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Introduction

Action research offers exciting new beginnings for the development of the curriculum, the profession and the person ... Action research, as a teacher-researcher movement, is at once an ideology which instructs us that practitioners can be producers as well as consumers of curriculum inquiry ... The ultimate aim of the inquiry is understanding and understanding is the basis of action for improvement (McKernan 1996, p. 3).

These words highlight the key perceptions on Action Research, its benefits and its usefulness in curriculum change. Action Research, which began as a method of understanding complex social systems, developed into educational research in the 1960s and 1970s “to bring the practicing classroom teacher into the research process as the most effective person to identify problems and to find solutions” (Riding, Fowell & Levy 1995). Action Research concerns change coming from action, observation and reflection. Action Research benefits teachers both in their personal professional development as teachers and in refining the curriculum they use. Action Research is a method, which allows teachers to be involved directly in the process of curriculum development for their own unique classroom situation.

Definitions

There are numerous definitions of Action Research. David Nunan, a teacher, researcher, and writer in ELT merged the definitions of the well-known Action Research proponents Kemmis and McTaggart with those of Cohen and Manion and produced his minimalist definition (1992, p. 18). This definition states that “the research is initiated by the practitioner and is derived from a real problem in the classroom which needs to be confronted,” “the research is collaborative,” “the teacher collects objective data,” “the results are disseminated,” and finally, “the project takes the form of an ongoing cycle in which the teacher reflects on, returns to, and extends the initial enquiry.” He downplays the importance of either collaboration or change as the defining characteristics of action research despite both of these taking more prominence in some other definitions of action research. Action Research is not library research or finding what is wrong – it is about finding ways to change and improve. “Action research is not about learning why teachers do certain things, but rather how they can improve to do things better” (Ferrance, 2000, p. 3).

Likewise, there are numerous definitions and approaches to *curriculum*. Marsh and Stafford (1988,

p. 4) describe a number of them before settling on their particular orientation as “an interrelated set of plans and experiences, which a student completes under the guidance of the school.” Grundy (1994, p. 28) describes two complementary ways of looking at curriculum, as an object in what she calls the syllabus view and as an action in the pedagogical view. She distinguishes between a traditional view (p.38) “that it is developed by one set of people, implemented by another and received by yet another” and alternatives that see it as a “construction in which all participants in the educational enterprise are actively involved” where “teachers and students should be seen as co-developers.” In relation to language teaching Nunan (1988, p.1) expresses similar views summing up the traditional meaning as referring to “a statement or statements of intent - that should be of a course of study” while expressing his own perspective and basis for what he calls “the Learner Centered Curriculum” as “what teachers actually do ... what is rather than what should be.”

Curriculum Change and Action Research

Action research methodology offers a systematic approach to introducing innovations in teaching and learning. It seeks to do this by putting the teacher in the dual role of producer of educational theory, and user of that theory. This is both a way of producing knowledge about higher education learning and teaching, and a powerful way of improving learning and teaching practice. No separation need be made between the design and delivery of teaching, and the process of researching these activities, thereby bringing theory and practice closer together (Riding, Fowell & Levy 1995).

An example of confidence in curriculum change through Action Research is a combined university wide Action Research project called “Action Research for Change Towards Sustainability in Higher Education.” This project involved individual researchers from three universities in Sydney, Australia and was run from 2002 to 2004. This combined government and university funded project was created to improve education for university graduates, especially their awareness of sustainability, a goal that came out of a joint university summit. It was realized that innovation and organizational change were needed to achieve this change to the curriculum, and not just the integration of new sustainability concepts within the curriculum. Action Research was chosen for this project because it was seen as conceptually congruent with the aims of the project and it was believed that for the change to happen, capacity building of the individual, which Action Research provides, was needed and yet the focus could go beyond the individual to lead to institutional change as well. In short, Action Research could provide change to the individual and institution to create the most successful implementation of the project aims.

Whether Action Research is a valid approach to curriculum change largely depends on the view of the curriculum and the place of the teacher within it along with the power of the teacher within the institution to develop and instigate changes to it. The non-traditional meanings of curriculum previously mentioned give prominence to the place of the teacher in the curriculum and these views are especially prominent in fields such as language teaching. Thus it is no surprise that Action Research, which directly allows the teacher to become involved in research, is a popular method of research in this field.

According to Nunan (1992, p. 17) it is a “form of research which is becoming increasingly significant in language education.”

Burns (1992, p. 2) mentions the “dichotomy between theorists and practitioners,” which leads to teachers regarding research “at best with suspicion and at worst with contempt.” She goes on to say that “many teachers believe what they do best relates to the practical management of the classroom, rather than the theoretical deliberations of the researcher and that the two are incompatible.” Action research provides an avenue for teachers to break this dichotomy by allowing them to conduct practical and meaningful research projects. Riding, Powell & Levy (1995) saw the same ideas in their Action Research project in Higher Education designed towards curriculum change. Action Research they said can “bring the practicing classroom teacher into the research process as the most effective person to identify problems and to find solutions.” Thus Action research, among its other benefits, can then lead to curriculum change through the meaningful and practical research they generate. Elliott in his article on Action Research (1994, p.137) also writes how Action Research integrates theory and practice. “New ideas proposed by theorists are not a threat if they are translated into concrete curriculum proposals that can be reflectively explored through teachers' action research.”

In language teaching the application of theories of adult learning, needs-based notions ... and a move away from centralised curricula in favour of localised, learner-centred models have all thrust the teacher into the limelight. In fact in some language-teaching systems, it is now the teacher who is the principal agent of curriculum development (Nunan 1989, p. 3).

Due to reasons such as those mentioned by Nunan above and the diversity of learner needs and types, it is difficult for a top down or centralized curriculum system to work in the field of ELT Curriculum development is therefore school based and classroom based with the teacher adapting to the particular needs and desires of the students. This can be particularly true in situations where the students are adult fee paying clients who, like fee paying clients for all services, will complain if they do not believe they are getting what they are paying for. The curriculum must change with the developing and changing nature of the classroom. Nunan (1988 p.20) adopts a model of curriculum development which is a synthesis between the product-oriented ends-means model and the process-orientated approach, one which gives “due consideration to both process and product.” He rejects the “ballistic nature of ends-means models where planning occurs before course delivery and evaluation after course delivery” for one which integrates these activities throughout the course.

This model is one in which Action Research can have a valuable role in curriculum change and development. The teacher carries a heavy burden for curriculum development yet has little time for research and as Nunan writes (1990, p. 63), the teacher as a researcher also “often lacks appropriate training in the collection and interpretation of classroom data.” Teachers need a more systematic and organised approach to carry out research on their teaching to lead to more beneficial change in the curriculum, which, especially in language teaching they play a pivotal role in defining. In his learner centered system where the teacher “has a central role to play in all aspects of the curriculum” (1988, p.136) Nunan also sees Action Research as a research method that not only plays an important part

in professional self-development but one that when tied to self evaluation “can also make valuable contributions to curriculum development” (1988, p. 147). For teachers trying Action Research in their classes even when not successful or fully developed, as is the case with any study and reflection on one's teaching, it can lead to some useful insights which can also lead to changes in teaching and curriculum. As Nunan described the self-reflection, not only encourages professional self-development but also, leads to curriculum change.

Field (1998, p.49), advocating classroom research in English teaching, highlights two points as further important reasons for classroom based Action Research benefiting curriculum change, especially in the ELT field. Firstly he mentions “the specific circumstances” of each class; “a specific class with a specific teacher attempting to put across a specific language point using specific materials.” Although there are universal similarities between classes, in reality each one is unique due to such factors as the different mix of levels, student backgrounds, nationalities and personalities as well as of the motivations leading the students to be there. Centralized research, in the same way as the class textbook is used, needs to be adapted for each particular situation. Curriculum change is a fact of life and action research can be a valuable method in adapting ideas and changing to the specific and unique circumstances of each particular class. Over thirty years ago, Stenhouse (1975, p. 143) wrote “The uniqueness of each classroom setting implies that any proposal ... needs to be tested and verified and adapted by each teacher in his own classroom ... It is not enough that teachers' work should be studied; they need to study it themselves.” These sentiments seem fresh and unchanged when considering the education situation today.

Secondly Field mentions (1998, p.49) what he calls the “compelling argument” that this kind of research allows teachers to “free themselves from the constraints of tradition and precept.” He claims, “We need to recognize that much of what passes as good practice in ELT has no scientific evidence to back it up it is simply the result of an amalgam of experience, myth and wishful thinking.” Language teaching, perhaps more so than some other fields of study, is certainly one where theories keep changing rapidly and none are ever proven scientifically. Action Research is a method to find out what works and what does not for a particular teacher in a particular situation. Hood (1995, p. 24), writing about policy driven curriculum change in ESL at TAFE colleges in Australia mentions how “dissatisfaction with communicative language teaching methodologies and loosely framed process curriculum models” was part of the stimulus in their move to a competency related approach, whilst others opposed this change. She then goes on to explain how Action Research helped teachers to adjust to the change by allowing flexibility in methodology and style to suit the individual teacher and class providing different ways to reach the specified competencies. Action Research helped the teacher to change the “process” part of Nunan's curriculum model whilst still allowing for the centralized designated and unchangeable “product” part that was a key feature of the TAFE policy change.

Somekh and Zeichner (2009) in an interesting article describe the use of Action Research throughout the world in educational change, including curriculum change. They analyzed various publications to present five “variations” of Action Research that have developed in different countries and areas of the world. They mention for example how in one of the “variations” from East Asia, the Hong Kong

government has introduced their variation of Action Research called “Learning Study” to support teacher professional development and curriculum change. They go on to say this form, similar to “lesson study” an approach carried out in Japanese schools at one time, has roots in Confucian philosophy and is a meeting of Eastern and Western thought. Although the different “variations” of Action Research they described had different goals and methods, they concluded they all had common features in the importance to working towards action and generating new practice through “the reflective process of inquiry and knowledge generation” (p.18) thereby remaining true to the basic precept of Action Research.

Strengths

According to Burns (1992, pp. 4-5), writing about Action Research in ELT, it has become “a fairly well established aspect of professional development in language teaching in Australia” because “it can be easily adapted to a variety of contexts and fits well with the collaborative and ‘applied linguistic approach’.” Action Research has a number of strengths, of which some have already been mentioned. It is a method or research accessible to the class teacher with little experience in academic research. In fields such as ELT, where the teacher is central to the curriculum, it is also useful as a reliable method to lead to change in that curriculum. Riding, Fowell & Levy (1995) saw Action Research in Higher Education as “putting the teacher in the dual role of producer of educational theory, and user of that theory.” They saw it as a way to not only produce knowledge about teaching, but also, to improve it by combining the process of teaching and research.

Another benefit, also previously mentioned, is that of professional development. Nunan (1990, p. 64) advocates the potential of action research to contribute to professional development, particularly in encouraging self-directed teachers, who are capable, through action research, of furthering their own professional self-development. He claims that the self directed teacher as classroom researcher is acceptable within present trends in teacher development and mentions the issue of reflection as a key factor in furthering this self-development. Adelman (1989, p.175) espouses the same ideas. “Teaching ... is an activity which entails reflection on what one has done in order to become more accomplished ... envisaged ends and practical means are considered jointly in order to improve practice.”

Carr and Kemmis (1986, p.189.) also write about the benefits of reflection in Action Research claiming “while practical experience can be gained through unsystematic reflection on action, a rational understanding of practice can only be gained through systematic reflection on action by the actor involved. The knowledge developed by action researchers about their own practices is of this kind.” They point out the systematic framework required for reflection to lead to self-development which is an integral part of Action Research and further on (p.190) point out the “correctness of the interpretation of an action is not a matter to be decided by external reference to rule or principles or theories.” This repeats another benefit of Action Research also previously mentioned and especially important in a field such as ELT Action Research is very suitable for individual situations and for dealing with individual problems in its own particular setting. It is a way of finding out what works best for teachers in their own situation and can allow opportunity to test out the generalized theories of others in their own individual situation. “Action research enables teachers to think more objectively about practice ... it

helps us to construct informed rather than implicit theories of teaching and learning in context in ways which have meaning in our individual classrooms” (Burns, 1992, p. 5).

Burns, in her assessment of the Action Research project on the curriculum in Australian TAFE Colleges (1995 pp. 9-10), has a comprehensive list of benefits of Action Research in the project, some of which overlap those already discussed. They include:

1. *The systematic form of the investigation.*
2. *The grounding of the research within a real social context (an important part of Action Research in regards to the Kemmis and McTaggart model).*
3. *The variety and multidimensions of data collection methods and tools as well as of different participants perspectives.*
4. *The genuine nature of the research dealing with real and pressing questions and responding to them actively rather than after the event.*
5. *The breakdown of the traditional dichotomy between researcher and practitioner allowing the two to work together and increasing the knowledge of the relationship between theory and practice.*

Through some quotations from teachers involved in the project, she lists some additional important benefits of Action Research (1995, p.10). She found that “action research breaks down the relative isolation of most teachers' work allowing them to affirm and reaffirm what they do as well as to critique it within a supported problem sharing and solving atmosphere.” Loss of the feeling of isolation many teachers feel, being able to share ideas and opinions with other teachers as well as having your methods critiqued by other even if only indirect benefits of Action Research are certainly worthwhile and something all teachers are able to benefit from in their workplace.

Weaknesses

Despite the numerous benefits of Action Research “there are also likely to be a number of difficulties experienced in carrying it out” (Burns 1995, p. 11).

A key difficulty identified by Burns (1995, p. 11) as the most serious and universal in their project was teachers “having the time to carry out research in addition to their usual teaching” and the associated problem of “the logistics of documenting or collecting data during busy classroom time.” Every teacher can relate to a lack of time in his or her teaching and conducting research can only add to this. Time is a serious impediment not only for Action Research, but also, in the whole matter of Curriculum development, which, as has been seen is in some fields of teaching, centrally involves the teacher. Teachers often feel there is little time for lesson planning, let alone curriculum development or Action Research projects however desirable and beneficial they may be. “If language teachers are to be charged with the responsibility of developing their own curricula, they need more time and greater skills and more support than if they are implementing a curriculum developed by others”(Nunan 1989, p. 3).

Nunan has mentioned some further problems, which, although in reference to curriculum development can equally apply to Action Research. To carry out such projects teachers need more support and “individual contact with coordinators or others to reaffirm that they were on the track” and

overcome “uncertainty about whether what they were doing was right and whether they were going about the data collection accurately” (Burns 1995, p. 11). Therefore successful Action Research is an issue of staff development and requires time and resources in acquainting teachers with the principles and characteristics of its style of research as well as the provision of ongoing professional support to assist teachers during the course of projects. The Australian joint university Action Research 2002-2004 project in Curricula, previously mentioned, found these same problems. Lecturers needed more support than anticipated and they needed a more formal mentoring program (2004, p.12). They also found that time problems, especially in scheduling face-to-face meetings, was their biggest unexpected challenge.

Carr and Kemmis (1986, p.152-153) mention another possible problem with Action Research involving the traditional “separation of educational research from educational practice” leading to a tendency for people not to naturally form action research groups. They suggest that intervention is necessary to create the acceptance of a need for Action Research although they concede that this has its own problems in elevating the person intervening to that of “someone with superior knowledge” which defeats the principle of “participatory, collaborative forms of critical self reflection” which are integral parts of Action Research. Burns (1995, p. 11) in another of the difficulties teachers found in their action research project expresses similar ideas in a different way noting teachers misgivings in “revealing their teaching ‘warts and all’ to researchers and other teachers.” Many teachers, whilst at home teaching their own class, feel apprehensive when being observed by other teachers and opening up their teaching in the collaborative manner required by action research could lead to a rise in similar feelings of apprehension. Perhaps unwillingness to be confronted with the shortcoming in one’s teaching is a part of this feeling.

Conclusion

The benefits of Action Research in the field of teaching and curriculum change overwhelmingly outweigh the problems, although these issues of time, training and interest must be addressed before Action Research will be able to flourish in a particular education setting. Action Research, already used in numerous educational settings, is a valuable tool to promote curriculum change especially in fields such as language teaching and situations where the teacher bears a heavy responsibility for curriculum development. Furthermore, Action Research promotes professional self-development and is suited for teachers' own unique class situations. It deals with real problems that teachers are experiencing and gives them not only a practical mechanism to improve their own teaching practices but also a step towards curriculum change at all institutional levels.

Action research can be seen as a potent methodology for educational reform precisely because its core principle of combining action with research inevitably challenges the routines of the status quo. It gives the teachers, who carry it out, a means to develop agency to bring about change; and the changes they introduce are locally appropriate within the globalized world they inhabit (Somekh & Zeichners 2009, p. 19).

Appendix

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