

Action Research

<http://arj.sagepub.com/>

The praxis of educating action researchers : The possibilities and obstacles in higher education

Morten Levin and Ann W. Martin

Action Research 2007 5: 219

DOI: 10.1177/1476750307081014

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://arj.sagepub.com/content/5/3/219>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Action Research* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://arj.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://arj.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://arj.sagepub.com/content/5/3/219.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Sep 10, 2007

[What is This?](#)

ARTICLE

The praxis of educating action researchers

The possibilities and obstacles in higher education

Morten Levin

The Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Norway

Ann W. Martin

Praxis Consulting Group, Inc. and the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Norway

ABSTRACT

This article deals with the matter of educating action researchers in higher education. It takes as a point of departure what is currently published that considers the teaching of action research as a practice within university settings. This literature is rather meagre, so we seek a better understanding in the theories and models developed in adult education. We believe the adult education frame offers the basis for making sense of the relationship between experiences, reflection, and the written reflections intended to communicate research-based insights to the scientific community.

KEY WORDS

- action research
- education
- higher education

Action research is not a single method. Action research is a strategic approach to knowledge production, integrating a broad array of methods and methodological approaches in specific ways to create new understanding for participants and researchers through solving practical and pertinent problems and supporting problem-owners' democratic control over their own situation. As an approach to knowledge, action research expands outside the existing borders of discipline-based conventional social science.

This issue of *Action Research* focuses on educating action researchers. Our question is, simply, 'how do you teach someone to be an action researcher?' We could also ask this question, 'how does anyone learn to be an action researcher?' These are not, of course, the same. We asked the first question of our contributors, and they provide several examples as answers. But in all cases, the answers to the second question, not asked, are only implied. Yet we realize that we can't talk about teaching action researchers without exposing our assumptions about how people learn action research. Furthermore, we are reminded by the variation in submissions for the journal that we should be clear about what it is we believe an action researcher should know and be able to do.

It may be simplistic to say that action research involves both action and research (Levin, in press), but it is this combination that creates the complexity in understanding what action researchers should know. As Levin (in press) writes, the practitioner must be able to 'initiate and support' involvement of self and others 'in action' as well as (have) the capability to 'reflect critically on the process and outcomes of the action engagement.' Furthermore, the role as we understand it demands the capacity to share the knowledge generated in that action engagement. Action researchers need intervention skills and research skills. They need theoretical appreciation and the capacity for critical reflection.

How can a person learn (and be taught) all of these capacities? We often read about 'training' action researchers, but there is a subtle distinction to be made between training and educating. In the case of action research, both terms apply. According to the *American Heritage Dictionary* (1976), "'train" implies concentration on particular skills . . . to fit a person . . . for a desired role.' 'Educate' is more comprehensive and implies a wide area of learning, achieved 'either by experience, or more often, by formal instruction in many subjects.' Training and apprenticeship will fit action researchers for their roles in the field; education will deepen their capacity to inquire and reflect as well as broaden their exposure to theory that applies to their work.

What the literature says about teaching action research in higher education

A central duality in AR is the pair of goals, one to create social developmental processes aiming to solve pertinent local problems and the other to, at the same time, contribute to the body of scientific knowledge (Greenwood & Levin, 2007). Given that the action research process is grounded in social developmental processes, it is surprising how little attention there has been in the literature on how to develop action researchers. Indeed, the focus has been on identifying necessary skills as exemplified in the final section of the *Handbook of action research* (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Of the five chapters in that specific section, only one focuses on educating graduate students in AR (Reason & Marshall, 2001). The authors present the core elements that through their experiences have been important in conducting action research but concentrate only on 'process oriented supervision' (Reason & Marshall, 2001, p. 415) as the approach to train students in AR. This focus fits naturally with Reason and Marshall's conceptualization of AR 'that research is not an impersonal, external and solely intellectual endeavour, but rather a complex and personal social process . . .' (p. 415).

A broader perspective on skills required for AR is addressed in a special issue of *Systemic Practice and Action Research* entitled 'The engaged researcher' (Levin & Ravn, 2007). In the issue, the authors discuss the core aspects of the action researcher's role, from the process of becoming an action researcher, through mastering everyday practicalities in the field, to managing the necessary reflection processes both in action and on action. However, the journal issue does not attend to the problem of educating action researchers in higher education.

In the second version of *Introduction to action research* (2007) Greenwood and Levin devote the final part of the book to a discussion of AR within higher education where their attention is on both how to develop and accommodate teaching in AR within institutions of higher education and on the transformations needed if AR is to find firm ground in academia. They suggest, as does Greenwood in this issue, that such transformation has the potential to transform higher education. The authors build on their individual experiences from teaching AR, but present no more inclusive overview, as published discussions of AR in higher education are scarce.

A brief review shows some reference to the pedagogical challenges associated with introducing and practicing AR in institutions of higher education, but not in detail. Herr and Anderson (2005) in *The action research dissertation* embark on the project of how to go about making it to a PhD in action research. They introduce a spectrum of different modes of action research strategies and continue with a discussion on quality criteria for AR. At this point the authors turn their attention to how to do the dissertation. From that point on, Herr and Anderson (2005) focus on the research part of the PhD dissertation. The title

of chapter 5, 'Designing the plane while flying it', conveys the complexities of working on an AR based PhD. Since an action research project is in constant movement, the PhD student lives in the flux of a changing field, changing priorities even as she needs to 'keep the course' in terms of the theory and analysis that can lead to a successful PhD.

It is also worth noting that Coghlan and Brannick (2005) in their book on doing research on one's own organization end up with the research 'product' in the form of a PhD thesis. This is what they somewhat imprecisely identify as academic oriented action research. It is interesting, however, that Coghlan and Brannick (2005) end up locating the insider action research effort in a university. In the final chapter they discuss the issue of writing an action research-based thesis but still offer little advice on how AR should be taught at the university level.

Perhaps more notable is the rudimentary attention the education process of actions researchers has received from the practitioners in the field of education research. Stringer (1999) in his introductory book *Action research* deals with the role of the researcher but devotes no attention to the educational process for taking on that role. Nonetheless, Stringer also suggests that reporting on action research can take the form of a PhD thesis. It seems typical that the writing on AR emerging from researchers involved in the educational sector gives little to the actual process of training and educating action researchers. In their book on education, knowledge, and action research, Carr and Kemmis (1986) give us the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of AR, but do not offer a perspective on how to educate the professionals who might be able to work according to their argued epistemology. In a more recent work by Mills (2003), we see the same pattern. Even those writing about AR in educational settings neglect the process of educating action researchers. Richard Sagor (2005) has published an admirable and practical book, *The action research guidebook* for educators. This book provides the steps in action research, but it doesn't address directly how we might teach someone to take these steps. In this sense it is a cookbook, and assumes that the cook can learn by reading directions.

Because of the range and depth of what must be and *can be* learned about being an action researcher, we do believe that the education of action researchers belongs in institutions of higher education. How it fits in such institutions is, however, problematic and certainly not accompanied by accepted conventions, as the offerings in this journal issue will show. Of course, there are many more efforts to teach action research than are represented here. These span from segments in specific undergraduate courses to full doctoral programs in AR. There is perhaps no straight line linking the different types and forms of teaching. However, we invite you to look with us for common threads in what our writers depict.

Our assumptions about how action research is learned

Our view is that action research is learned in action, in reflections with others, in reflection on what is written (theory), and in discourse, interaction through language, especially written discourse. Taken together, these four components comprise the cycle of action and reflection that describe the progression of action research (see, for example, Coghlan & Brannick, 2005). What may be most promising for learning action research may be no more complex than these cycles, which mirror the cycles in the research itself. The challenge, as we understand it, is to create the space for this concept and practice in institutions of higher education. In the articles in this issue, you will find some places where academics and non-academics working together have begun to pry open such spaces.

Like most of the authors in this special issue, we operate on the assumption that learning to be an action researcher must connect organically to the practice being learned. Experience is an essential component in this learning. We turn naturally to Dewey and the value of experience and reflection on experience. In explaining the epistemology of AR, Greenwood and Levin (2007) cite Dewey's refusal to separate thought from action (p. 60). The epistemology of action research must inform the learning of action research as well, lest in painful irony our students are asked to divide thought and action, concept and experience, at the very moment when we want them to understand that these are not separable.

Heron (1996) argues for knowledge within a 'systematic whole' built as a pyramid. The foundation of that pyramid is experiential knowledge, 'direct, lived being-in-the-world.' Each subsequent layer is supported by the layer beneath. Following experiential knowing are presentational or pattern knowing, then conceptual knowing, and, ultimately, practical knowing which to Heron is the 'exercise of skill' (Heron, 1996). This image of the pyramid, an integrated system, serves well as an image of both how action research can be learned and how we can conceptualize the teaching of AR. We cannot separate out the learning of concepts, for example, from the lived experience. And simply put, we cannot expect students of AR to learn it without doing it.

The second major point about how action research is learned also derives from our understanding that learning must be organic, consistent with *what* we ask students to learn. We ask them to embrace the concept of co-generated learning. For students to do this in a meaningful way, we expect that they will need to learn the theory and practice of AR in reflection with others. AR is research with others; inquiry and reflection are in collaboration with others. So, too, should be the learning of action research. To quote Heron again, "'experiential knowing' . . . is active, intentional, capable of increasing degrees of participative articulation and engagement' (1996, p. 205). This contrasts directly with the image of the academic scholar pursuing her own questions, alone with her books, isolated but for occasional classes where it is quite likely that exchange is between professor

and individual students. The insistence that a doctoral study be a solo endeavour confirms this image. Those who write in this issue about teaching AR in spite of university regulations (Taylor & Pettit, 2007, in this issue), and at the margins of their conventional assignments (Greenwood, 2007, in this issue) can only begin to challenge the higher education institutional and cultural expectation for solo learning.

Third is the role of literature in learning action research. Because in this issue we are concerned with the education of action researchers in post-secondary institutions, we must assume that literature will play a role in the education, although we have not seen anyone examine how the literature contributes to the learning. Although one of us has published a major work on action research (Greenwood & Levin, 1998, 2007) and both have published chapters about action research (in handbooks, etc.), we certainly cannot claim that it is possible to become an action researcher by reading about being an action researcher. Given our claim that one learns to be an action researcher in action and reflection, what is it that the literature offers a student of action research? It is in the literature that we find theory, the scientific and philosophical bases and the epistemology that inform the approach to research. Great potential for learning awaits in reflection on literature in the context of experience. A couple of the writing teams for this issue have themselves spoken of the discovery the process sparked. There is an ‘aha’ for someone who has been engaging in action research to return to the theory to confirm or disconfirm her understanding of what is really going on.

The fourth way one learns to be an action researcher is in ‘theory testing’. In spite of the label, theory testing is inextricably linked to experience and grounded in an epistemological assumption that we learn by doing. The work is fundamentally a task of discovering and/or recognizing what we know. It is the act of naming what we know, and in formal education this act is most often exercised as writing. Heron (1996, p. 205) links language and action research: ‘Language enables us to symbolize our personal experiences’. We expect in the use of language to communicate with others, and, in the context of this discussion of how action researchers learn, we argue that writing is one way to engage in reflection with others. At its best, academic writing is a way to connect literature – the thoughts of others – with our own discoveries. And at its best, writing in the academic environment demands that we test our experience-based theory in language that will bring new awareness (and questions) to others. Writing can be the integrating experience for learners of action research. Experience remains the foundation of action research learning, but reflection and framing in language that captures learning deepen the understanding. We invite you to note how many of our contributors include a writing component in their accounts of educating action researchers.

Adult education and action research teaching

How, then, should we teach AR? The learning theory and practice of adult education are closest to any formalized approach that can endow the combination of skills and understanding that are required for action research.

Adult education theory emphasizes the need for learners to be self-directed and autonomous, for the educational process to build on experience, and for the content to be relevant and practical (Knowles, 1984; Tennant, 1988). Following these principles in training and educating action researchers minimizes the role of direct instruction and emphasizes learning in the field. The most comparable approach in university teaching may be in the project-based teaching practices followed in engineering and architecture schools.

The emphasis on learning in the field or in practice makes sense because the practitioner skills in process design and facilitation, the practice skills, needed by action researchers are learned *in action*. Skills, while they may be taught, are developed through experience. Furthermore, experiential learning itself both demands and cultivates some degree of autonomy and self-direction. The moment-by-moment decisions in facilitation cannot be dictated or directed by a teacher. The processes action researchers use require interactive planning skills that assume an ability to think and act in the moment, independent of instructors or even the advice of wise mentors.

Furthermore, an essential goal of action research is to solve practical problems. The practice of adult education is to focus students on real problems such as planning programs, deriving solutions to social issues, or working within organizations to implement change. This parallels the stance of action researchers who use the practical skills of intervention and collaboration to address relevant social issues.

Other elements in adult learning theory can inform the education of action researchers as well. One is the concept of critical thinking, connected to and deriving from the work of critical theorists (see, for example, Benhabib, 1996; Habermas, 1971). In the simplest terms, critical thinkers inquire into the assumptions in understanding and 'givens' in institutional and structural conditions. To accomplish their research mission, action researchers need to have acquired the mindset of inquiry. Their approach to social problems is strengthened by an understanding of what it is to challenge assumptions and accepted patterns, whether they be in material reality or in thinking. Their job as leaders of co-generated learning assumes a habit of inquiry.

A relatively recent development in adult education theory is the theory of transformative learning articulated in the early 1990s by Jack Mezirow, a scholar at Teachers College, Columbia (Mezirow, 1990). In transformative learning, our mental models are challenged, and as a result of self-inquiry and reflection, we emerge with a new or transformed understanding. The triggering event for trans-

formative learning is described as a ‘disorienting dilemma.’ Something occurs that jars our habitual understanding of the world and we must develop a new understanding. This may be the most controversial application of adult education theory to our notions of educating action researchers. With a firm set of practical skill needs and the deeper understanding that accompanies critical thinking, is there also a need for personal transformation?

In the context of transformative learning, it is good to remember the roots of action research in the work of Paulo Freire (1970), whose process of ‘conscientization’ is a transformation that challenges habitual thinking and roles and enlightens the learners involved in the research project. Mezirow (1990) envisions adult education as a process that fosters transformative learning, much as Freirian educators foster conscientization, a process of empowerment through new knowledge. Action researchers are frequently engaged in the business of empowering others – to trust their own knowledge and to engage in meaningful social action. Since we are educating action researchers for practice, it is sensible to hope we can provide them with challenges and support that will shift their sense of agency and power. Our goal should be that the student’s learning of interactive skills through practice and the reflective skill for theoretical understanding of the potential for empowerment come together to shape a person who is both scientist and practitioner. Note the learning experience described in the article by Sankaran, Hase, Dick and Davies (2007, in this issue) as a ‘metamorphosis that borders on life changing’ (p. 296).

However, if we insist on grounding action research education in university doctoral programs, we confront serious contradictions between the ethos of adult education, where personal growth and transformation are most important, and the expectation that the quality of educational achievement will be determined by external ‘judges,’ the PhD committee, looking to compare the academic product with the products of prior academics. This focus on examinations and scholarly references may have a similar impact on undergraduate students of action research. These are constraints that those of us educating action researchers must relate to actively. We must hold the values of experiential learning, reflective practice and transformational learning on the one hand and, on the other hand, insist on written work of a quality to influence scientific thinking. In the world of social science as we know it, the opportunity to have that influence exists largely within the confines of institutions of higher education.

With this in mind, we offer the following issues for the education of action researchers in university settings:

Engage students in explicit cycles of practical action and reflection that connect with existing theory and invite critical thinking.

Insist on socially relevant field work that requires the development of action-oriented skills in the field. Provide support for this work as students *will* learn to fly this airplane while flying it. To provide such support demands a teach-

ing model that credits field supervision. (We are encouraged to see that some of our contributors are experimenting with such a model.)

With these perspectives in mind we turn our attention to the articles in this issue.

Articles in this special issue

The articles in this special issue cover a wide field of AR educational activities in higher education. The perspectives range from joint student–teacher reflections based on teaching and being a student in the same program to a reflection on the transformations that are required in higher education in order to accommodate teaching action research. The articles document what is possible and at the same time offer good critical reflection on the possibilities for AR in higher education.

Taylor and Pettit build their article on efforts to create a masters program in participation, power and social change. This program aimed at social activism and integrated power, participation, and reflection processes as integrated elements of the educational effort. The masters program was created through a critical analysis of their former teaching activity and the program itself underwent changes as they learned from running it.

Greenwood argues that action research will never find a place in higher education unless the institutions themselves are transformed to embrace action research as a viable form of research and a significant career pattern. Although his argument is that teaching action research could be the integrating activity that would transform university life, he paints a grim picture of this potential, based on his 30-plus years of teaching at a research university.

Grant's article brings us the lived experience of learning action research. She shares her intellectual journey of learning action research and offers several insights to guide the education of action researchers. She focuses on the emergent nature of action research and the role systematic reflection contributes to the learning of the action research role.

Etmanski and Pant report on a joint Indian/Australian effort to teach action researchers via the internet. The international/cross-cultural/cross-occupational nature of their endeavour and the idea of linking these in internet-based co-operation opens possibilities for thinking how we might experiment with action research education, across cultural boundaries and outside of the usual margins of academia.

Sankaran et al. also build an article on distance learning and net-based teaching. These authors present the design for a program and reflect on what they have learned from experience with it. Their article presents a good example of the impact of bridging theory and practical learning.

Barazangi tells the story of introducing action research to academic faculty in Syria. The irony and the point of her tale is that the engagement in action research is liberating for these academics where research of any kind has not been rewarded. Her project with these faculties provides a glimpse of transformation in highly bound university cultural settings.

Peters and Gray give an account of their experience as instructor and student in a course Peters designed to engage students in cycles of action and reflection. It is noteworthy that the program, housed in a university, is named the Doctoral Program in Collaborative Learning. Most of the students in Peters's course are adults, full-time professionals for whom this is their sole research course.

Conclusion

Fortunately, there is no one pattern for educating action researchers in higher education. The articles in this special issue offer alternative approaches. We see this heterogeneity as an encouraging development. It will be through active experimentation and the sharing of reflections and learning from each other that we can position the education of action researchers to prosper and become a viable activity in higher education. We hope that the articles in this special issue can contribute to this critical exchange of ideas and praxis.

References

- American Heritage Dictionary* (1976).
- Benhabib, S. (1996). *Critique, norm, and utopia: A study of the foundations of critical theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Carr, W., & Kemmis, S. (1986). *Becoming critical education, knowledge and action research*. London: The Falmer Press.
- Coghlan, D., & Brannick, T. (2005). *Doing action research in your own organization* (2nd edn). London: Sage.
- Freire, P. (1970). *The pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder & Herder.
- Greenwood, D. J. (2007). Teaching/learning action research requires fundamental reforms in public higher education. *Action Research*, 5(3), 249–264.
- Greenwood, D. J., & Levin, M. (1998). *Introduction to action research, social research for social change*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Greenwood, D. J., & Levin, M. (2007). *Introduction to action research, social research for social change* (2nd edn). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Habermas, J. (1971). *Knowledge and human interests*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Heron, J. (1996). *Co-operative inquiry research into the human condition*. London: Sage.
- Herr, K., & Anderson, G. L. (2005). *The action research dissertation: A guide for students and faculty*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Knowles, M. (1984). *Andragogy in action*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Levin, M. (in press). The praxis of educating action researchers: The possibilities and obstacles in higher. In P. Reason, & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of action research participative inquiry*.
- Levin, M., & Ravn, J. E. (2007). Involved in praxis and analytical at a distance. *Systemic Practice and Action Research*, 20(2), 1–13.
- Mezirow, J. (1990). *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood: A guide to transformative and emancipatory learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Mills, G. E. (2003). *Action research: A guide for the teacher researcher*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (Eds.). (2001). *Handbook of action research participative inquiry*. London: Sage.
- Reason, P., & Marshall, J. (2001). On working with graduate students in reason. In P. Reason, & H. Bradbury (Eds.) (2007) *Handbook of action research participative inquiry*. London: Sage.
- Sagor, R. (2005). *The action research guidebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Sankaran, S., Hase, S., Dick, B., & Davies, A. (2007). Singing different tunes from the same song sheet: Four perspectives of teaching the doing of action research. *Action Research*, 5(3), 293–305.
- Stringer, E. T. (1999). *Action research* (2nd edn). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Taylor, P., & Pettit, J. (2007). Learning and teaching participation through action research: Experiences from an innovative masters programme. *Action Research*, 5(3), 231–247.
- Tennant, M. (1988). *Psychology and adult learning*. London: Routledge.

Morten Levin is a Professor at the Department of Industrial Economics and Technology Management, The Faculty of Social Sciences and Technology Management at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim, Norway. Throughout his professional life, he has worked as an action researcher with a particular focus on processes and structures of social change in the relationships between technology and organization. The action research has taken place in industrial contexts, in local communities, and in university teaching where he has developed and been in charge of a three sequential PhD programs in action research. He is author of a number of books and articles, including *Introduction to action research: Social research for social change* written with Davydd J. Greenwood. Address: Department of Industrial Economics and Technology Management (IOT), The Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), N-7491 Trondheim, Norway. [Email: morten.levin@iot.ntnu.no]

Ann W. Martin is an engaged action researcher and consultant who has taught adult practitioners at Cornell University, Teachers College, Columbia University, and the Norwegian Technical University. She specializes in projects where participants need to work across their different interests and perspectives. She combines action research and leadership teaching, and especially loves to encourage researchers to write about their experiences.