

EDUCATIONAL ACTION RESEARCH AND YOU

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Notes for an address to the Ontario Educational Research Council
5th December, 1997. Toronto

Introduction

One of the pleasures of visiting Ontario over the last few years is the experience of meeting so many teachers and educational researchers who have a passion for education and professional development. I'd like to thank OERC for inviting me to talk with you this morning and to share some ideas from my own educational action research. My enthusiasm for this form of research is due to my understanding of the way in which it can help to improve the quality of students' learning and can help to reconstruct what counts as educational theory and the knowledge-base of teaching.

I identified with Ontario teachers during their strike last month. At the same time last year, as President of the Bath University Association of University Teachers, I was helping to organise the pickets on a freezing wet, November morning. The issue was similar to your own. It was about the funding of education. Without adequate funding we know that the quality of education and educational research will not be what it should be. Economic values do play a most significant part in the quality of education we are able to provide for our students and who controls the power to decide how these resources are produced and spent has a significant influence on what, as teachers, we are able to do. So in my talk about action research and you, I do not want to lose sight of the importance of the economic and political forces which influence what we do in our universities, boards, ministries, schools, classrooms, homes and communities of educational researchers. As a Principal you may regret the move to remove you from the Federations. As a Director responding to the ending of the recent teachers' strike you may have felt the pressure of enforcing a policy such as:

The Board has not approved any advertisements or announcements for placement in the schools. Therefore, it is not appropriate for staff to display any type of symbol.

When I read this last month, in relation to the wearing of Green Ribbons in Ontario schools, I remembered a letter I received in 1968, from the vice-principal of my first school, after I had put a page from a public lecture on Authority and Freedom on the School Notice Board. It read:

Although you personally may not have posted in the Staff Room the excerpt from a Reith Lecture, I regard you as the leader of the group responsible and I accordingly address this letter to you...

Any non-official criticism, (implied or stated), posted for public exhibition, should be torn down.

If any member of staff picks up the slightest whiff of criticism of a colleague by a teacher or a pupil, the matter should be reported to me immediately. K. Merton.

I recall with distaste Ken Merton thrashing 20 pupils at a time with a cane because they were in the gym during a wet break.

Here is an e-mail which shows American educators are also under pressure from government policies:

Date: Sat, 15 Nov 1997 13:39:27 -0700 (MST)
>From: Ken Goodman <kgoodman@U.Arizona.EDU>
>To: anne_o'leary@ed.gov
>Subject: Re: HR 2614 (fwd)
>
>Dear Ms. O'Leary,

I'm responding to your forwarded message on HR2614. I would like to request a meeting with you, Secretary Riley, Marshall Smith and others in the Department of Education about HR2614 and the position of support which you say the administration has taken. I'm asking on behalf of myself, many other leading researchers, and all of the major literacy education and literacy research organizations who have been completely left out of the process that has led to HR2614 passing the house and being sent to the Senate. Our voices have not been heard on a bill which would establish a national definition of reading, a national definition of reading research and a national phonics curriculum. In fact we find that, as written the bill would explicitly exclude us from participation in any of the programs funded under HR2614 and under most other federal programs in which we are currently playing key roles. I find for example that I would be excluded from providing support for the tutors being recruited on my own campus.

I could bring together a group of leading researchers and teacher educators and the leadership of IRA, NRC, NCTE, NCRL and CCCC and the Reading Hall of Fame sometime in December or January for such a meeting. That would make it possible to express our concerns about this bill before the Senate reconvenes.

I think this serves to emphasise the importance of the educational policies of governments on what we do as teachers and researchers. A national definition of reading, a national definition of reading research and a national phonics curriculum is bound to influence teaching and research. In the UK we have a national curriculum, standardised assessment tasks and a national inspection process called OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education). A national curriculum for teacher education in our Universities is also planned. The publication of league tables of school results already

takes place and there are plans to publish the results of inspections of University Departments of Education later next year.

I hope these points emphasise certain similarities in our social contexts. As teachers and researchers we are being subjected to forms of economic rationalism where our fundamental educational values appear to be increasingly omitted from official 'discourse' and policy. We are also being subjected to political pressure to conform to government educational policies which are being influenced by these pressures. In 1992, in his keynote address on Economic rationalism, de-valuation, de-moralisation, to the Second World Congress on Action Learning, Action Research and Process Management, Robin McTaggart of Deakin University in Australia, referred to this process in terms of de-moralisation and de-valuation. :

We have moved beyond the reductionism which leads all questions to be discussed as if they were economic ones (de-valuation) to a situation where moral questions are denied completely (de-moralisation) in a cult of economic inevitability. (McTaggart, 1992, p. 50).

While the focus for my talk is what we can do as educational action researchers I do want to place this work in its global context by relating it to two other keynote addresses to conferences of educational researchers. The second is Richard Winters keynote given to the Collaborative Action Research Network Conference in London on 18th October this year on **Managers, Spectators, and Citizens: Where Does 'Theory' Come from in Action Research**. The third is a development of some themes concerning representation in educational research from Elliott Eisner's Presidential Address to the American Educational Research Association in 1993 on **Forms of Understanding and the Future of Educational Research**.

I know that time is short but what I like to do is to engage with audiences so that they do not feel that they are being talked at. I will pause to give you the opportunity to respond so that you can see that I am working at taking your responses seriously.

Why is educational research so neglected by practitioners?

Mary Kennedy. Mary Kennedy is a professor at Michigan State University. Her specialities are teacher learning, research use, and education policy. This is what she says are the reasons for the apparent failure of research to influence teaching.

The reasons hypothesized for the apparent failure of research to influence teaching can be grouped into four general hypotheses: a) the research itself is not sufficiently persuasive or authoritative; the quality of educational studies has not been high enough to provide compelling, unambiguous, or authoritative results to practitioners. b) the research has not been relevant to practice. It has not been sufficiently practical, it has not addressed teachers' questions, not has it adequately acknowledged their constraints. c) Ideas from research have not been accessible to teachers. Findings have not been expressed in ways that are comprehensible to teachers. d) the education system itself is intractable and unable to change, or it is

conversely inherently unstable, overly susceptible to fads, and consequently unable to engage in systematic change. Either of these characteristics - excessive instability and excessive stability - render it incapable of responding reliably to educational research. (Kennedy, p.4,1997)

How could your action research, if you decided to undertake it, help to overcome this gap between researchers and practitioners and between educational theory and practice?

I am suggesting that we could overcome this gap by focusing on the creating and testing of educational theories which emerge from, and hence are related directly to, the processes of improving the quality of students learning. This includes research and educational theorising which is focused on “system” responsibilities in education such as those being researched by Jackie Delong (1996) in her work as a Superintendent of Schools in the new Grand Erie School Board and those outlined by Linda Grant (1996) in her paper on action research and teacher networking. It also includes educational theorising of the kind undertaken by teacher educators such as Tom Russell (1996) at Queens University, Stephanie Pinnegar at Brigham Young University (Pinnegar and Russell 1995) and Ron Wideman (Delong & Wideman 1996) at Nipissing University.

Here are a couple of ideas about the nature of ‘Theory’ from Richard Winter’s (1997) keynote address to the Collaborative Action Research Network Conference in October 1997. I want to concentrate on his idea of ‘improvisatory self-realisation’ in the second view.

i) Theory’ means: learning of general significance, initially located outside the immediate events we wish to interpret but with a potential bearing on how we may eventually decide to explain them.

ii) He also says that, ‘theory in action research is a form of improvisatory self-realisation, where theoretical resources are not predefined in advance, but are drawn in by the process of the inquiry’.

My position on educational theory contains Winter’s first definition of theory and needs to extend his second definition for the following reason. I think the generation and testing of educational theory is the most important outcome of educational research. Educational theorising for me is an indication of the health and well-being of a community of educational researchers. Rather than look to other educational theorists to create our educational theories I am suggesting that each one of us could create their own in a way which could integrate and extend both of Richard Winter’s ideas in original syntheses of the kind:

Our educational theories are forms of improvisatory self-realisation in which we create descriptions and explanations for our own educational development.

In the process of researching their own practice, individuals can create their own educational theories as they describe and explain their own educational development. In the creation of your own explanations, which I believe you do for yourself in the course of your daily lives and professional practice, you may include the reasons which explain why you do what you do. From my own action research into my practice and in my supervision of other teacher-researchers I have come to understand the central role our values play in our explanations of our own educational development. For example, during the recent teacher's strike in Ontario, e-mail correspondence kept me informed about what was going on. I had detailed analyses of Bill 160 and the way in which this was taking fund-raising powers away from local democracies. So, not only was the Strike about money, it was also about the value of local democracy. At the heart of my talk this morning on **Educational Action Research and You**, I want to stress the fundamental importance of our values of democracy, integrity and the well-being of our societies and communities. I want to ensure that our educational values are not omitted from our teaching or research under the influence of economic rationalism. Indeed I will be arguing that values are an essential component in educational action research. This is not to accept uncritically the proposition that our values are the correct ones, or that you should accept my values or that I should accept your values.

What I want to show you is a form of research which requires the creation of a public account of the action researchers educational development, in which values can be communicated, justified and held up for validation in a process of public accountability. I also do not want to be misunderstood in relation to the kind of skills which are needed for our economic well-being. Our education and health services need the financial resources which industry and commerce helps to provide. It would be foolish to create an education system which was not helping our students to develop some of the skills they will need to live productive lives in our economies. But, I do want to insist that educational values and educational theories are needed to guide the direction in which the exercise of our economic skills takes us.

As the focus of my talk is **Educational Action Research and You** perhaps I should just outline my understanding of educational action research so that you can appreciate the particular stance I am taking.

Elements of an Action Research Path from Matthias Meiers:

1. experiencing and recording critical incidents
2. reflecting: what is going on here
3. formulating an action plan:
4. trying the plan out
5. seeing whether the plan makes a difference
6. speaking with critical others, children/parents
7. entering into dialogue with the academic community

Let me give some examples from the work of action researchers and my responses so you can get a feeling for the processes of educational action research as they are

being experienced and lived by other action researchers. The examples are drawn from action researchers who are wanting to overcome behavioural problems, who want to improve the quality of pupils' learning in the curriculum and who want to create their own educational standards of judgement in the process of gaining accreditation for the contributions to educational knowledge.

A) Extracts from an e-mail 19 November 1997 Constructive Speech and Action in the Classroom Community from Matthias Meiers.

The Reduction of Teaching to a Set of Techniques

.... I anticipated my professional development session with eagerness. As a novice, I realized that my teaching techniques needed refinement. The imminent inservice on "assertive discipline" promised to offer some useful strategies. They turned out to be amazingly simple. The video modelled them for us. It showed a teacher in the middle of teaching a lesson on split infinitives when Henry, an adolescent student in the front row, threw an airplane. The teacher calmly continued with his speech as he wrote Henry's name on the board. When the student rudely asked, "Man, what was that for?" the teacher scratched a check mark next to Henry's name. When the boy protested, "That's so unfair!" a second check mark appeared and the non-compliant student was sent to the office.....

The following day at 9:40 the grade-nine students sauntered into the classroom. Marc wearing his baseball cap, a breach of the "no-hats" school policy, approached me, "You know Miss Darnell sent Mike and Andrew to the office for refusing to take off their caps."

"Marc, you know very well that you're not supposed to be wearing a hat in school."

"No, Mr. Meiers, that's wrong. Didn't you know you have to write my name on the board? I think it will take me about five seconds to get you to put three check marks next to my name and kick me out.".....

Action researchers work to improve the conditions for the possibility of learning in their classrooms and for critical professional dialogue among educators. I believe that in the act of writing about the actual learning conditions in my classroom I prepare the groundwork for this reflection and critical dialogue. The written text can show others and me the pedagogical issues, which I am exploring. These issues do not appear "ready-made" in abstract theorizing but rather, they emerge in my thinking as I write, read and re-read detailed narratives of critical incidents. Theoretical constructs support me as I work with these narratives.....

The Classroom as Agonistic Space and as Dialogic Learning Community

In an agonistic sphere speech is at the service of the individual who uses it for the purpose of controlling or coercing the actions of others.

Katherine's Refusal

"Before you leave to catch the bus, please, enter the homework assignment for tomorrow in your agenda."

"I don't think so!" Katherine shouted, her voice shifting from mock anger to resolute fury. With a determined gait she stomped her way to the door. All eyes were on her. The children silently listened to the muffled echo of her steps on the wooden floor of Hut Three. In the silence we only heard the loud rhythm of Katherine's long march. She had to traverse the classroom from one end to the other. Why had she not taken the fire exit located only two feet from her desk? Like her precipitated and very dramatic exit of four days ago, this was a staged act. At the door Katherine turned towards her classmates and me. Was this "Show-down at High Noon"? Students were watching us attentively. Was Katherine expecting me to block the door this time? I decided not to offer them any theatre and instead to let her leave three minutes early and speak with her later that evening. Rather than bellow some inane statement like, "Be silent and sit down!" I responded with, "Don't forget to slam the door on your way out!"

This produced general hilarity and mirth among the students... The laughter drowned the sound of the door being thrown shut. Her defiant and aggressive act had misfired and round two had gone to me. I had stepped into the ring with Katy. But this was not a gratifying victory because we did not come together in this space to fight each other. I set out to repair my rapport with Katherine and to explore the classroom conditions in which she staged her angry outburst.

It was Katherine who answered the phone that evening, "Hello, Mr. Meiers. I knew it was you. We have call-display. And you know what... I could've just let the phone ring because my parents are not at home. But I didn't."

That was a good sign. She was ready to speak with me. I decided to get straight to the point.

"I want to know why you stormed out of the classroom this afternoon."

"I knew you were going to call. I talked to mom already and I told her what happened."

"So why did you storm out of the room? I can't have this sort of behaviour in the classroom. What irritated you?"

"I think it's really unfair that you... we come back from gym class to go home and I see homework on the whiteboard. Tonight I have swimming and piano..."

"Do I ever throw a temper tantrum when the homework isn't done on time?"

"You throw temper tantrums but not for that."

"Next time when you get angry about something you could speak to me or write me a note and tell me what's happening. I thought you were rudely undermining my authority. If something bothers you, tell me about it, rather than storm out of the classroom and try to start a conflict. Is that doable?"

Katherine agreed it was.

"But Mr. Meiers. You know I'm a teenager and well, that is something teenagers sometimes do."

"Try to drive their teachers around the bend?"

"Yeah. But it is tempting, you know, just to see what you're going to do. You didn't do anything. You just talked to me last time I took off."

B) Moira Laidlaw has developed an understanding of how to communicate educational values as living and development standards of judgement for evaluating the quality of one's own learning.

One of her group of year nine (14 year olds) students are reading 'Walkabout', a novel by Marshall about the Australian Outback. They have several weeks in which to produce projects showing their understanding of the book in at least two forms, one of which must be writing. (Group is mixed-attainment of 27 girls.). Moira includes a process of action planning with her pupils in which she encourages them to clarify the standards of judgement they will be using to improve their own learning. Here are some extracts from one of her student's Mishma's Action Plan and from Mishma's self-evaluation using her own educational standards of judgement.

Mishma's Action Plan, 3.11.97.

..2) What is giving me a headache at the moment?

'being a bit behind.'

3) How can I improve the situation?

'Work harder with less discussion.'

..5) How can Doctor Laidlaw help me?

'By picking out 'good (whether work is neat) or bad (spelling needs

working on).

6) How will I know I have improved the situation?

'I will feel more confident in myself.'

7) By which standards of judgement do I wish my (our) work to be judged by Dr. Laidlaw and the rest of the class? (for the writing). It should be:

legible - meaning neat and people are able to read it.

imaginative - meaning that a lot of imagination has gone into our work.

precise - meaning get straight to the point

In her amended standards of judgement comments on 18.11.97 Mishma wrote after her work was completed:

legible - meaning that my teacher was able to read it and when I'm going through it, I enjoy it because it's not a load of mess that I don't understand.'

imaginative - meaning I think that the newspaper that me and Sami made up was very interesting and we tried to make our newspaper sound like a newspaper really is.'

precise - I usually do get straight to the point on things, like when I'm arguing with my brother over something.'

For her other piece of work (a photo. album depicting the children's adventures in the Outback):

Mishma wrote in her original action plan(3.11.97) that she wanted it to be:

creative - meaning artistic and beautiful work.

organised - meaning work in right order and photos put well together and not losing the things we need for the project.;

In her amended standards after the photo album was completed (18.11.87) that she judged it as:

creative - meaning I sometimes notice that I want everything to be perfect and it doesn't flow properly. I get too fussy and realise that I have spent too much time on something. This time I think it is beautiful and artistic. It's nice to look at.

organised - meaning, I think I have improved my organisation from year 7 and 8 because I always used to lose things and now in Year Nine I thought,

'I'd better buck up my organisation', and the way I've noticed that I have is because Miss C. (Mishma's tutor) has said that I have improved on

my organisation while she was looking at my homework record.

She also wrote on this occasion in response to the question:

'What have you most enjoyed and why?'

I have most enjoyed looking back at the book and wondering how I was going to put it in pictures in the album, and then finding pictures to go into our book.

What have you least enjoyed?
NOTHING. I loved everything!

In my next project I would like to concentrate even more and do even better imaginative work and not just think: 'Oh, what kind of things am I supposed to do for this?' but instead think, 'I'm going to do some research first then write it down'. Take more trouble. Think more clearly.'

C) Hilary Shobbrook is a senior police-woman who has developed an understanding of how to produce an action research account within the form of informal correspondences to her teacher and internal dialogues with herself as she creates her own educational standards of judgement in relation to the university standards she experienced me imposing on her in supervising her on her Masters Degree. Here is how Hilary describes her dissertation and I have included the contents page to emphasise that she has addressed the university standards while creating her own within the informal, dialogical communications, in her correspondences.

My Living Educational Theory Grounded In My Life: How can I enable my communication through correspondence to be seen as educational and worthy of presentation in its original form?

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the
University of Bath for the degree of Master of Arts
HILARY SHOBBROOK

ABSTRACT

In the process of writing, this dissertation has developed a dialogue which goes some way towards explaining my own educational development. It thereby reveals my living educational theory which is grounded in my own life. I have engaged in dialectic enquiry which is progressed through ongoing dialogue and represented mainly in the form of correspondence. In the course of my dialogue, I have explored the possibility of using correspondence as a means of educational research as well as a means of representing that research.

I have included the University criteria for judging a dissertation as a subject of my debate in order to enable me to come to terms with such criteria in the context of this account. I hold the view that my personal and professional practice are inextricably linked to each other and to my life as a whole. I therefore insist that my enquiry must be natural and authentic, and fit in with my life. The result has been the discussion of the criteria within the text of an informal letter.

My contribution to educational theory has been in my attempt to show you my living educational theory grounded in my life. I have done this by providing an example of the dialogue and dialectic that is part of my life and, within this, explaining its centrality and value to me.

CONTENTS

Introduction: Letter to Reader dated 27 April 1997

Interlude: Back Garden dated 4 June 1997

LETTERS TO MY TEACHER: Letter to Jack dated 1 April 1997

Justify the Appropriateness of the Methodology to the Nature of the Enquiry

Nature of the Enquiry

Justify the Appropriateness of the Methodology (a bit more)

Show Evidence of a Critical Review of Appropriate Literature

Show Evidence of the Systematic Collection of Valid Data

Show Evidence of an Ability to Interpret, Analyse and Evaluate the Data

Demonstrate a Coherent Approach, Clarity of Thought and Quality of Argument

Relate the Special Theme to the Wider Field of Educational Knowledge and

Contribution to Theoretical Perspectives

Draw Justifiable Conclusions Acknowledging the Limitations of the Study

Demonstrate an Acceptable Standard of Presentation and Satisfactory Use of English

And Now to the Postbox

AT LAST, SUBMISSION OF MY DISSERTATION: dated 6 June 1997 REFERENCES

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POSTSCRIPT, OR SHOULD IT BE "THE START OF SOME MORE DISCUSSION"

Learning about ourselves as living contradictions

I hope you have recognised something of yourselves, your values and theories in what I have been saying. Now I want to come to the final part of my talk on the values which can be used as the standards of judgement for testing the validity of our educational theories and our claims to educational knowledge. I want to say something about 'I' as a living contradiction in relation to values. The idea of putting 'I' as a living contradiction in educational theory came out of my response to a question asked in 1977, but not answered before he died, by Eward Ilyenkov, a Soviet logician:

If an object is a living contradiction what must the thought be that express it?
(Ilyenkov, p. 320, 1977)

The crucial importance of contradictions to a dialectician is that they are at the heart of their epistemology, their view of knowledge. Theories of the normal propositional kind, eliminate as a matter of principle, contradictions from their claims to knowledge. Yet I believe that each one of us experiences ourselves as a living contradiction within our embodied knowledge; within the knowledge we are expressing in our professional practice. You can, of course, refute this in relation to your own experience.

For example, I experienced myself as a living contradiction in looking at our programme. I appear as Dr. Whitehead on the programme. I must thank OERC for this elevation but as much of my most creative writing has emerged from two Ph.D. examinations in 1980 and 1982 where 6 eminent examiners were agreed that I should not be awarded a Ph.D., nor should I be permitted to resubmit, I must insist that OERC strip me of the title in the programme! I have published the story of my action research and educational development in the University of Bath in a book called the Growth of Educational Knowledge: Creating your own living educational theories. In this text I explore forms of representation which include my emotional responses and experiences of existing as a living contradictions as I experience the denial of my values in my practice.

I think this story of my educational development can be linked to Eliot Eisner's 1993 Presidential Address to AERA where he advocated the exploration of different forms of representation in educational research. He developed his ideas in his recent 1997 paper on **'The Promise and Perils of Alternative Forms of Data Representation'** (Eisner 1997), and focused on four questions:

How do we display what we have learned?

What forms can we trust?

What modes are legitimate?

How shall we know?

In relation to these questions and to the problems of finding appropriate ways of representing the educational values which give meaning to our lives and professional practices let me ask you about the values you use to explain your life in education. How do you make sense of what you do for your students, colleagues and system of education in the classroom, as an educational leader, as a member of a Board or Ministry with a responsibility for the "system" of education?

Let me show you a picture of Jane Verberg with one of her pupils to focus on the quality of relationships between teachers and pupils and to illustrate my questions. Jane is the Head of Special Needs at Oldfield Girls School in Bath.

How do you explain the influence of the values which underpin the quality of relationship within which students feel valued?

How do you explain the influence of the values which underpin the curriculum you offer to students in Ontario?

How do you explain the influence of values which you use in developing educational forms of assessment with your students?

How do you represent these values in your educational theorising in a way which brings them to life in the communities you care about?

How do you integrate your political and economic values and understandings within the narratives of your educational development?

In answering similar questions, teacher-researchers at Bath have placed their accounts of their classroom and school life on the action research homepage at:

<http://www.actionresearch.net>

for you to see if they help to strengthen our feelings of conviviality and solidarity within our local and global communities of educational researchers. They have revealed the fundamental values they use to give their lives meaning and purpose in their productive life in education. In these studies of singularity (Bassey 1995) they analyse their educational development. The teacher-researchers explore how they enable their pupils to explore and express their own values in educative conversations with their pupils.

I have explained how Hilary Shobbrook (1997) shows how she insisted that her own voice should be heard in developing her own educational standards of judgement as she encountered my imposition of university standards of judgement on her work. I think Hilary's dissertation is particularly significant because of the way her dialogical form of communication could help to overcome the present 'Balkanisation' (Donmoyer 1996) which is taking place between research communities. Ben Cuninghame (1997) is exploring his spiritual values; Moira Laidlaw (1996) her aesthetic values; Erica Holley (1997) her professional practice as a Head of Upper School in a secondary school; Kevin Eames (1995) his professional knowledge-base as a teacher; Jackie Hughes (1996) her professional practice in career's guidance; Moyra Evans (1995) her professional practice as a vice-principal.

Because I set such a high value on education and good teachers I would like to conclude by acknowledging my gratitude to Cliff Metcalfe, a teacher, now retired in Australia who was not one of my formal teachers in school. He was the Father of my closest friend in Secondary School, Ray Metcalfe, who now lives in Ontario. He brought a vitality and enthusiasm to my life matched only by my Fathers. His new year card arrived just before I came to Toronto with the one word PEACE on it. I'd like to finish by thanking Cliff for his positive influence on my life and in the spirit of peace and well-being and our other educational values which I think we share as teachers and educational researchers I would like to thank you once more for enabling me to share my own enthusiasms and values for education with you. Thank you.

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