Educational Action Research

Action research in the educational workplace

Juny Montoya-Vargas [a]

[a] CIFE, Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, DC, Colombia

Available online: 06 Mar 2012

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BOOK REVIEW

Action research in the educational workplace, edited by Margaret Farren, Jack Whitehead, and Branko Bognar, Palo Alto, CA, Academica Press, 2011, 448 pp., £69.50 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-93-632005-9

This book contains a series of articles previously published in the web-based *Educational Journal of Living Theories* (*EJOLTS*) (p. xvi), and from that I would say it takes its major strength and its major weakness. As its major strength I would highlight the authors' shared commitment to practitioner action research (Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen 2007) as a form to develop and give account of their educational living theories (Whitehead 1989) and with them to contribute to the improvement of practice as well as to the generation of knowledge. As its major weakness I would say it is the same reason why the authors made their contributions to *EJOLTS* to begin with: because of the difficulty of representing well their living theories in the form of a written text (p. 15). At times the argument is difficult to follow as you need to complement the written account with the several videos referenced during the text. Probably, a multimedia project would be more appropriate for this enterprise than a book. However, the effort to put together these different accounts in the form of a book is valuable as a way to allow readers to understand how living theory methodology works and how it can be used to improve practice by tracking the commonalities among the different stories told.

Practitioners applying living theory methodology to the improvement of their practices in this book come from several different educational and cultural contexts (the United Kingdom, Ireland, Croatia, Japan, Norway, China), but they have in common their understanding that by systematically reflecting on questions of the type 'How do I improve what I am doing?' (p. 11) and encouraging others to do the same, they are contributing to the creation of a 'living form of philosophy' (p. 61) more able than traditional research to inform and improve educational contexts consistent with their values.

All the research questions included in this volume can be understood as variations of the original 'How do I improve what I am doing?' that Whitehead finds still useful after 41 years (p. 11): 'How can I develop social formations that can lead to active, inquiring and creative learning in a variety of contexts?' (p. 34). 'How can we help the ten-year-old pupils to become autonomous researchers?' (p. 67). 'How, then, do I recreate and hold my teaching/healing space within the constraints and academic-social issues outlined in order to bring about a more socially embedded curriculum?' (p. 189). 'What are the strategies and processes which have worked (or failed to work) for me as a writer, and are these generalisable or teachable?' (p. 263). 'How can I encourage my pupils to think critically through collaborative online-learning?' (p. 295). 'How am I improving my practice and contributing to knowledge as I encourage multi-stakeholder narrative reflection on

the use of ICT in Teacher Professional Development programmes in Rwanda?' (p. 316). 'How can I help my students promote learner autonomy in English language learning?' (p. 367).

Another remarkable aspect of the book is that the authors practice the living theory methodology by experiencing and acknowledging 'their own existence as a living contradiction' (Whitehead 1989) and use this realization as a means for identifying gaps between their values and their practices and to initiate a reflective spiral oriented to minimize such gaps. They make explicit their commitment to educational values such as dialogue, teamwork and cooperation; democratic practices, freedom, equality, wholeness, and love; integrity, coherence, and creativity; equitable relationships, mutual learning, empowerment and autonomy. They also present evidence of the way their practices could be improved and were indeed improved in order to better reflect those values. Thus, in several different ways this book gives practitioners hope about the possibility of living and working according to their most cherished educational values.

This book is worth the effort to follow the threads between the text and the online links to be able to track the authors' educational living theories developed during their research processes. Their work makes apparent why action research is oriented towards, 'the empowerment of teachers, traditionally relegated to the role of consumers of scientific research developed by a disconnected academy' (Montoya-Vargas, Castellanos-Galindo, and Fonseca-Duque 2011). Here, some of the authors coined their own original concepts such as 'educational counterpoint' (p. 118), 'pedagogy of the unique' (p. 174) or 'inclusional pedagogy' (p. 182); others borrow concepts such as 'holographic universe' (p. 171) and 'love in education' (p. 204) but give them a particular meaning as illustrated by their living interpretations. Despite the nuances among those different concepts, all of them share an understanding of education that can be summarized in the account of Spiro as an enterprise requiring:

> A mutual sense between learner and teacher of the intrinsic value of the enterprise; the time for 'slow' learning to take its natural time and course (including false starts and mistakes on the way); the mutual commitment of learner and teacher to work at the highest level of their capacity; a mutual belief that learning comes from a deep investigation of one's own resources; a mutual openness to learning from one another. (p. 271)

References

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Juny Montoya-Vargas
CIFE
Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, DC, Colombia
Email: jmontoya@uniandes.edu.co
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