

ENHANCING PROFESSIONALISM THROUGH ACTION RESEARCH

INTRODUCTION

This guide is designed to help you enhance your professionalism through a systematic study of practical questions of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' or 'How do I live my values more fully in my practice?'. The term 'research' may be off putting to a number of you because you may associate it with your previous experience of abstract theorising which has little direct relevance to your practice. You may begin by rejecting the idea that your professionalism will be enhanced through your action research as you describe and explain your own educational development in the process of improving the quality of learning with your pupils and students. You may also feel sceptical about the value of a view of educational theory which holds that your value-laden explanations of your professional practice are constructing a living educational theory which has within it a view of human nature and a view of a good social order in what our communities and society are in the process of becoming.

I hope that those of you who feel like this will find this guide persuades you to conduct an action enquiry. For those who have committed themselves to produce an action research case study of their own professional practice I hope that you find this guide provides you with good examples from the lives of other professionals.

My own interest in producing this guide is grounded in my work as a university academic. I am committed to the idea of a university which upholds values of freedom, justice, democracy, truth, excellence and beauty. I am also committed to the creation and testing of a form of educational theory which can describe and explain our lives as individual learners as we explore what it means to live these values as fully as we can in our practice. I understand that I can only continue this kind of enquiry within the university because my society provides the university with the cash to continue its existence. In other words the economic foundations of our society are necessary to my work in the university. I want to emphasise that, probably unlike yourselves, I see my primary responsibility as the creation and testing of educational knowledge rather than the education of my students. In other words I am attempting to make my own contribution to education through a study of my own educational development as I explore what my values mean in the social contexts in which I attempt to live them more fully in my practice. Through such study I hope to reveal the nature of the values, logic and methodology which you will find useful in the conduct of your own educational enquiries with your pupils and students. This is not to say that I don't value my work as a tutor. I am saying that I have not made my educative relationships with others the focus on my research.

In producing this guide I recognise I am writing for those of you who have a primary responsibility for the education of others. Thus I will draw my examples from teacher researchers who see their primary responsibility in terms of enhancing the quality of their pupils' learning. They view the creation of professional knowledge as significant but as of secondary importance.

In organising the material for this guide I am making a number of assumptions about who you are, the way you learn, what you want and what you will need. I want to support those of you who are already asking yourselves questions of the kind, 'How do I improve my practice?' and who want to try an action enquiry to see if it is of value in improving your practice and enhancing your sense or professional well-being. In writing for the committed it isn't that I want to avoid the emotional hassle of trying to convince others who are sceptical or shrink away from the confrontations with those who oppose the growth of the action research movement. My previous writings are littered with accounts

of these battles and for those interested in the politics of educational knowledge I will refer to these in the text.

My present purpose is to celebrate the highly principled commitments and teaching careers of those professional colleagues I have worked with over the past decade in creating and testing a research-based view of professionalism in education. I want to share something of their work with you in the hope that you too will find their work life affirming in both the values they hold and in the quality of their educative relationship with their pupils. I am also hoping that you will see the good sense in forging a partnership between School-based professional knowledge and University-based knowledge in the creation of a living educational theory for a good social order.

I recognise that my ordering of the material will not suit you all. Understanding my rationale may help you decide to reorder the material to meet your own purposes. The material is organised into four cycles. The first is addressed to action learners who wish to improve their practice. It includes an action planner and a teacher researcher's first account of her professional practice. The second cycle moves into an action enquiry and shows how a teacher researcher integrates evidence from pupils' learning into her account. The third cycle develops the enquiry into action research and considers issues concerned with relevance, rigour and validity in the claims of individuals to know their own educational practice. The fourth cycle is intended to draw you into a research community and into the creation of a living educational theory for a good social order. Finally a list of the details of an action research network are linked to the national organisation of The Classroom Action Research Network.

As you read other books you will find that they use the terms, action learning, action enquiry and action research, in different ways. I am taking you all to be action learners in that you recognise that you have already attempted to improve your work in a systematic form of experiencing problems when your values are not fully lived in practice, of imagining alternative ways of improving your practice and choosing one to act on, of action, and of modifying your ideas and actions in the light of your evaluations. By an action enquiry I am meaning your conscious attempt to answer, in a systematic way, your question, 'How do I improve my practice?'. In action research I stress the validating process of submitting your accounts of your systematic enquiry, as an action learner, to public test. In other words I hold a traditional view of educational action research that it is essentially concerned with the creation and testing of educational knowledge.

Because of my own work as a tutor of action research case studies for Advanced Certificates and Diplomas in Professional Development, and MEd, MPhil and PhD Degrees in Education, I have organised the first three cycles in relation to the developing extension and depth of the standards of judgement I use in examining material for these awards. The fourth cycle is intended for higher degree research students who are at the forefront of educational enquiry and educational knowledge and who are making original contributions to knowledge of our subject, education.

The first cycle contains material on an action planner, gathering evidence on your values, your intentions, your classroom educational management and your pupils' learning, together with Mary Johnson's delightful first account from an Advanced Certificate Programme.

The second cycle contains material from Daniella De Cet's (1991) Advanced Diploma which shows her integrating evidence of pupils' learning as she asks, *How can I develop the pupils' understanding of the process of writing poetry and encourage them to regard it as a 'legitimate' form of writing?*. I have also included in this cycle an historical introduction to the action research movement because my past students have indicated that they found it

useful in placing their enquiries within an emergent tradition. The implications of action enquiry for whole-school development, are explored in papers from Andy Larter and Kevin Eames. These papers describe the school-based contexts of their PhD enquiries.

The third cycle on action research, emphasises the values of a conversational research community in terms of the relevance of data, and the rigour and validity of teachers' accounts of their professional practice. It contains a paper from the British Journal of In-service Education (1977) which shows the collection of **relevant data** in terms of contradictions between ideas and practice and on enquiry learning in science. The second contribution is from Peggy Kok, a lecturer in the Singapore Vocational and Industrial Training Board. Peggy applies Richard Winter's **principles of rigour** in her MEd action research study, *The Art of an Educational Enquirer*. The third contribution is from Martin Forest, a Senior Lecturer at Bristol Polytechnic. Martin provides an analysis of the **validity of his claims** to educational knowledge in the context of his conversations in a validation group. This analysis is taken from his MEd dissertation, *The Teacher as Researcher* (1983).

In the fourth cycle I ask whether you and I can create a living educational theory for a good social order and cultural renewal. Writing the introduction was the most educative experience in producing this guide. At the end of the BERA'91 conference, David Hamilton, Professor of Education at the University of Liverpool, showed me a copy of Alisdair MacIntyre's (1990) book, *Three rival versions of moral enquiry*. My engagement with this text has moved me from the habit of a research lifetime of, as a matter of principle, refusing to use **we** in my work, on the grounds that the use of **we** implies an acceptance by another of something I was stating on their behalf without checking their acceptance. MacIntyre's work has prompted me to risk using **we** in writing about the values and beliefs of the research community I see myself belonging to. The introduction to this cycle begins with personal communications to individuals who I believe to be conducting original educational enquiries and I am open to their criticism for my use of **we**, and to the criticisms of all those in the list of action researchers who I identify as a research community to which I belong.

In this cycle I also raise questions about the nature of educational theory, of rationality, of a good institutional and social order, of the politics of truth and of cultural renewal. The cycle is placed in the context of a brief history of changing views on the nature of educational theory for professional practice. I have included this history because teachers have valued it in understanding their own explanations as contributions to educational theory. My paper from the Cambridge Journal of Education (1989), *Creating a Living Educational Theory from Questions of the Kind, 'How do I Improve my Practice?'*, precedes this account. In the next paper presented to the First World Congress on Action Research and Process Management in July 1990, I focus on the experience of power relations in supporting the power of truth and the ethics of good order in my educational development. I consider some of the implications of the work of Foucault (1980) in relating to the truth of power and the power of truth in an institutional context. I also draw on the work of Habermas (1987) on communication and the evolution of society.

The belief which underpins this fourth cycle is that educational enquiry is a form of moral enquiry which has profound implications for the future of humanity and that Peggy Kok, in her impressive MEd dissertation, *The Art of an Educational Enquirer* (submitted 1991), offers a way of synthesising an Eastern Woman's views on the **Values of Beauty, Perfection and Excellence** with a Western Man's views of the **Values of Truth, Freedom, Justice and Democracy**. Peggy also reflected back to me a quality of educative conversation which I would accept as characterising the mutuality of an educative relationship between tutor, student and respected professional colleague. I have explained above that my educative relationships in my work as a tutor have not been a focus of my past research. In entering the fourth cycle I acknowledge that they appear central to any

rational answer to my question as to whether **we** can create our living educational theories for helping our pupils and students improve their learning, for our professional and educational development for a good social order and for cultural renewal.

The fifth cycle is the most embryonic and is grounded in the concerns, ideas, actions and evaluations of a community of educational action researchers. Pam Lomax (1994), as Professor of Educational Research at Kingston University, is most influential in drawing people together. Moyra Evans, as deputy head of Denbigh School, Milton Keynes has shown at a conference in February 1995, on Sharing Good Practice in Schools, what is possible in developing a community of action researchers in a school in a partnership with Pam at Kingston University. This partnership has recently won an award in a national competition. Jean McNiff (1992, 1993; Collins,1994.) through her writing, her wonderful communications in small groups, and prodigious energy, has shown what is possible in helping to develop a community of action researchers associated with the Marino Institute of Higher Education in Dublin. Moira Laidlaw (1994) helped to bring together action researchers from their international contexts at the World Congress 3 on Action Learning, Action Research and Process Management at the University of Bath in July 1994.

Tom Russell, a teacher educator at Queens University, Kingston, Ontario, is helping to share experiences and to extend our community through the use of the internet. He has brought together new teachers, such as Dawn Bellamy at Wootton Bassett School with teacher educators like Mary-Lynn Hamilton at Kansas University and Stefinnee Pinnegar at Brigham Young University. Like Terri Austin of the Alaskan Action Research Network (1994a & b) Tom lives his commitment to learning from experience and to sharing concerns and ideas within a community whilst reflecting on his own professional practice. I will be saying more about a form of community action research which may be emerging from our work and which could have significance for the creation of new forms of educational knowledge and cultural renewal.