

Action Research in Teacher Training and in the Living Theories of Professional Educators

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Abstract

Action Research, if it is viewed as an efficient method of training or problem solving can be used to support or constrain an individual's education. Teachers can be trained to use action research methods without any concern for the values of education which should guide their technical skills. Action Research can also be used by professional educators in the creating of their own living theories as they ask, answer and research questions of the kind, 'How can I live a good and productive life in and through education?' and 'How can I help you to improve your learning?'. This paper explores the use of action research in both training and education within the context of the influence of Greek theories of knowledge. In particular it draws attention to the value of the internet in communicating the value of action research in the creation and testing of the living theories of professional educators.

When I wrote this paper some two weeks before this presentation I held two vivid images in mind together with their associated feelings. The first image is of myself as a 23 year old student teacher, lying in the balmy summer evening under the Acropolis, at peace with myself and the world, feeling that life is worth living and joining in a imaginary conversation with Plato, Phaedrus and Socrates on the meaning of love, life, knowledge and education. Socrates and Phaedrus are talking of love and knowledge:

Socrates. You must know that I consider the speech itself, in its general character, to be nothing more than a sportive effusion; but through all that was thus casually uttered, there are two forms of method apparent which would well repay our attention, if we could obtain a systematic view of their respective efficiency.

Phaedrus. What are they, pray?

Socrates. The first consists in comprehending at a glance, whenever a subject is proposed, all the widely scattered particulars connected with it, and bringing them together under one general idea, in order that, by precise definition, we may make every one understand what it is that at the time we are intending to discuss.

Phaedrus. And what is your other method, Socrates?

That, on the other hand, enables us to separate a general idea into its subordinate elements, by dividing it at the joints, as nature directs, and not attempting to break any limb in half, after the fashion of a bungling carver..... if ever I find any one else whom I judge capable of apprehending the one and the many as they are in nature, that person I follow behind as though in the track of a God. And to all those who are possessed of this power I have been in the habit of giving, whether rightly or wrongly, heaven knows, the name of dialecticians. (Rhys, p. 258-259, 1910).

Now, just as I was about to describe my second image my computer announced an e-mail had arrived. I opened it to find it that it resonated with my second image which was of last night's television pictures of NATO bombers and cruise missiles attacking targets in Belgrade and Kosova. The e-mail was forwarded from the Section of Education of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, named after the Greek thinker who has had such a dramatic influence on the logics of the Western mind. The e-mail was written by two academics in the Association of Art Historians in Serbia and it was an appeal to the international community to protect the cultural heritage which, as they said, is part of European and world culture.

Now, I imagine that this letter will raise powerful emotions on being read by academics around the world. I feel anger and some despair at the human suffering in the images of so many thousands fleeing from their homes, in fear of their lives. I am alarmed at the failure of international politics created from my own action research Homepage (<http://www.actionresearch.net>). These links extend through

Britain, Australia, Canada, South Africa and America. Perhaps the best recent review of action research in education is by Susan Noffke in the 1997 Review of Educational Research published by the American Educational Research Association in which she says:

Rather than a particular research methodology, action research is best thought of as a large family, one in which beliefs and relationships vary greatly. More than a set of discrete practices, it is a group of ideas emergent in various contexts... work (s) in this area in recent years have been marked by not only an increase in volume of references to it but also a proliferation of varied usages of the term. (Noffke, p. 306, 1997)

John Elliott (1998) is one of the central figures in the extending influence of action research around the world. He is a Professor of Education at the University of East Anglia in the U.K. and has this to say about 'the Greek theory of knowledge', in relation to the work of John Dewey and 'Standards-driven reforms'.

The Greeks, according to Dewey left European societies with a legacy that became enshrined in their traditions of education. It was a legacy that located knowledge as a reflection of reality and that defined reality as the realm of fixed, static and invariant things.... This legacy rendered the realm of change as the 'appearance' at the surface of things, and since practical activity falls within this realm, it cannot yield knowledge and understanding. (Elliott, p. 140, 1998).

Elliott relates this Greek theory of knowledge to the present day emphasis on 'Standards' in education systems throughout the world. As he says, standards are defined in terms of learning outcomes, conceived either as fixed and unchanging facts and concepts (knowledge), or as behavioural responses called 'competences' or 'skills'. Standards-driven reforms take the Greek theory of knowledge for granted.

If you want to remain within a Greek theory of knowledge influenced by the Aristotelean logic which eliminates contradictions from correct thought you can use the action planning strategies of action research in a technical approach to problem solving.

There is an action research guide for pre-service teachers, by Moira Laidlaw, on my action research Homepage. You simply click on the guide and it should freely download to your computer, ready for printing. If you wish to develop a standards-driven approach which eliminates contradictions from correct thought and holds the standards as static and invariant things, you can adopt an 'objectives' approach to your teacher training curriculum (Elliott, p. 134) by simply using the action planning process in Laidlaw's Guide as a method to be applied to teaching practice. It is not Laidlaw's intention that you should use her guide in this way, but you could certainly do it.

This standards-driven approach to teacher education is at the centre of the Teacher

Training Agency's framework for the professional development of teachers. The teacher training curriculum for our novice teachers in England and Wales has to 'deliver' 63 standards of practice. The novice teachers have to be able to produce evidence that they have met these standards.

The way in which an action planning process can be used in a technical way to meet such a standard's driven curriculum is exemplified in the professional development planning process I have been using this year with novice teachers which states:

Review and target setting are important parts of the process of developing the skills and understanding of the teacher.... There are two stages to this. First of all you will wish to identify strengths and developing competence. Secondly, you will wish to identify areas of weakness, things you are finding difficult, Standards which you have not had the opportunity to meet etc.... When target setting it is important to make sure that they are specific... (Professional Development Plan, PGCE, University of Bath, 1997/98.

The standards-driven approach with their 'targets' is now moving into university teaching in England where the new Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education has published consultation papers which set out 24 teaching outcomes for university teachers to provide evidence that they have met these outcomes in order to become members of the ILT.

I now want to consider a different approach, which doesn't deny the value of using standards as part of a process of improving learning. In fact, it uses values as living standards of practice and judgement. It does however require the appreciation of a different logic, a dialectical logic of question and answer (Gadamer, p. 333) through which I think a new Greek theory of knowledge could be developed in the living theories of professional educators. In this approach the externally 'imposed' standards can be engaged with in a dialogue through which the individual continuously regenerates their own living standards (Laidlaw, 1996) in the educative process of their own self-creation. What is different in this 'living' approach to standards from traditional 'standards' is that they are embodied in the lives of practitioners. Standards, understood as living values, are embodied in our practical lives. We use them to give purpose to our lives and what we do. The normal language of value-words such as love, peace, freedom, justice, integrity, care and compassion, is useful in directing attention to the meanings of the embodied values, but the meanings of such values can only be understood in the course of their emergence through time and practice. Evidence to show the ways in which this can be done can be accessed from the action research Homepage, especially in the section on 'Living Theory Theses' and I now want to consider a living theory approach to teacher education.

Action Research in the Living Theories of Professional Educators

In a living theory approach, teacher-researchers ask, answer and research questions

of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' in the context of helping their students to improve their learning. They see themselves in their own 'I' as living contradictions who hold together their experience of holding certain values and the experience of denying these values in their practice. In working to improve their practice they often engage in cycles of action and reflection in which they create an action plan to enable them to live their values more fully, they act and gather data to enable them to make a judgement on their effectiveness, they evaluate their actions in relation to their values, skills and understandings and modify their concerns, plans and actions in the light of their evaluations. They construct accounts and offer these descriptions and explanations of their own learning for public validation in order to take their enquiry forward, to strengthen their contributions to educational knowledge and theory and to extend their professional communities. I have called such explanations 'living theories' in that they explain what someone is doing in terms of an evaluation of past practice and an intention to create something in the world which is not yet existing. It is this projection of the individual into a future which constitutes the generation and testing of the 'living' theories. I have been heartened by the international response to these ideas (Ghaye & Ghaye, 1998; Hamilton, 1998; Lomax, 1999a; MacPherson, 1998; McNiff, 1999). In case you might think that the acceptance of these ideas has been simply a matter of explaining them to others you might like to read the stories of some of the political battles which have accompanied their legitimation in the Academy (Whitehead, 1993; Hughes, Denley and Whitehead, 1998)

Let me return to my imaginary conversation with Socrates as a 23 year old student teacher in 1967, and make a contribution to the conversation some 32 years later as a professional educator. Socrates has explained to Phaedrus, some 2000 years ago, that there are two ways of coming to know through a dialectic of question and answer. He has said that we can hold things together with a general idea and we can analyse things in their separate parts. He has called 'dialecticians' those who can hold together both the One and the Many. Here is my contribution to the conversation. I hope that it stimulates your own.

Jack to Socrates

I see what you mean, Socrates, about two ways of coming to know. I wonder if there is a third way in which we dialecticians can 'come to know' through exploring questions of the kind, 'How do I live my values more fully in my practice?' . It might be possible to create a new Greek theory of knowledge on the basis of such enquiries. What we could do is to ask, answer and research questions of the kind asked by Tony Ghaye in his work with vulnerable children, 'How can we improve the educational experiences of the most vulnerable children in Athens/Bombay?' (Ghaye, 1999; Ghaye & Ghaye, 1998). Should we try to do it?

Let me illustrate the contribution our educative community at Bath could make to your creation of a new Greek theory of knowledge from our work in supporting action research approaches in the in-service education of teachers (Lomax &

Whitehead, 1998). I am thinking specifically of the materials on my action research Homepage. I am hoping that the on-line links are now working and that when I access my Homepage we will see the following list of:

Values,
JW's Writings
Pre-service
Living Theory Theses
Masters Programme
Police Stories
Other Homepages
Chat Room

Because of your interest in action research in in-service teacher education I think you may find particularly significant the materials in the section, 'Masters Programme'. This contains the details of my 1997 programme on how to organise an action research module for the in-service education of teachers. The process of carrying out an action research enquiry with teachers on an in-service programme is outlined in the form of action reflection cycles of defining concerns; developing action plans; acting and gathering data; evaluating the effectiveness of actions in terms of values, skills and understandings; modifying concerns, plans and actions in the light of the evaluations; the construction of a description and explanation for the professional learning of the teacher which constitutes their living educational theory.

In this section there are examples of teachers' action enquiries from primary/infant and secondary schools. It also contains details of a programme of portfolio assessment for teachers' professional development which is due to begin in September 1999. It is through such portfolio assessments that I am hoping to extend the range of evidence acceptable for academic accreditation by the University. I want to see included multi-media representations of the spiritual, aesthetic and ethical values of professional educators. Our community of action researchers at Bath have begun this process in the Values section of the Homepage and I want to focus on the work of some of the individuals who have made significant contributions to our community of professional educators.

Jean McNiff's Creativity in Supporting Teachers' In-service Action Research Programmes; A Methodology of Care.

I want to stress the importance of the 'Masters Programme' section of the Homepage. because it is focused on the creative and generative process of getting the action research started. The work of Jean McNiff (a member of our group) in the U.K. and Ireland (1992, 1996,1999) has been particularly useful in showing how to form and sustain teacher action research groups. Her latest work on Action Research as 'A Methodology of Care' (McNiff, 1999) shows how this fundamental human value can be integrated within an action research process with teachers.

In her work with Una Collins in Ireland (McNiff and Collins, 1994) Jean gives a clear illustration of how to move from the values of teachers, to action plans, to action and to the accounts produced by the teachers about their own learning. These processes are fundamental to the creation of a living theory approach to teachers' professional development and are not initially focused on getting work accredited by a University. These processes are the generative heart of the process. On the basis of these processes it is possible to support teachers in their in-service education and training to gain further professional/academic qualifications from their classroom enquiries with their students as they work at helping their students to improve their learning. It is from the action research of such teachers that I think it will be possible to create a new Greek theory of knowledge.

For example, in the section on 'Living Theory Theses' you will find M.Phil. & Ph.D. Theses from the following teacher researchers who have created their own living theses as they ask, answer and answer questions of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?'

Kevin Eames' and Moyra Evans' creativity in supporting school-based teacher-research and contributing to the professional knowledge-base of education.

If you want to understand how school and university teachers have established teacher-researcher groups in schools do study the Ph.D. Theses of Moyra Evans (1995) and Kevin Eames (1995). Evans explains how she helped to form and sustain an action research group through her work as a deputy headteacher with responsibilities for staff development. This action research approach to the in-service development of teachers has been highlighted in Professor Pam Lomax's 1998 Presidential Address to the British Educational Research Association. It has led to the award of Ph.D., M.A. degrees and Diplomas for teacher-researchers as they explicate their practice-based knowledge. For those of you who want to develop a new Greek theory of knowledge, which can integrate valuable contributions from the old view, I suggest that a study of Eames' (1995) theses on the professional knowledge-base of teaching will repay your close attention. In my paper presentation to the BERA Symposium at AERA in Montreal next week (Whitehead 1999 - which you can download from the JW's Writings section of the webpage), I show how the work of Eames can contribute to the creation of a new discipline of educational enquiry and hence a new form of educational knowledge.

The BERA Symposium at AERA 1999 with Pam Lomax, Jack Whitehead, Moyra Evans and Zoe Parker.

For those academics amongst you who also want to engage in action research in your in-service education as university teachers I suggest you access the four papers being presented this coming Monday at the BERA Symposium at AERA 1999. The Symposium is on 'Creating Community through Educational Research'. It focuses on the action research of four university teacher-researchers (Lomax, 1999;

Whitehead, 1999; Evans, 1999; Parker, 1999) and stresses the importance in developing action research for teachers, of community, autobiography, disciplined enquiry and providing emotional support in the conduct of teachers- action research. In my paper on the creation of a new discipline of educational enquiry you will see the Greek influence on the dialogical and dialectical forms of educational knowledge which I am claiming can emerge from this new discipline of educational enquiry. I am hoping that these papers will stimulate your interest in creating a new Greek theory of knowledge in teacher education. In my view you could develop such a theory to help the world to move forward into the new millennium just as a Greek theory of knowledge helped the world to move forward into the first millennium. In Parker's paper you will see the importance she gives to revealing the values which can describe and explain our professional learning in the self-creation of the autobiographies of learning. Lomax explains the significance of a double dialectic of learning as we work at improving our own and our students' learning. Evans contributes her insights into the value of writing 'fictional stories' in overcoming difficult emotional tensions in the action research process. Each contributor acknowledges the importance of dialogues and dialectics in their in-service education.

The Dialogues and Dialectics of Andy Larter and Peter Mellett

There are two works which may be particularly useful to you in creating a new Greek theory of knowledge for teacher education. I am thinking of the work of Andy Larter and Peter Mellett, two action researchers who have received their higher degrees from the University of Bath. I plan to have these available for you in the 'Living Theory Theses' section of the Homepage by the end of May 1999. Andy Larter shows the improvisatory nature of theories from action research (Winter 1998) in his response to being handed a 'racist' poem in one of his English lessons. By chance, the conversation with his pupil was video-taped and Andy has analysed his learning from experiencing himself as a living contradiction as he viewed the video. In the conversation intended to open up the issues of racism for discussion he saw his body language communicating a different message from the one he intended. Larter's theses shows a dialogical and dialectical form of representation for the in-service learning of a professional educator.

Peter Mellett's (1994) work may also hold the key to the development of a new Greek theory of knowledge. In his master's dissertation on 'Making the Break' Mellett asks, 'How can I undertake and understand my search for an enhanced comprehension of my life through moving beyond forms of existence that are founded in 'mere formal rationality and instrumental reason?'. His dissertation describes and explains his educational journey, in love and understanding, as he creates himself in his educational enquiry through dialogues with himself and others. He pushes himself to develop a new view of knowledge which acknowledges the value of the Aristotelian tradition without being contained within it.

The feminist values, classroom and school management practices of Erica Holley

and Moira Laidlaw.

I also want to draw your attention to the living theory theses of Erica Holley (1997) and Moira Laidlaw (1996). Holley shows her in-service teacher education as a senior manager in a secondary school as she works at both improving her own classroom practice and improving an appraisal system with her colleagues. She does this whilst retaining the integrity of her feminist values in the face of the influence of government-driven, economic rationalist policies (McTaggart, 1992).

Moira Laidlaw's work is another outstanding illustration of the value of teacher-research which is focused on improving classroom learning. You can access her living theory Ph.D. from the 'Living Theory' section and access two further papers by Moira from the 'Values' section of the Homepage. These papers show what it means for her to live her valuing of equal opportunities with her pupils. These two papers are particularly important because they focus on the provision of evidence in relation to her influence on her pupils' learning. They communicate her values as the living standards of judgement to which she holds herself accountable as a professional educator. She shows how the meanings of her values which are embodied in her educative relationships with her pupils, emerge through time in enquiries of the kind, 'How can I help you to improve your learning?'.

My own writings

In the section on 'JW's Writings' you will find a paper of mine on Creating a Living Educational Theory from Questions of the Kind, 'How do I Improve my Practice?'. This was first published in the Cambridge Journal of Education in 1989 and the reason I mention it is that other researchers have commented on its value for introducing teacher-researchers to the idea that they can create their own living theories. In this section, at the bottom of the list you will also find my papers for the BERA Symposium at AERA 1999, Whitehead (1999), the Keynote I am presenting today, and my 1998 contributions to the Educational Studies Association of Ireland, The Ontario Action Researcher and Teaching Today for Tomorrow.

International Links

With Tom Russell at Queens University, Ontario.

Perhaps the most significant section on the action research Homepage is the section which links to other Homepages of interest. This gives you immediate access to action research resources from around the world. If you are interested in initial teacher education Tom Russell at Queen's University in Ontario, Canada, has developed programmes of action research with his novice teachers and you will see, in the section on 'Novice Teachers at Queens University Ontario, with Tom Russell', that Tom has encouraged his novice teachers to undertake their own action research. Tom's credibility as a university teacher who is advocating action research approaches is largely due to his willingness to practice what he preaches

by engaging in his own self-studies (Korthagen & Russell, 1995).

With Southern Cross Homepage in Australia

Perhaps the best international link for action research is the Southern Cross University webpage on Action Research Resources. You will gain access from this page to several influential e-mail lists of action researchers from around the world and Bob Dick is doing a splendid job in facilitating the development of these communities.

With Action Research Ireland; Ontario Action Researcher; Teaching Today for Tomorrow.

One of the benefits of being invited to address international conferences is that it has given me the opportunity to see the excellent work being undertaken to support action research in teacher education in different countries. If you go into the Action Research Ireland Homepage and click on the Educational Studies Association of Ireland (ESAI) Action Research Conference 'Action Research and the Politics of Educational Knowledge'. You will be able to download my keynote on 'Developing Research-based professionalism through living educational theories'. In this paper I explained how the development of teacher professionalism in Ireland could learn from some of the mistakes of standards-driven agenda of the Teaching Training Agency in England and Wales and learn from some of the excellent work being carried out by Fran Squires at the Ontario College of Teachers. If you go into the Homepage of 'The Ontario Action Researcher' and click on the 'New Issue' you can download a paper on 'Continuously Regenerating Development Standards of Practice In Teacher Education: A Cautionary Note For The Ontario College of Teachers' (Delong & Whitehead 1999). This paper demonstrates the danger of applying a standards-driven curriculum for teacher education as a technical exercise. It shows the danger of stifling the teachers creative energies of mind which are needed to direct the technical skills.

If you select the Homepage of the electronic journal, 'Teaching Today for Tomorrow', a journal about education and teaching published by the Seven Oaks School Division, in Canada, and click on Issue 11 (Fall 1998) you will see find a keynote I presented to the Ontario Education Research Council Conference in 1997 on 'Educational Action Research and the Construction of Living Educational Theories'. This paper updates the ideas in the original paper in the 1989 Issue of the Cambridge Journal. The Action Research Kit joint produced by the Ontario Public School Teachers' Federation, Nippissing University and the Brant County Board in 1997 is also an excellent set of resources for those who want to support action research on a systems wide basis.

Integrating standards, teacher-led reform and central agency support in the creation of living educational theories in the process of helping students to improve the quality of their learning.

This brings me to my final point about the many lessons still to be learnt in the process of developing action research approaches to the improvement of teacher education. I am drawn to Elliott's point that:

“Centralized social engineering in the form of standards-led curriculum development cannot deliver the fundamental changes in pedagogy that will need to occur if our future citizens are not going to be anything more than passive consumers in a society controlled by market forces and governed by market values.” (Elliott, p. 159, 1998)

In the work I have presented so far I have stressed the importance of supporting individual teachers in their action research to improve their classroom practice through enquiring how to live their values more fully. There is much to be achieved within the present institutional and curriculum structures. There is also however, much that is constraining within the present structures. These constraints will need transforming into supports, if the full educational potential of teacher education is to be realised in classrooms with students. Understanding how to do this is where Elliott's views are most significant, along with the development of a participatory action research approach of the kind supported by Peter Reason (1994) in the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice (CARPP) at the University of Bath (see the links to CARPP from the 'Other Homepages'). Both Elliott and Reason stress the importance of collective action:

“Rather than disempowering teachers as active agents of educational change, as both the standards-led and teacher-led approaches tend to, the roles of central agencies in pedagogically driven curriculum development, as they are depicted above, empower them fundamentally to change their practice.”. (Elliott, p. 161, 1998).

If you wish to work at the development of action research and living theory approaches to teacher education I would hold this point at the focus of what you do. It is vital, in my view, to find the appropriate balance between support for teacher-led initiatives and the development of appropriate system's support from central agencies in relation to improving standards through living educational theories. In the living theories of Moira Evans, Kevin Eames, Moira Laidlaw, Erica Holley and Andy Larter, you will be able to see their impressive contribution to the development of action research approaches to teachers professional development. But, do please read Pam Lomax's (1999) Presidential Address to BERA 1998 in which she analyses five 'threats' within the English culture to the development of such approaches. There may be an implication for Greek Educational Researchers in her 'Threat number 4' (Lomax, p. 14, 1999) - academic journal editors and reviewers are predisposed to reject the type of research paper coming from a school-university partnership context. If you decide to develop living theory approaches to in-service teacher education, you may find it necessary to transform, alongside your practical initiatives in teacher education, the dominant theory of

knowledge of your universities.

By doing this you could provide, as Greek Educational Researchers, a central support on a global basis, for legitimating action research accounts in the Academy. I have suggested that such a theory of knowledge would have a dialogical and dialectical base and be grounded in the living theories of teacher-researchers as they ask, answer and research questions of the kind, 'How can I live a good and productive life?', 'How can I help you to improve your learning?' and 'How can we improve the educational experiences of the most vulnerable children in Bombay?'.

In conclusion I would like to thank the organisers of the conference for inviting me to speak to you today. My passion for education owes much to those imaginary conversations with your Greek citizens and academics who lived over two millennia ago and contributed so profoundly to Western views of Knowledge. I am hoping that we can move forward together into the new millennium with a sense of belonging to an international community of professional educators and educational researchers. I hope you can identify with my continuing passion for education. A passion which you could help to support through your creativity in contributing to new forms of educational knowledge in teacher education from the ancestral home of the originators of the Academy.

Jack Whitehead 31 March 1999

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