



Action research: Inquiry Based Action

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Abstract

Action research is a holistic method to problem solving rather than a single method for collecting and analysing data. It points a way to answering questions such as — how can teachers learn from their own work of teaching? How can they encourage critical inquiry among students? How can teachers or administrators be participants in generating change? Through action research, teachers become aware of themselves as both the products and producers of history. The real function of education is not only to help you uncondition yourself, but also to understand this whole process of living from day to day so that you can grow in freedom and create a new world — a world that must be totally different from the present one. That is why education must be a process of educating the educator as well as the student.

Keywords: Action, research, collecting, analyzing, critical inquiry, real function, uncondition, educating, educator.

Introduction: Teachers often see research as involving distance and separation from their work. According to most teachers, researchers walk into the classroom, distribute surveys, gather data, scribble notes and depart to a distant ivory tower where they analyze and write up their findings. When results are shared with the teacher or the school, they are, as one teacher expressed, ‘pages filled with jargon and “researches” best fit for wedging under tilting tables to help them stand upright.’ Teachers and students are rarely consulted for their feedback during the process of analysis. Such distance within research traditions is seen as promoting objectivity, credibility and plausibility and is used to test or prove hypotheses.

When research is viewed as separate from teaching, teachers do not conceive of themselves as researchers. However, when teachers are invited to discuss their work in supportive settings, they identify a rich variety of concerns and questions that they wish to explore further. Increasingly, a different type of research is gathering momentum in educational circles that promises to galvanize change in classrooms and schools and

stand the test of practicality and relevance. Educators everywhere have a new buzzword — action research. In this essay, I draw on examples from a course that I have been teaching for the last four years on action research to an audience comprising, in large part, teachers and administrators. Since my own work is inspired by holistic educators and in particular by the teachings of J. Krishnamurti, I present examples from the course projects that are particularly relevant to holistic educators.

What is action research?

Action research is a form of systematic inquiry made public. It is not a process of proving something but a process of discovery and learning that aims at a systematic development of knowledge in a self-critical community of practitioners. Action research gives meaning to the constant learning referred to by J. Krishnamurti that involves ‘listening to everything that’s happening both outside and inside...’ Action research assumes that research is a natural part of teaching and builds on the understanding that teaching is informed by personal knowledge, trial and error, reflection on practice and conversations or dialogues with colleagues and students. The aim of action research can range from a desire to improve the learning environment for all, to address the essential educational questions, advocate for all learners, work for social justice and human rights, educate for insight and for a peaceful and liveable society.

Teachers taking a course on action research begin by exploring the different strands of action research. They follow this up with questions that they are interested in investigating and finally, choose the procedures for gathering data. While there are different types of action research, the action research process itself is operationalized in five phases: (1) frame critical questions, (2) collect relevant data, (3) take well-researched action, (4) reflect on the impact of the action, and (5) share results. It is represented in a diagram as a cycle or a spiral of activity involving planning, acting, observing and reflecting. Some scholars simplify the process to ‘look, think and then act’. The important feature of action research is that it not only recommends action but also further research, thereby generating a continuous process of learning and reflection. While the differences among types of action research are not necessarily rigid, they do have different emphasis. In one, a problem solving approach is key, and in another, reflection is central. Action research operates within a paradigm of praxis, a term used by Aristotle to mean the art of acting upon the conditions one faces in order to change them.

Types of action research

The problem solving model:

This model begins with a teacher identifying a problem who then tries to solve it through some data gathering in the classroom. Once the problem is solved, she evaluates the effectiveness of the intervention. Action research, in this case, involves less collaboration and is usually undertaken by a single teacher in a single classroom. For example, one of the teachers in my action research class decided to implement a new method of reading through writing in her classroom. She was dissatisfied with the

existing classroom texts and hemmed in by regulations that insisted that she use them. She began to document how students responded to the texts and experimented with using writing to teach reading. She invited other teachers to sit in on her classes for feedback and documented student progress in reading skills. Her peers gave her feedback that she incorporated into her teaching. Feeling affirmed in this way, she introduced journal writing in her classroom as a regular part of the day, and found that even those who struggled to read could always read their own writing.

The reflection model:

Action research that involves teacher reflection often stems from a desire to change one's teaching practice. The goal is to understand practice and solve immediate problems. The changes that result in such projects tend to be associated with the individual teacher, and consequently the interventions may cease to be used once these individuals leave the system. For example, one teacher wanted to reflect on his practice in terms of paying particular attention to gender equity in his classroom. He videotaped his classroom and analyzed the number of times and the ways in which he interacted differently with boys and girls in his classroom. While watching the videotapes, he asked questions that would prompt reflection. For example, what kinds of decisions did I make during the lesson? What was I thinking about and feeling during the lesson? What responses and reactions of students prompted or influenced my decisions? He used the data he gathered to prompt changes in the way he taught.

Emancipatory model:

Emancipatory action research works for social change. The first aim of this model is to decrease the gap between the day-to-day problems encountered by practitioners and the theories used to explain them. The second is to raise the collective consciousness through a three- part social critique of theory, enlightenment and action. One example of an emancipatory model is a social action project that two teachers decided to introduce to their high school students. Students identified one problem in the community, reflected on what caused that problem, learned to negotiate and understand power structures and finally came up with a plan to resolve the problem. This project involved not only the teachers and the students, but also the community and the local political authorities. Its impact was felt beyond the walls of the classroom in the community. In this case, students chose to promote environmental awareness by identifying the problem of a lack of recycling in their communities. With the help of a local community-based organization, they succeeded in getting recycling bins to every home in their neighbourhood.

Towards a holistic action research model:

After examining these models, I emphasize that the boundaries between different types of action research models are not set in stone. The more complex or comprehensive a project, the more likely it would be to encompass critical thinking, reflection and problem solving within it. Having looked at these models, we challenged ourselves to think about what action research would look like in a holistic school. Thus far, in keeping with the different models, we had read scholars who emphasized each of

these areas. Since my own teaching is inspired by holistic education, I introduced the writings of holistic educators — J. Krishnamurti, Rudolf Steiner and Maria Montessori. The teachers in the class, some of whom were at alternative schools, were excited by the readings and wanted to design holistic action research projects. I now describe the process of one action research project that was designed and implemented in a holistic school. My role in the project was to serve as the listening post and a reflective guide. Once the project expanded beyond the class to the school site and involved collaborations and permissions, I was invited in as a trusted 'friend' and consultant to help analyze the data.

Case study of action research at a holistic school

At Maple Leaf School, the focus was on creative arts. A small school of 120 children, it was a successful school in the area. Two of the teachers from the school were in the class on action research. Inspired by their readings on holistic education, they reflected on alternative strategies to nurture the inner lives of children. In action research, this process is called awareness planning, requiring one to expand ways of thinking and form new mental connections. The teachers decided to abandon their customary mode of thinking only about their own classroom, and chose instead to act and think about the whole school.

They used a five-step outline comprising the following questions:

What do I want to know and why is it worth knowing?

Procedures — what will I do in order to find out?

After carrying out the procedures:

What did I find out and what did I observe?

What do I think this information means?

What would I recommend as a result of this information?

The answer to the first question would create educational change. Learning in holistic education is seen as a journey in consciousness, a passage of self-unfolding. Although the school they were working in was holistic, it had embraced the creative arts as a way of being. The question that the teachers had was whether other dimensions were being ignored and what needed to be included.

The second question was answered by their decision to involve everyone at the school, including students and parents, as co-participants in the research. They decided to hold a series of focus group discussions on how different groups viewed holistic education — what was considered central and necessary to holistic education. By doing this, they hoped to build up a set of criteria to establish what holistic education might include, and to propose changes to the curriculum of the school.

During the focus group discussions, the facilitators explained that this was a discussion focused on what makes a holistic school, and as such, while parents were definitely interested in their children's job prospects and academic skills, the purpose of the discussion was to find out what else they might like to see happen at the school. What kind of adult did they want their child to grow up to be?

The focus group discussions produced lively debate and generated numerous ideas and suggestions.

Findings from the focus group discussions

The teachers found to their surprise that there was much more consensus around what parents wanted for their children at a holistic school than they had expected. Parents wanted the school to be committed to the cultivation of spiritual intelligence. Overall, parents stressed that they wanted to see the following qualities nurtured in their children: self-awareness, a capacity to be inspired by truth, the ability to face and transcend pain and suffering, the ability to face truth and 'what is', the sensitivity to see connections between diverse things, and the ability to be field-independent, by which they meant the capacity to stand against what a crowd believed or stand up against convention.

Students wanted the capacity to be spontaneous, flexible and adaptive, all of which they deemed as vital for them as they grew into adulthood. They saw their teenage years as becoming increasingly constrained with pressures to be popular, famous and to make it big. They were convinced that they would have to learn to adapt to failure and quickly changing circumstances. They wanted to learn to develop the capacity to 'slow down' enough to experience a quality of life, and learn to be strong in the face of failure. They also wanted to learn how to find meaning and satisfaction in what they did.

Teachers added that they wanted students to feel compassion. They wanted students to become aware of the aspects of human life that have some mystery about them and that cannot be explained away easily. Finally, they wanted students to feel empowered and become aware of the power of their own ideas.

The teachers took all the information and analyzed it thematically. I was called in as a consultant during this period and I helped in the analysis and grouping of data and information. They categorized the qualities and skills that parents and youth were looking for in school. At the end of this, they had a series of discussions about what was found in the data. They first discussed it among themselves, and then opened up the discussions to all participants and presented to them what they had found in the data.

From all that they had learned, they made a series of recommendations that included changing the curricula of the school to incorporate specific times where teachers and students would pay attention to nurturing their inner lives. One small example of this was a project for the eighth grade called Thin Places.

Thin Places

In J. Krishnamurti's teachings, both aesthetic beauty as well as a natural environment is referred to as important for educating for intelligence. Krishnamurti often pointed out the importance of relating with one's natural surroundings. In his words:

Healing [of the mind] gradually takes place if you are with nature, with that orange on the tree, and the blade of grass that pushes through the cement, and the hills covered, hidden, by the clouds. This is not sentiment or romantic imagination but a reality of a relationship with everything that lives and moves on the earth.

The teachers at Maple Leaf School decided to take seriously the idea that connecting with nature in meditative ways is important for the growth of students. They decided to experiment with the idea that there are 'thin places' in the world where it is possible to connect with nature at a more fundamental level, where the layer between direct experience or perception and the weight of conditioning is thin.

Students were first asked to think about times when they had been overcome with the beauty or magnificence of nature. The teachers then explained that such places were referred to as 'thin places' where the veil between the physical and the spiritual was thin. Students were intrigued by this idea and were open to the question of whether they could find such places on the school grounds. Taking the idea of thin places seriously, every student in the class was asked, either with another student or preferably in solitude, to take walks on the school grounds in silence. They were asked to sit down wherever they felt they connected with nature in some deep way. After a few days of walking and sitting for half-hour periods, they were to identify places that they had an affinity to or felt especially quiet in, and take photographs of these places. Students kept an ongoing record of their observations and thoughts in a journal, and eventually shared some of them with the rest of the class.

Conclusion

Action research is a holistic method to problem solving rather than a single method for collecting and analyzing data. It points a way to answering questions such as — how can teachers learn from their own work of teaching? How can they encourage critical inquiry among students? How can teachers or administrators be participants in generating change? Through action research, teachers become aware of themselves as both the products and producers of history. In this sense, action research gives concrete meaning to the statement by Krishnamurti:

So the real function of education is not only to help you uncondition yourself, but also to understand this whole process of living from day to day so that you can grow in freedom and create a new world — a world that must be totally different from the present one. . . That is why education must be a process of educating the educator as well as the student.

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