Empowerment and action research: Personal growth, professional development, and social change in educational and community settings

Jack Whitehead, Liverpool Hope University, UK.

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Introduction and context

First of all I want to express my thanks to the organizers of the 7th Annual Action Research Conference for the invitation to present this keynote on the theme of the conference on Empowerment and action research: Personal growth, professional development and social change in educational and community settings'. Such invitations allow me to share my passion for action research as a form of educational enquiry that carries hope for the future of humanity and my own. Part of this hope rests in my experience of the pooling of energy, values, skills and understandings in the accounts of action researchers around the world. Using web-based resources, including visual narratives, I want to share some understandings of the significance of this pooling of accounts in terms of the theme of the conference. The web-based resources made available freely from http://www.actionresearch.net are flowing into this space as gifts from action researchers around the world. The gifts are the narratives of learning as individual action researchers share their learning from their unique contexts as they seek to live as fully as they can the values they use to give meaning and purpose to their lives. The contexts vary from the local to the global. For instance, in the local context the conference marks the first study day in North America of the Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN). You can access details of CARN from http://www.did.stu.mmu.ac.uk/carnnew/ and I hope to share some experiences from yesterday's CARN study here in San Diego, during the keynote.

In the global context the conference is taking place at the same time as the Education and Learning Virtual Networking Stream of the the Eighth World Congress of the Action Learning Action Research Association (ALARA), 6-9th September 2010 in Melbourne on 'Participatory Action Research and Action Learning: Appreciating our Pasts, Comprehending our Presents, Prefiguring our Futures'.

To participate in the Education and Learning Virtual Networking Stream of the ALARA Congress, click here, fill in your name and e-mail and press Join Practitioner-Researcher.

For my brief from ALARA click here In South Africa the conference on 'Action
Research: Exploring Its Transformative Potential’ of the Action Research Unit of Nelson Mandela University, takes place on the 19th-20th August 2010 with contributions from members of the Self-Study for Transformative Higher Education (SeStuTHE) group of the Durban University of Technology (DUT).

In a recent visit to DUT I emphasized the importance of making public through the web, the living theory accounts of practitioner-researchers. I'm delighted to say that Snoeks Desmond from the University of KwaZula Natal has made public her completed doctoral thesis on ‘A journey in family literacy: Investigation into influences on the development of an approach to family literacy’ at:

http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/SnoeksDesmondphdopt.pdf

This thesis is the first living theory thesis to be supervised at Durban University of Technology.

You can access the presentations at the Keynote Symposium on Explicating A New Epistemology For Educational Knowledge With Educational Responsibility, 3rd September 2009 at the British Educational Research Association Conference in Manchester

You can also access the action research accounts of self-study researchers who have produced evidence-based accounts of their educational influences in learning in The Educational Journal Of Living Theories.

Having focused on some of the local and global contexts of action research I now want to consider some of the distinguishing characteristics of action research and their influences in empowerment and in the personal growth, professional development and social change in educational and community settings.

Action Research

I carried out my first action research project in 1976 in a local curriculum project entitled ‘Improving Learning for 11-14 year olds in Mixed Ability Science Groups’ (Whitehead, 1976 http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/ilmagall.pdf). What distinguished this as an action research project was that the individual participants were all exploring the implications of asking, researching and answering questions of the kind, ‘How do I improve what I am doing?’ in the professional contexts of their educational practices with 11-14 year students in mixed ability groups. We all worked at improving and researching our practice with action-reflection cycles in which:

i) we expressed concerns when our values were not being lived as fully as we believed that we could do;

ii) we imagined possible ways forward and chose one possibility to act on.

iii) we acted and gathered data on which to make a judgment on the effectiveness of our actions;

iv) we evaluated our actions in terms of our influence in pupils’ learning and in terms of living our values and understandings as fully as we could;
v) we produced accounts of our learning and shared them with the group to enhance the validity of our accounts through the mutual rational controls of critical discussion.

In saying ‘we’ I want to stress the participatory nature of action research. In stressing the importance of the question, ‘How do I improve what I am doing?’ I am stressing the importance of retaining the integrity and uniqueness of the individual ‘I’ in action research. In 1953 there was one textbook on action research in education. This was Stephen Corey’s Action Research to Improve School Practices (Corey, 1953). In 2010, as I write, a google search shows 85,400,000 references to action research!

In relation to early insights that have influenced my understanding of action research I have benefited greatly from Carr’s and Kemmis’ (1982) text on ‘Becoming Critical: Knowing through action research’ with their idea of action research as a self-reflective enquiry into improving practice, understanding the context in which the practice is located and in improving the social context. I have retained a commitment to integrate insights from the most advanced social theories of the day in the generation of my explanations of my educational influences in my own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations in which we live and work. For example, I draw on Amartya Sen’s (1999) distinction between an economic theory of human capital and an economic theory of human capability in the generation of explanations of educational influence in learning. I have called such explanations living educational theories (1989a & b) to distinguish these explanations generated by individuals from the explanations ‘deduced’ from the conceptual abstractions of propositional theories from the traditional disciplines of education. I hope that I am communicating clearly the nature of this distinction.

A living educational theory is the unique explanation produced by an individual action research to explain their educational influences in learning. Such explanations cannot be ‘deduced’ from traditional theories in the sense of sets of determinate relationships between variables in terms of which a fairly extensive set of empirically verifiable regulations can be explanations.

In stressing the uniqueness of each individual’s explanation I want to draw attention to a methodological implication of this uniqueness that has been highlighted by Dadds and Hart (2001) in their understanding of methodological inventiveness:

"The importance of methodological inventiveness

Perhaps the most important new insight for both of us has been awareness that, for some practitioner researchers, creating their own unique way through their research may be as important as their self-chosen research focus. We had understood for many years that substantive choice was fundamental to the motivation and effectiveness of practitioner research (Dadds 1995); that what practitioners chose to research was important to their sense of engagement and purpose. But we had understood far less well that how practitioners chose to research, and their sense of control over this, could be equally important to their
motivation, their sense of identity within the research and their research outcomes.” (Dadds & Hart, p. 166, 2001)

If our aim is to create conditions that facilitate methodological inventiveness, we need to ensure as far as possible that our pedagogical approaches match the message that we seek to communicate. More important than adhering to any specific methodological approach, be it that of traditional social science or traditional action research, may be the willingness and courage of practitioners – and those who support them – to create enquiry approaches that enable new, valid understandings to develop; understandings that empower practitioners to improve their work for the beneficiaries in their care. Practitioner research methodologies are with us to serve professional practices. So what genuinely matters are the purposes of practice which the research seeks to serve, and the integrity with which the practitioner researcher makes methodological choices about ways of achieving those purposes. No methodology is, or should, cast in stone, if we accept that professional intention should be informing research processes, not pre-set ideas about methods or techniques… (Dadds & Hart, p. 169, 2001)

I like the way Jean McNiff distinguishes action research in her publications and living educational theory and in the way her doctoral students have acknowledged her educational influence’s in their own learning in the generation of their living educational theories. You can access details of Jean’s publications at her website at http://www.jeanmcniff.com/ and access these living theories http://www.jeanmcniff.com/reports.html. Jean continues to exert a creative and global influence in the empowerment of action researchers.

**Empowerment**

Personal growth in educational and community settings

Professional development in educational and community settings

Social change in educational and community settings

**References**


McNiff, J. (20) My story is my living educational theory, in Clandinin


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