

3.2 RIGOUR IN AN ACTION RESEARCH ACCOUNT

Peggy Kok
MED Student
University of Bath
Bath BA2 7AY
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NOTE:- My assignment was divided into two parts. The extracts below are taken from the end of part one and the whole of part two. They are focussed on the application of Winter's criteria of validity to my work. The discussions described in the text are with Jan Winter, Leslie Jefferson, Jack Whitehead and Stephen Bailey - my colleagues on the MED programme. The appendices described in the text are too bulky to present here. They were submitted with the successfully submitted report for an MEd assignment on Action Research.

THE PLURAL STRUCTURE OF MY ACTION RESEARCH REPORT

The data in this inquiry is made up of my action research diary ([Appendix C](#)), the paper above and the transcript of the discussion on my paper ([Appendix D](#)) and an analysis of the transcript ([Appendix E](#)) which contains the insights I had gained from the collaborated efforts of my peers and tutor.

My inquiry in this Action Research module had metamorphosed from the intention to find out the effectiveness of my nonverbal skills in teaching to seeking a way to resolve the tension I experienced between the way I was (structured, organised, mechanistic) and the way I felt I should be (valuing people, reflective, dialectic). This turmoil within my head and body was recorded in my diary - the first account produced in this inquiry.

Born out of that tension was the paper presented above. This paper is an account (second one in this inquiry of mine) of how I found relief through writing about my tension trying to see a way to resolve the conflict of ideas in my head. The final piece of data is the critique of my second account in the form of a tapescript of the discussion on my paper and a videotape of the discussion.

The problem facing me now is how should these accounts be organised for analysis? I cannot resist (the positivist in me is not yet dead) designing a structure that has a logical flow to it - analysis and interpretation of data, conclusion and recommendations.

Winter (1989) typifies a conventional report as:

"linear, presenting a chronology of events, or a sequence of cause and effect; they are presented in the single voice of the author, who organizes evidence to support his or her conclusions, so that the report will seem authoritative and 'convincing' to readers."

However, because the process of Action Research seeks "differences, contradictions, possibilities, questions, as ways of opening up new avenues for action....and situations cannot be reduced to a consensus, but must be presented in terms of the multiplicity of viewpoints which make up the situation" (Winter, 1989) an Action Research report has to be expressed in a different format.

Winter considers the appropriate format for an Action report to be a 'plural structure' which consists of "various accounts and various critiques of those accounts, and ending not with conclusions (intended to be convincing) but with questions and possibilities (intended to be 'relevant' in various ways for different readers)."

At this point of my report, I am still struggling with this report. It is difficult for me not to have the familiar research report framework to guide me along. It is a very painful experience for me not to have a skeleton to fill out my research efforts. How I wish I can write under neat headings like "Analysis and interpretation of data" and "Conclusion and recommendations."

How do I present the "dialectical, reflexive, questioning and collaborative form of inquiry" (Winter, 1989) that is action research? How should a piece of action research be presented without using any positivistic framework and yet in the eyes of the world, measures up to the validity and reliability associated with scientific research? Action research is a highly personal endeavour, so how could it have general applicability?

I find solace in the following part of Winter's discussion of plural structure, his fifth principle in the conduct of Action-Research:

"...one does not need to address explicitly a universal audience or to utter a statement in the form of a universal law in order for one's words to have a general significance: 'significance' is, in a very important sense, in the mind of the beholder, as an interpretation which finds points of contact, of relevance, to which the beholder can relate."

I have all the data in my hands and the significant truths have already been extracted from the transcript of the discussion on my paper. I believe that amongst the people who read this action research report, there will be someone who will harmonise with the chords I struck within the structure of the situations I have presented in my diary, my paper and my analysis of my tapescript. Having said that I am convinced that my action research report so far has fulfilled the criterion of plurality of structure.

Logically, the analysis of my tapescript should be presented in the following paragraphs as it is the highlight of my report. I have relegated it to a position at the rear of this report not because it is unimportant but because at this point, a new concern has emerged: I am concerned now with whether my accounts will stand up to the scrutiny of those who:

"cast doubt upon the value of small-scale inquiry carried out with minimal resources by people actively engaged in the situations they are investigating." (Winter, 1989)

For readers who are interested in my original inquiry, they could read my accounts in Appendices C, D & E. For now I urgently need to find the answers to my new inquiry. Therefore, the progress of this report from this point onwards will be to investigate if my action research efforts have been rigorous enough to stand against comparisons with scientific research.

To facilitate that investigation, I shall use five of Winter's (1989) "Six principles for the conduct of Action-Research" as criteria for judgement. The fifth principle, that of plural structure, has in my view been followed closely and have been discussed above. In the following paragraphs I shall use examples from my accounts to show that I have fulfilled each of the remaining five criteria. I shall use the data from the analysis of the tapescript in Appendix D to prove my case. It will be for my readers to judge and decide if they are in agreement with my interpretations and claims.

PART 2: IS THERE RIGOUR IN MY ACTION RESEARCH INQUIRY IN PART 1?

Principle No. 1: Reflexive critique.

Winter (1989) explains the first principle, that of reflexivity, in the following way:

"The thesis of reflexivity begins by insisting upon modest claims: making judgements depends on examples from various personal experiences (not on representative samples of universally agreed categories). These examples can be analyzed, but no analysis will be complete or final, because inquiry will take the form of questioning claims rather than making claims. The result of the inquiry will thus take the form of a dialogue between writers and readers concerning possible interpretations of experience, rather than a single interpretation thrust upon a passive reader by a writer whose enquiry has resulted in certainty. It is this process of questioning claims which is itself a dimension of validity - not the only one but an important one."

Winter outlines the basic procedure of reflexive critique as follows:

- 1 Accounts will be collected, such as observation notes, interview transcripts, written statements from participants, or official documents.
- 2 The reflexive basis of these accounts will be made explicit, so that
- 3 claims may be transformed into questions, and a range of possible alternatives will be suggested, where previously particular interpretations have been taken for granted.

In the paragraphs that follow, I shall give examples of reflexive critique present in my inquiry with reference to the discussion on the paper I presented.

Having presented the gist of my paper to the group using a diagram which I had earlier put on the blackboard, I assumed the role of 'tutor' with the task of leading the group and in Jack's words, *"...to bring out of people here their own inquiries in relation to what you have written and to get some genuine questions coming which would be free and open, which will not be imposed as in skills training..."*.

Analysing the tape for evidence that I had performed this role assigned to me, left me with a sense of dissatisfaction. I could not honestly say that I had been successful in managing the group in this way. Most of the time, I was concerned with clarifying, answering, giving examples, views - hardly what a good discussion group leader would be doing. However, it is not my inability to fill out the role 'assigned' to me that I was unhappy about. It was my realisation my unquestioning acceptance of tasks given to me that woke me up to the fact that perhaps I should have made my feelings clear to people instead of complying ever so readily.

When Jack suggested that I took on the role of 'tutor' the day before the discussion, I was hesitant as I was doubtful if it was possible for me to simultaneously 'defend my paper' and take on the responsibility of charting the educational development of others. I did not voice my doubts strongly enough because Jack was the authority and I reluctantly agreed although I did say before I left him that I would have to "play it by ear" in the session the next day. But the fact remains that when tasks are delegated or assigned to me by those in authority to do so, I do not ask questions nor try to exert any influence by stating my case. If there is a job to be done, it should be done and done well, don't ask - that has been my philosophy.

On page 4 of the transcript ([Appendix D](#)), I stated emphatically that:

"...somebody has to be right, somebody has to tell me what to do, and if somebody tells me what to do I will make sure that I will do it to the best of my ability. Even here. The assignments - Jack says, you do a paper on the nature of teachers' knowledge, I never questioned or said that I would not do it, I will do, even the first AR (Action Research) - "Peggy you prepare a lesson plan." I never questioned why, did you notice that: Jack, I never asked you why because you were the teacher and you said to do it and every step of the way he said, "do this, do this and do this" and I did it."

Here I had made explicit a claim that I had been given orders to do things. This has consistently been my interpretation of such situations in which I perceive the other party as having more power than I. I would have lived with that belief probably for the rest of my life had it not been for Jan who remarked:

"That's an interesting perception of what's happened between you and Jack there because I don't perceive what's happened to me over the time that we've been together I have been told to do this, do this and do this and I have done them. I am not sure whether that's been true for you either because you perceived things that way."

That observation prompted me to ask Jack for confirmation and what he said was a revelation to me. He said:

"I think I did make suggestions but you took them as instructions."

I had not imagined that the words I had interpreted as instructions were possibly just suggestions which I did not have to obey.

Reflexive critique in this case has opened my eyes to the fact my conditioned responses to what I perceive as orders has deprived me of the freedom to explore possibilities and exercise choices which could result in better quality work.

Here is another instance of reflexive critique in my inquiry:

The second most significant event in the discussion was my discovery that despite my consciousness of the fact that people's opinions should be valued and respected, I was observed to be rather undemocratic in an instance when I had the power to overrule the wishes of the majority. This observation was made by Jack when he said:

"You see, yesterday we were talking, and I was trying to suggest that your task today would be to bring out of people here their own inquiries in relation to what you have written and to get some genuine questions coming which would be free and open, which will not be imposed as in skills training. But when you offered choice to us at the beginning I knew how difficult that was for you and then as soon as you got one person....(laughter). Because it was what you wanted to do." ([Appendix D](#), page 5)

Jack was referring to the choices I offered to the group at the start of the discussion as to how they would like to have the session conducted. One of the choices was that I gave a short presentation using a diagram I had previously put up on the board. The other choice was that people would just respond freely to what I had written in my paper. Although the majority in the group preferred free response, I eagerly sprang to my feet to give a presentation as soon as one person had indicated such a preference.

Jack's evidence was corroborated by Steve and Leslie:

Steve: *"Because it was what she'd wanted to do. First piece of evidence she finds to support, she gets to the blackboard."*

Leslie: *"Yes, going to the blackboard would enable her to be the instructor again."*

These comments confirmed the fact that I still very much wanted to hold on to the control that a teacher had. By going to the board, I could do what I had planned beforehand and to give information because only then was I confident that everyone would at least have grasped the gist of my paper. Although my actions were natural responses to the situation, I had not realised their effects on people in the group especially those whose wishes I had ignored not intentionally, but because I was "desperate to get to the board". Perhaps I could have asked the people who had wanted free response to my paper their reasons for their choice instead of just counting hands.

Reflexive critique - people questioning my behaviour and telling me how they have interpreted my actions - has enabled me to be more sensitive and respectful of the expressed needs of others. It has made me aware that there are other viewpoints apart from mine.

Lastly, where reflexive critique is concerned, I feel I have to mention that I was totally oblivious to the fact that my use of the masculine gender practically throughout the paper I presented had in Moira's words dismissed "half the population...". I had not thought that using man as generic was anything wrong as back home, we do not fuss about such things. However, Moira's indignation and anger set me thinking about this issue of equality between man and woman and I begin to see the logic behind it. It is not just words we are quibbling over, it is the fight for recognition as equals that had made Moira angry and having been there to experience her response to the way I had chosen to represent man/womankind, awoken me to another reality that I had been aware of but did not give much thought to until now.

Principle No. 2: Dialectic critique

This principle is based on the concept of 'dialectics' as "a general theory of the nature of reality and of the process of understanding reality...". On this basis, Winter proposes a method of analysis which helps the researcher decide what is significant from amongst the numerous possible interpretations one can come up with when one takes a step back and reflects upon them. In simple terms, 'dialectics':

"...puts forward a coherent general theory both of the nature and structure of reality and also the process of analyzing and understanding reality...dialectics gives us a principled basis for making selections. It thereby helps to contain our potentially vast amounts of data and interpretation within the practical limits (for example, time, resources) of practitioner research."

Using dialectics as an approach to analysing data entails an investigation of:

"(1)the overall context of relations which gives them a unity in spite of their apparent separateness, and (2) the structure of internal contradictions - behind their apparent unity - which gives them a tendency to change, in spite of their apparent fixity."

Was there dialectic critique in my inquiry?. I would say yes. I had assembled my thoughts, beliefs and feelings into a paper and what I had presented in that paper was a structure of my reality - my work background, the political climate that shaped and sustained my thinking, how that thinking had been influenced by what I had learnt about action research and the writing and thoughts of those for and against positivism and finally, how I managed to find a way to accommodate the new ideas I had been exposed to within my life's framework. This was the definition of the scope of my inquiry.

The contradictions were picked out by my peers in the discussion of my paper. I had openly supported social engineering because it was, to me, the only logical way for us as a young nation to survive and progress. At the end of the paper, I said:

"I have thoughts, ideas and knowledge that were not there before. Now I look beyond ostensibly invincible structures and see a way of making life within it more meaningful and valued. I propose to introduce change in teacher training slowly and given time and modest successes there may be a possibility where there can be cooperation between government and people in working towards reform in teaching training in the vocational and educational setting."

The first few questions that followed my presentation were:

"What would an implementation of these ideas do for your society as a whole?...What is your motivation really? Is your system, the existing system working so poorly in terms of (a)producing people with skills and (b)producing happy people, or satisfied people or people who are going to live a full and rich life or are there any shortcomings in any of those departments that you see that AR can ultimately improve?"

Peter probably could not understand why I should now embrace the philosophy of Action Research when I had spent half of my paper glorifying the political system and economy of my country and even till the very end, I wrote: "I accept the way my country is run and I give my government my fullest support and loyalty."

It could have appeared that I was holding two ideas at the same time where what might be more plausible would be to have one or the other but not both together.

Though in thinking, I have moved into the realms of values as against structure and concern with the ends and not the means, in practice I have not really been transformed by what I have learnt and accepted through action research - democracy, justice, valuing people. The observations by the group set off contradictions in me. I want to be more humane, less mechanistic but all the ghosts of my past come to haunt me and to impose structures, order and control in the way I relate to the world and people. These contradictions are there and it will take some time and a lot of conscious effort on my part to resolve. I don't just feel that they are there, they were perceptively noted by Jan when she said: (Page 10, Appendix D):

"I think she has oscillated between two extremes....This term you have been going in a different direction that you were going in the last. And I am not sure what I am left with here except you are in a lot of contradictions because there is a lot there that is unspoken."

Steve shares similar feelings when he said:

"Yes, I got a feeling that there is no synthesis yet. You have stated the thesis and antithesis and in some sense you are leaving the synthesis somewhere in the future..." (Appendix D, page 10)

These observations accurately describe the tension and contradictions within me from the time when I started to look for a focal point to build my paper around. With the completion of the paper I have released some of that tension in theoretical proposals but not in reality. Jack illuminated the group with the following explanation:

"...One of the central points about education and training is the point in which you are accredited, where judgements are made, where you are assessed. In relation to power and control that is where you begin to see how a system is organised....It may appear to be a throwaway line but I think it is very significant: "I do not care if I don't get an 'A' for this paper". I suppose, I think we all ought to care. If we feel that the quality of the work we've judged in relation to the criteria....Peggy's work itself justifies that judgement and we are in a set of power relations that might come to a different conclusion using the same criteria. Then it is what you do about it that the synthesis takes place. When she gets back to Singapore, she intends to do certain things. We'll only see the synthesis in action there."

I think I do not need to restate the obvious. The principle of dialectic critique was alive and kicking throughout my whole inquiry.

Principle No. 3: Collaborative resource

The third principle - that of collaborative resource indicates:

"...a process of simultaneously giving weight to the understandings contributed by all members, and at the same time a process of 'deconstructing' the various contributions so that we can use them as resources for 'reconstructing' new categories and interpretations."

Unlike positivistic research where the researcher is detached from those whom he observes, working collaboratively in action research means that:

"...it is the variety of differences between the viewpoints that makes them into a rich resource, and it is by using this resource (the differences between viewpoints) that our analysis can begin to move outwards from its inevitably personal starting point towards ideas which have been interpersonally negotiated."

In the previous examples given to illustrate reflexive and dialectic critique, I have shown how through other peoples' questioning of my statements and actions that had resulted in a broadening of my mind towards certain things. Reflexive critique would have been impossible without the operation of the principle of collaborative resource. Without collaborative resource, I would have been much poorer in knowledge, probably living in ignorant bliss that much of what I believed in was unquestionably right.

Principle No. 4: Risk

This principle states:

"that initiators of research must put themselves 'at risk' through the process of investigation....the process is not merely one of exposure to refutation, but of exploring possibilities for transformation....In engaging in a process where the purpose is change (innovation at the level of practice and the development of new insights concerning practice) we are part of the situation which is undergoing change. We have no theoretical basis for exempting ourselves from the

processes we set in motion, and we do not want to be exempt; on the contrary, we want to change because we want to learn as much as possible..."

I think my enquiry has satisfied this criterion fully. Writing that paper for discussion was a 'risk'. I had consolidated my thoughts and views into 15 pages and I was prepared for people to question my claims, assertions, beliefs and proposals and to emerge from their scrutiny with a much wider and informed world view. Although the discussion did not focus on everything I had written it had resulted in the crystallisation of some significant insights and realisations that benefited me educationally and professionally. If anyone in the group was at risk, it was certainly me. I still remember what Steve said to me at the end of the whole ordeal (presenting the paper and having it discussed). He said I was "very brave". There can be no bravery without the element of risk present.

Furthermore, towards the end of my paper, I had made some proposals on how I would change the face of teacher training in the VITB. I have committed myself to black and white statements these plans of mine. It is done now and I am exposing myself to the risk that I may not be able to get these plans to materialise. In research done in the positivist tradition, all I needed to do was to make recommendations and apart from the risk that my report was not valid or reliable, I could rest easy once the report is out.

Principle No. 6: Theory, practice and transformation

Winter emphasises that:

"theory and practice are not two distinct entities but two different and yet interdependent and complementary phases of the change process."

There are two action research inquiries contained in this report. The first one is ready for implementation. I have surveyed the theories produced a paper that is a synthesis of my thoughts and reading, gathered valuable insights through discussion with my peers and all that is left is to go back to my place of work and apply the theories to my practice to transform it. I can anticipate that the transformation will not be a smooth straightforward matter but that there will be a continual cause-and-effect relationship between theory and practice.

"...theory, being based in practice, is itself transformed by the transformations of practice. Theory and practice do not therefore, confront one another in mutual opposition: each is necessary to the other for the continued vitality and development of both."

The second inquiry is just at the synthesis stage. It requires the validation of a collaborative group before implementation can take place. If I may project the course of development of this second inquiry, I would say that the outcome of a debate amongst my peers as to whether I have satisfied the six criteria of rigour in action-research would be in the form of insights that would provide me with guidance in doing future action-research in a rigorous way.

The mental exercise of synthesising my action research accounts in Part 1 with the six principles for doing Action-Research has been a worthwhile pursuit of knowledge. Although, the inquiry in Part 2 is incomplete, my understanding of Action Research has deepened and I now have a structure to work with. It is a different structure from the one that I am familiar with but having acquired in theory how to build such a structure in conducting research, I am more confident of my ability to conduct such research when I am back at work in VITB.

EPILOGUE

Last week, I went to see a movie entitled "Dances with Wolves". It was the most beautiful and touching film I have ever seen in my life. It was about a soldier who volunteered to be posted to the American frontier because he wanted to see what it was like. When he arrived at the post, he found it deserted but he decided to stay on. He rebuilt and cleaned up the place and passed his leisure writing a diary. One day, a Sioux Indian medicine man came across the post and was examining it when the soldier returned. The Sioux Indian was startled and took flight immediately.

A series of encounters took place after that and the soldier soon got to gain the trust and friendship of the Indians. He learnt their language and married a white girl who was brought up by the medicine man. Slowly he assimilated their ways of life but he was always bothered by the fact that these beautiful people would one day be pushed to the end of the world by the white men. How was he, a powerless individual able to help them? He understood them but that was not enough. He was captured by soldiers but he did not betray his friends. He was one of them and when he was tortured by the soldiers, he proclaimed his new identity in the language of the Sioux saying that his name was Dances with wolves. That was the final break with his

heritage. Why did a white man choose to be Sioux Indian when all the white man did not think that Indians were entitled to a free life on land that was rightfully theirs?

The difference is that this one man had lived amongst the Sioux and experienced their way of life and had truly understood that Red Indians are not just riders on horseback that you take aim and shoot at whereas the rest of the white men were only interested in carrying orders to shoot on sight.

What has this movie got to do with Action Research? Well, I could not help thinking about it in action research terms. The dialectics amongst the Sioux leaders while conferencing and the dialectics between the Sioux medicine man and the hero helped to bring both parties closer together. The soldier was a living contradiction. He was white and a soldier and therefore he should look upon the Sioux as enemies. Yet, because he was alone and was answerable only to his own actions, he got to become their friend. Technically they were enemies but in reality they were friends. He had to resolve that tension. One way was to negotiate a peace treaty between the Sioux and the white men. If he was able to do that with the understanding he had acquired while he was making his 'inquiry' he would have succeeded in bringing people towards a more productive and peaceful world. Unfortunately, he was powerless but he chose to live and fight as a Sioux for survival on the enclosing frontier.

In a way, I could relate to the main character in the movie because I have experienced the power of dialectics in helping me to understand myself and others and the knowledge I now possess gives me the ability to think, without positivistic frameworks, about how things could be improved at work, and how life and relationships at the workplace can be improved or sustained at a quality that everyone agrees is desirable.

I see the present stage of my development in action research as being at the point where the soldier, out of loneliness at his post, built a fire and did a Red Indian dance round it. He was able to forget his inhibitions and the fact he was white and for the duration of the dance he was just communicating with his friends through dance unaware that they were watching him. He was called Dances with wolves because a wolf was near him when he was dancing. Perhaps I may be called at this stage of my educational development -Dances with Action Research. Perhaps I am shedding my inhibitions more and more now that my understanding of Action Research has deepened through the two inquiries I carried out in this assignment.

How much more meaningful it is to do research where:

"The central task of inquiry is to devote reason to the enhancement of wisdom - wisdom being understood here as the desire, the active endeavour, and the capacity to discover and achieve what is desirable and of value in life, both for oneself and for others. Wisdom includes knowledge and understanding but goes beyond them in also including: the desire and active striving for what is of value, the ability to see what is of value, actually and potentially, in the circumstances of life, the ability to experience value, the capacity to help realize what is of value for oneself and for others, the capacity to use and develop knowledge, technology and understanding as needed for the realization of value. Wisdom, like knowledge, can be conceived of, not only in personal terms. We can thus interpret the philosophy of wisdom as asserting: the basic task of rational inquiry is to help us develop wiser ways of living, wiser institutions, customs and social relations, a wiser world." (Maxwell, 1984).

I would like to think that I have been touched in a special way with an educational knowledge that has enriched my mind even if it still has not broken habits formed through the years. I would like to think that the knowledge I have acquired is the kind of integrative knowledge (Kolb, 1984) that enables me to feel, understand, judge and create in a holistic way. That I face the world and see what was once my whole world being transformed:

"...into but one of a multidimensional array of world to experience."

I hope that this new-found knowledge will take root and grow within me so that some day other people can be touched and transformed by me in the same way that I have been because:

"The dawn of integrity comes with the acceptance of responsibility for the course of one's own life. For in taking responsibility for the world, we are given back the power to change it." (Kolb, 1984).

I do not wish to change the world - only a very small part of it, for a start.

The above work has drawn on the concept of 'rigour' appropriate for action research from Winter, R. (1989) *Learning from Experience*. Falmer.