this commitment through my persistence in the face of pressure. The other reasons I have given to explain my educational development include my commitment to exercise my academic freedom to persist in questioning and publishing my findings and my commitment to support the power of truth against the truth of power. In Part Three I hope that you will also come to understand my educational development in terms of my care for my own integrity. I hope to communicate the strength of my commitment to this care through the educative relationships of Erica Holley, Moira Laidlaw and Peggy Kok, in which I respect their right to speak on their own behalf. Erica also demonstrates a growing awareness of her context as she analyses her relationship with one pupil, a class and a colleague in a process of appraisal.

In Part Four I am engaged directly with market forces and the political forces which are being used to enable the market to penetrate education. I have begun an examination of how these are influencing my educational development and hope to contribute this study to the Case Study Collection described below.