

# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LEARNING

Volume 10, 2003

Article: LC03-0083-2003

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WHAT LEARNING MEANS: Proceedings of the Learning Conference 2003



Edited by Mary Kalantzis and Bill Cope



**International Journal of Learning**  
Volume 10, 2003

This journal and individual papers published at <http://LearningConference.Publisher-Site.com/>  
a series imprint of theUniversityPress.com

First published in Australia in 2004 by Common Ground Publishing Pty Ltd at  
<http://LearningConference.Publisher-Site.com/>

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ISSN 1447-9494 (Print)  
ISSN 1447-9540 (Online)

The International Journal of Learning is a peer-refereed journal which is published annually. Full papers submitted for publication  
are refereed by the Associate Editors through an anonymous referee process.

Papers presented at the Tenth International Literacy and Education Research Network Conference on Learning.  
Institute of Education, University of London 15-18 July 2003

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# Action Research and the Challenges of Urban Education

**Dave Allen, Cassandra Bolden-Haraway, Mary Brydon-Miller, Abbie Cook, Beverly Eby, Warren Foster, Gisele Mack, Kelly Obarski, Weslie Ostendorf, Sally Thurman, and Kerry Welch**

## Abstract

*Using our experiences as students and instructor in an action research seminar as examples, we discuss the concept of transformation – personal, professional and institutional. Whether we are examining on-line learning for high school students at risk of not graduating, developing mentoring relationships among women in educational leadership roles, working with low-income women to develop literacy skills, or encouraging investment in local minority-owned businesses, these action research projects are making a difference in a variety of school and community settings. And as participants in this year-long action research course, instructor and students alike, we are also being changed. We are finding new ways of understanding our own practice as teachers, school administrators, and community activists. We are coming to understand the concept of research from a different perspective, developing challenging links between theory and practice, and discovering new ways of recommitting ourselves as scholar/activists to achieving positive social change.*

## Introduction

Education is, at its most fundamental level, a process of transformation. As teachers and school administrators, we hope to transform the ways in which our students approach the process of learning by allowing them to see education as a joyful and enriching experience. And we hope that these same students will then go on to transform their own neighbourhoods and workplaces, taking the lessons they have gained in our classrooms regarding cooperation, understanding, and caring into their lives as employers and employees, as active participants in their communities, and as parents and caregivers who provide love and support to the next generation of children. But in order for education to serve this transformational role, the process of education itself must be reformed. We believe that educational action research has a critical role to play in this process of change.

This article reflects the collective response of a group of students and our instructor to a year-long course in action research. As students in this course, each of us worked within a specific school or community setting to identify an issue or concern, to develop collaborative relationships with students, teachers, and community leaders, to work together with these partners to gather and analyse data related to the issue we had identified, and to then take action focused on addressing these concerns. In co-authoring this paper we have tried to represent both our

shared understanding of educational action research as well as the many different ways in which we have experienced this process. It is our hope that in reading this discussion you can work with us to broaden our notions of what constitutes legitimate intellectual discourse, accepting that no one point of view is being represented here, but rather the multiple voices of our own classroom discussion. We have attempted to give equal time and consideration to the efforts of each co-author and, in doing so, to represent the breadth of action research in terms of issues, methods, and the theoretical approaches we use to frame our work. We have also included a number of teacher-to-teacher sections (set off here in italics) in which we have the opportunity to speak out as individuals to our readers. But beyond our many differences, we share a dedication to the notion of education as a location for positive social change and so you will also see reflected in this paper a common, and unapologetic, focus on activism. Educational action research provides the opportunity for us acknowledge the insights and expertise that we, as educational practitioners, can contribute to the process of transforming schools and communities and it provides us the tools we need to guide this process of change.

### **Teacher to Teacher ...**

Participatory action research is a powerful tool for those who are actually in the teaching field. Education involves working with and through others in constantly changing, interrelated complex systems to practice our craft as “development in use.” (Fullan, 2001, p. 109). Action research is a natural fit as we participate in learning communities to better our practices. I struggled to expand my preconceived notion of research beyond the elementary science fair process but found the participatory problem-solving model much better suited to the praxis of learning that is required in schools. (Weslie Ostendorf, Special Education Depart Chairperson, Milford Exempted Village Schools.)

### **Exploring Opportunities for Action Research in an Urban Setting**

In the spring of 2001, the year the Urban Educational Leadership doctoral program opened at the University of Cincinnati, a young black man was killed by city police. The rioting and civil unrest that resulted from this event brought some brief attention to the economic and political inequities faced by poor and minority residents of the city. But this attention was short-lived, and the lack of adequate funding for education, unemployment among the city’s residents, the need for reform of police practices, and an unwillingness among political leaders to tackle these tough problems continue to plague the city. Focusing on the educational system in particular, the Cincinnati Public School System serves more than 40,000 children, over 70% of whom are African American students, and over 60% of whom are eligible for free or reduced cost lunches (a way of measuring overall levels of poverty in the community).

At a broader national level, we in the U.S. are faced with the tyranny of standardized testing and an apparent belief that educational reform is made possible by further punishing teachers and local schools already struggling to deal with inadequate budgets, disenfranchised families, and children whose need for individual attention and instruction are constantly undermined by the rigid demands of “one-size-fits-all” curricula designed to increase test scores.

The Urban Educational Leadership program was designed as a response to these concerns. The mission statement for the program defines its central goal as preparing “dedicated educational leaders who understand and appreciate the challenges of urban areas and who are able to make a positive difference in urban schools and communities.”

A major component of this program is the year-long action research sequence. The course is open to doctoral students from throughout the university and the students who participated in preparing this paper come from the Curriculum and Instruction doctoral program in Teacher Education as well as the Urban Educational Leadership program in Educational Studies. Nevertheless, the course was conceived of as a cornerstone of the Urban Educational Leadership program and was designed to give students the experience of developing and carrying out their own action research projects.

Each year students in the action research sequence identify an issue of particular concern to them and the members of their communities and develop an action research project aimed at developing both a better theoretical understanding of the problem, as well as practical ways of addressing it within their own practice or their own institutions. This year the projects included a diverse set of issues, and we, as students in the course, developed an equally diverse set of techniques for bringing together project participants, for gathering pertinent data, and for applying our new understanding to addressing these concerns.

To summarize briefly, the projects dealt with both school and community issues. Kerry Welch’s project, for example, looks at ways of changing the physical environment of one of the student program offices on the University of Cincinnati campus in order to increase minority student involvement, while Warren Foster is using an action research model to examine a community-based effort to increase spending in local minority-owned businesses by the Cincinnati Public School system. Cassandra Bolden-Haraway’s project looks at increasing the self-efficacy of the adult learners with whom she is working – low-income women working to complete their high school equivalency requirements.

While all of the projects focus on increased collaboration among community members, two students in particular made this the central aim of their projects. Sally Thurman is working with other women educational leaders to rekindle a women’s mentoring network, while Bev Eby’s project involves a partnership between her own school in the Cincinnati Public School System and a school in New Orleans.

Technology, too, has played a fundamental role in our student projects. Abbie Cook, for example, looks at the experience of students using independent, self-paced online courses to complete high school requirements, while Kelly Obarski examines the use of online discussion as a mentoring tool for new classroom teachers.

Three of the students in the course decided to focus on specific issues in their own schools and classrooms. Dave Allen looks at the challenges of urban students relocated to more affluent, suburban schools; Gisele Mack at ways of increasing parental involvement in her school; and Weslie Ostendorf at teacher training around a specific reading assessment and intervention tool.

As you can see from these brief descriptions, we are using action research in a wide variety of educational and community settings. To be honest, some of the projects were more successful than others, and they all encountered significant

challenges along the way, but at the same time we all agree that action research has transformed our view of research and has had a profound impact on our own professional practice.

### **Teacher to Teacher ...**

Action research in the classroom can be a way to refresh, rejuvenate, and rekindle excitement in teaching and learning. Trying something new in the classroom – inquiring, evaluating, and reflecting on the process and the outcome is action research. Consciously focusing on processes and outcomes during the teaching and/or learning process is action research.

In my own professional practice I track student progress (attendance, grades, participation, and peer evaluations) in a unit involving literature circles. By consciously focusing my attention on the processes and outcomes of student learning and my facilitation role, I find what pieces work well and what pieces need to be adjusted.

Being an action researcher is a characteristic inherent in all good teachers. Being conscious of and learning more about action research and reflective practice can make teachers better action researchers. Teacher action researchers develop improved teaching practices and therefore set the stage for improved student learning. (Abbie C. Cook, Classroom teacher, Cincinnati Public School System.)

### **Defining Educational Action Research**

Reason and Bradbury define action research generally as “a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview” (2001, p. 1).<sup>1</sup> Looking specifically at the practice of action research within the field of education, Sue Noffke suggests that it is, “at once, a technology – that is, a set of things one can do, a set of political commitments that acknowledges, however tacitly, that educational (and other) lives are filled with injustices – and a moral and ethical stance that recognizes the improvement of human life as a goal” (1995, 4). Our approach to the practice of educational action research is deeply rooted in the work of Paulo Freire, Myles Horton, and other educational and social activists and it is from them that we have come to identify the core values we associate with action research such as social justice, democratic participation and community empowerment.

In examining the fit between action research and education, one of the students in our course, Sally Thurman, put it succinctly, “it’s what we should be doing – it’s a natural.” Bev Eby, another student in the class, echoed this sentiment. She said, “We are by nature action researchers.” But, she went on to observe, “It took a whole quarter to learn that it was okay to do this.” Most of us have taken a number of previous research methods courses, and Bev’s comment reflects the fact that

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<sup>1</sup> To be honest, they offer this definition somewhat reluctantly because they recognize that there are many approaches to conducting this kind of participatory, social change oriented research and that at different times and within different disciplines the same basic principles might be called by a variety of different names.

action research provides a radically different approach to the process of generating new knowledge about educational practices – an approach that respects the knowledge and skills of teachers and school administrators and that sees schools as important sites of community transformation and development.

### **Theoretical Frameworks of Educational Action Research**

One emphasis of the course is on introducing students to theoretical frameworks which might serve as lenses through which to view their action research projects. We focus on theories that reflect the social change focus of action research, such as feminist, postcolonial, and critical race theory. Feminist theory (see *e.g.* Brydon-Miller, Maguire, and McIntyre, 2004) with its attention to issues of identity and concern for understanding the ways in which gender influences our daily experiences and opportunities, is an important foundation for much of our work. And, of course, education remains a field in which gender plays a major role in determining who makes decisions and holds power – most classroom teachers and school staff members are still women while the majority of top administrative roles continue to be filled by men. This disparity makes the work done by Bev Eby and Sally Thurman, both school administrators interested in examining the experience of women in leadership positions, especially important.

Given the student population of the Cincinnati Public School system, which, as noted, has a majority of students who are African American, and the racially charged issues facing the city, we've also found that critical race theory has been a significant framework in shaping our understanding of action research in an urban educational setting. The emphasis on issues of representation, and the notion of counterstorytelling (Delgado, 2000), have been especially important in informing the way in which we view our role within the research process and in guiding us in the development of more effective strategies to allow project participants the means to tell their own stories. Cassandra Bolden-Haraway uses such a critical race theory perspective in examining the experience of low-income women working to earn their high school equivalency. But it is also key in Weslie Ostendorf's analysis of the barriers she encountered in trying to plan collaborative professional development programs for reading teachers – as she discovered, teacher responses and involvement differed significantly depending on who was "telling the story" of the goals of the proposed training.

### **Innovative Methods for Gathering Data in Educational Action Research**

Educational action research draws on both qualitative and quantitative methods to generate data (Stringer, 2004). But there are also a number of more participatory, more interactive, methods which have been developed specifically for this approach to research. One example is photovoice, a way of using photographs taken by research project participants themselves to record and then to reflect upon their own experience (Lykes, 2001; Wang, 1999). Steve Kroeger, one of the students from the first year of the AR course who later served as a co-teacher in this most recent sequence, is currently using this technique as the basis of his dissertation on at-risk middle-school aged students. He gives disposable cameras to the students, trains them on their use, and then asks them to discuss the resulting images. He and the other teachers on his team have found this a very effective way

of engaging these students in a discussion of issues of concern to them and that it has also given the teachers new insights into the lives of these children.

Another method we've found very effective in helping groups of participants to begin to understand the different aspects of an issue and how they are related is concept mapping. As an example, in the first year of the course students were divided into two groups, one group was primarily made up of teachers and school administrators. The other group was not as directly involved in the public schools, although most were parents. Each group was then asked to work together to generate and record on 3x5 cards a set of words related to the concept of "parental involvement" and then to arrange these cards on the floor in a sort of "map". After doing this the two groups were invited to look over each other's work and to discuss the differences and similarities they saw in the two configurations. The fact that teachers and parents had radically different views of what "parent involvement" means was made clear through the marked differences in their responses to this exercise.

### **Challenges to Conducting Educational Action Research**

While some of the challenges we faced represent the kind of problems inevitably encountered in any such participatory process – people not showing up for meetings, disagreements among participants, those in authority pulling rank, pulling resources, or simply pulling out – some of these challenges bear further examination since they suggest more structural issues involved in efforts to carry out university-sponsored action research projects in educational and community settings.

Probably our most frustrating experience as a group was in trying to deal with our own human subjects review board. Some of this was, no doubt, due to our own lack of experience in preparing such proposals, but to a large extent the problems seemed to grow out of a lack of understanding of the nature and goals of action research on the part of the members of the Board themselves. As an example, Bev's initial project proposal involved her in working with a colleague in New Orleans to do a participatory evaluation of that principal's practice. This is something the other principal wanted. She and Bev had collaborated in the past and were eager to work together again. But despite a letter from the principal to the review board telling them (politely) that she could handle herself and they should back off, the Board continued to object to Bev's project finally causing her to reconstruct the entire purpose of the collaboration. We hope that by meeting with the chairperson of the Board in the fall and perhaps offering training for all Board members regarding action research, that we can avoid such problems in the future.

Other ethical issues, however, continue to face us. One particularly important issue is in trying to find ways of doing research on our own practice, and in our own institutions, without misusing our power within these settings to coerce others into participating in our research. Because some of the students have considerable authority within their schools as principals and assistant principals, it might be possible for teachers and students to feel compelled to take part in these efforts, despite our assurances that there is no requirement that they do so, nor any penalty should they decide not to participate. Dave Allen, an assistant principal, encountered this dilemma in trying to find more effective ways to support urban students relocating in his largely upper-middle class suburban school. Would the

teachers in his school feel that they were able to decline to participate in his study? Could he or should he compel them to take part in the interventions he suggested if this would result in the best outcome for the students themselves? Action research hasn't dealt adequately with this on a theoretical level and so we have few resources to draw upon in our efforts to resolve these issues. We must choose to act, but do so with a constant eye toward the dangers of abuse that accompany any position of power (Brydon-Miller, 2004).

The issue of representation has also been a concern. How can we allow the participants in our research projects to tell their own stories? Our reading of theory, particularly of critical race theory with its focus on the notion of counterstorytelling, has provided important insights into this issue and has given us a sense of the multiple ways in which any issue might be understood by the various stakeholders involved. As mentioned earlier, Weslie Ostendorf encountered this dilemma in her project when school system administrators chose to represent her project to teacher participants in a way very different from the discussions she was having with teachers in her own school, in order to justify the cancellation of an opportunity for teachers to reflect together on a new assessment method. On the other hand, teachers who had the opportunity to learn about the project from Weslie were eager to participate in the collaboration. The goal, then, is to find more effective ways of seeing that these other points of view are heard.

The dual roles of teacher or principal within the school on the one hand, and as student researcher on the other, can lead to potential conflicts, as well. Abbie Cook describes her decision to wait to interview her seniors until they had completed their requirements for graduation in order to avoid the possibility of coercion, then being faced with the fact that many of them would only finish at the last minute and might not have time to take part in her study before they graduated and left the school. She was able to complete the project and to avoid conflicts of interest by waiting and conducting interviews immediately after her students completed their work, but making this more ethical decision also made it difficult for her as a student researcher to complete her own academic work on time.

In order for students to carry out action research projects in school and community settings in which such issues can affect the student's ability to carry out the research, it is important to emphasize the process over the final product and to focus attention on what the students and their school and community participants have gained through carrying out an action research project rather than worrying about specific outcomes or results.

### **Teacher to teacher ...**

I would remind researchers that AR requires a commitment. As a mindset for initiating an AR study, it should probably be regarded less as research and more as service. The process involves serving the constituents of whatever projects you choose and lives are involved, unlike more quantitative research, where the participants are unlikely to be affected unless results warrant changes to policy or practice. With AR, affecting the participants is the whole point and you really can't ethically or morally enter into those relationships without a sincere commitment.

Another consideration would be the people on the periphery who are going to be affected by the project. For example, I chose to work with students who underutilized our services. Although the context of the project was the physical

environment, the participants' observations regarding staff attitudes and behaviours challenged all of us to re-evaluate ourselves and recommit to serving students in new and different ways. Most of the staff did not have relationships with these students and did not understand the context from which the comments emerged. Although they have responded well, initially it was difficult for many of the staff to embrace these observations and suggestions. (Kerry P. Welch, Assistant Director, Student Activities and Leadership Development, University of Cincinnati.)

### **Transformation Revisited**

Which brings us back to the notion of transformation. Through the process of learning about and engaging in action research we have come to see research not as an irrelevant hurdle to be overcome as part of graduate study, nor as an esoteric practice carried out by experts, but as an integral part of our own professional practice as teachers and educational administrators; something we value enough to pass it along to others; something we will continue to study, to practice, and to write about.

At the same time, while we recognize that each of these projects is modest in scale and can effect only a fairly limited kind of social change, we believe in the cumulative impact of many small efforts. We are educational leaders, and as such, we have the opportunity – and the obligation – to make significant changes in educational policies and practices, both locally and nationally. We bring to the process our passion for bringing about such change, as well as an ability to do so – an ability enhanced by our new understanding of educational action research, and we have real hope that together we can create more humane, learner-centred, and creative schools and communities.

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