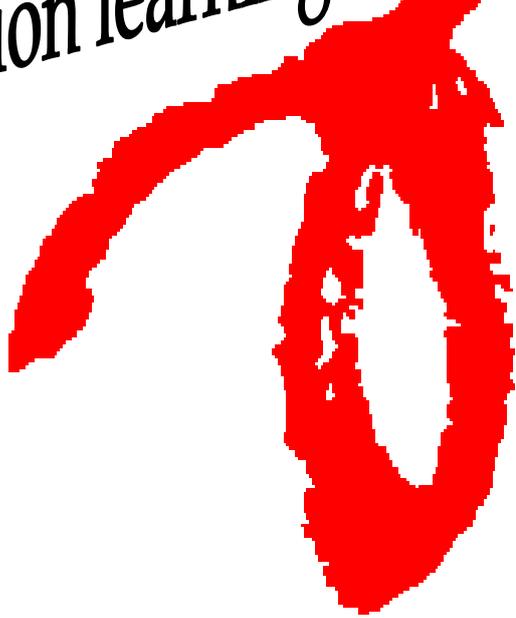


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# **ALAR Journal**

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**Chief editor:** Susan Goff

**Editorial team:** Susan Goff, Marian Naidoo, Margaret O'Connell, Shankar Sankaran, Jack Whitehead

**Editorial inquiries:**

The editor, *ALAR Journal*

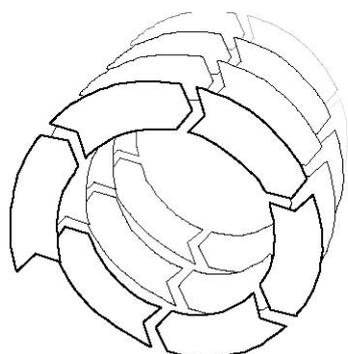
ALARA Inc

PO Box 1748

Toowong Qld 4066

Australia

editor@alara.net.au



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# Editorial

Having produced two Special Editions of our journal in 2011, one focussed on Future Praxis and the other on Indigenous Action Research, this edition was allowed to be open to whatever kinds of articles were submitted.

I anticipated a smorgasbord, but curiously all the articles that are in this edition relate to action research in teacher education. Moreover there is a specific focus to greater and lesser degrees, on the practices of the facilitator of action research methodologies in this field of endeavour.

Rachel Perry's article opens the issue. Her interest is in how facilitating action research to support teachers in primary school settings can increase their use of drama as a pedagogical choice. The account includes two action research studies, one completed in 2006 and the other still under way. The locations of these inquiries are Australian: the first project taking place in New South Wales, and the second in the State of Queensland.

The second article is by Allen Trent who again, looks at the role of the facilitator of action research, but with the purpose of enabling teachers to participate in educational policy-making. This initiative takes place in the American State of Wyoming extending to a national scale of engagement.

Our third contribution is by a frequent author for our journal Dr Pip Bruce Ferguson, located in New Zealand. Pip explores the use of action research to overcome resistance to researching teaching practice with teachers from a broad array of disciplinary backgrounds, in an institution which, like many, resists the relevance of practice expertise in actualising academic education.

Our last article is by Wenshin Chen who uses action research with student teachers in an unnamed American university,

to experience the use of authoritative “power practice” to create consciousness of critical pedagogy.

Our issue concludes with a book review (author: Gilmer), by Low Kian She who again is focussing on teacher practice: the use of Collaborative Learning and technology in teaching tertiary science education in the USA and Singapore.

An additional layer of comparison between the articles relates to a personal favourite, Torbert’s construction of Action Inquiry (e.g.: Reason and Bradbury 2001 pp 250-260), related to First, Second and Third Person inquiry. Torbert proposes that systemic transformation can come about with epistemological change to how we understand power. His proposition is that when we work simultaneously on the three dimensions of the personal (the ‘I’ of inquiry - first person), the inter-personal (the “I - thou” of inquiry - second person) and the systemic (shared notions of reality such as policy, concept and system – the third person) we can shift the idea, intent and actualisation of power to be “distributive”. Such a construction of power is intrinsically transformational.

Without naming Torbert, each author in our current edition explores different aspects of this idea. Perry considers the effectiveness of working in both first person and contextual dimensions of inquiry – her idea of context taking into account inter-personal (second person) and conceptual domains (third person) in the form of pedagogical choices and our reasons for making them. Trent is concerned with the relationship between the first person (individual teacher practice and understanding) and the third person (policy development), finding that the I-thou relationship (second person) is one of the essential keys to bridging this all too familiar gap. Bruce Ferguson provides a unique and really practical account of how participant-developed solutions to institutional resistance to practice inquiry can bridge the gap between individual practice and institutional assumptions (cultures – third person domain) about tertiary education. Finally, Chen drills into the micro-moments of effecting

power in teacher student relationships (second person dimensions) to bring into view the realm of critical pedagogy (third person inquiry).

Our book review integrates third person systems such as Information and Communication Technology with Collaborative Learning (first and second person inquiry).

Each of our papers paper, in its own way, produces detailed and powerful accounts of the role of the action research facilitator in providing the environments, resources, distinctions and relationships for co-researchers to self determine their solutions to these vital challenges to taken-for-granted realities in the interests of a more just, sustainable and joyful world.

As editor it is delightful to see the patterns emerging as our field gives rise to its voice through the reflections of our practitioners at any one moment, and in many locations.

I continue to be grateful and inspired by our authors.

Thank you to each and all for the considerable labours required to produce such excellent papers. I welcome you, our readers, to yet another action research/action learning treat.

Dr Susan Goff

Chief Editor, *ALARj*

# Facilitated action research: enhancing the teaching of classroom drama

Rachel Perry

## Abstract

*This paper argues for facilitated action research as an effective way of supporting teacher professional learning in drama. It also recognises that the need for support identified in a past study remains current resulting in the facilitated action research process still being relevant.*

*Facilitated action research is advocated as a way of engaging with individual needs, beliefs and experiences of teachers resulting in a positive change in pedagogical understanding and drama practice. Consideration of two separate research studies, five years apart, reveal the growth of the facilitated action research process and highlight the significance of personal or contextual factors in facilitating or constraining the use of drama in primary school classrooms.*

**Keywords:** drama, professional learning, action learning, action research, facilitation, primary school

## Mark's story

My story began as a part-time music teacher who also had a small degree of previous stage and film experience. A **really** [emphasis in original] small degree of experience...

Part time suited me extremely well. Three consecutive days per week provided me with a four-day weekend, which allowed me to pursue my studies in secondary education. With the latter nearing completion, I needed a return to full-time work.

I knew that if I proved myself at school, there may be an opportunity to take on the supervision of a creative and performing arts department

within the junior schools. This was the job that I had dreamed of and, since I was happy at the school, the job was perfect.

There was just one question. Could I actually do the job? Yes. Would I have benefited from staff training before taking it on? Even bigger, more emphatic, “yes!”

How perfectly time life events can sometimes be. With the prospect of taking on a new role came the opportunity to undertake staff development in the subject area in question. How lucky I felt to be offered this opportunity. How much I hoped that it would work!

Fortunately for me, it did work, and in such a way that it surpassed my own expectations. I experienced the most effective staff training ever - a tailor made programme that began and ended with my own needs, my colleagues’ needs, the school’s needs and the students’ needs. I felt like I was really being trained for something.

...And, it worked. I am now in the role that was dangled as the proverbial carrot and I am loving it. Why? I feel that I have been given concrete resources and experiences from which to draw and feel that, should I need to find more resources or more support, I know exactly where to find them.

This story is unlike other stories, as there is no end to it. I will continue to learn more about what I’m teaching and how I do it and, I trust, I will adjust my teaching according to what I learn. One day, my teaching at [current school] will end, but I foresee that the story of creative and performing arts at this school will continue far, far into the future. (Mark, 6 Month Survey)

Mark’s story has been presented unedited and in full as a demonstration of the impact participation in a facilitated action research process can have on enhancing the use of drama in primary school classrooms. Drawing on past and recent research, this paper argues for professional learning in drama that is located with and for the participating teachers. The emphasis is on the growth of the facilitated action research process as it emerged during the learning journey and the factors that contributed to its focus.

The facilitated action research methodology draws on, but is not part of existing traditions of action research and action learning. The teachers, their needs and contexts are placed at the centre of the professional learning experience. A

facilitator is embedded within the model and this role is critical in supporting the individual and collaborative journeys undertaken. It is the provision of such connected experience that encapsulates the key knowledge claim from the research and viewed as fostering positive pedagogical change.

This paper first provides a brief overview of two research projects before combining literature and methodology to present the growth of the facilitated action research process as it emerged through Study One. Data from both studies are then considered to highlight the need for such a model in relation to addressing current issues facilitating and/or constraining the use of drama in classrooms.

## **The research projects**

Data from two different research projects are drawn on in this discussion. Both focus on enhancing the use of drama in primary school classrooms and worked to engage teachers actively in the professional learning process.

Due to the embedded nature of experience, the use of the first person is adopted where appropriate, acknowledging the importance of giving clear voice to all participants (learners and facilitator). The use of the first person is appropriate when reporting stories and the process of action research. Fullan and Hargreaves (1992) state that “*teacher development... must actively listen to and sponsor the teacher’s voice...*” (p5). From a methodological perspective, multiple voices, that of the ‘I’ and of the audience must be taken into account (Elijah, 2004 p247).

### *Study one*

The first study, which concluded in 2006, was conducted in two phases. Phase One investigated factors that facilitate or constrain the teaching of drama. These factors are discussed through the presentation of how the facilitated action research project evolved. Identification of the need for school-based professional learning as one such critical factor

resulted in the focus for Phase Two. The professional learning structure emphasised context and self-identified needs along with the importance of facilitating a collaborative, school-based approach. Data were drawn from eleven teachers across three schools in New South Wales. Phase Two involved one school and five teachers in the emerging facilitated action research process. I took on the role of facilitator and my voice and experiences will be embedded in this paper alongside those of the teachers.

### *Study two*

The second study is still in progress. Beginning in the second half of 2011, data were collected from thirty-two teachers across eight schools in rural and remote parts of the Queensland and Northern Territory. As with the first study, Phase One was designed to identify factors facilitating or constraining the use of drama along with specific details regarding professional learning preferences, past experiences and technology integration. The responsive facilitated action research model that emerged within Study One will again be followed. Participant and school selection for Phase Two is currently underway. It is anticipated that four schools and twelve teachers from the Ayr and Mt Isa region of Queensland will be involved during 2013 and 2014. In addition, the research will engage practicing dramatic artists who will function as classroom-based facilitators. This inclusion extends the role of facilitator as presented in Study One. The artists, and myself as the 'teacher facilitator', will undergo a parallel journey considering our own practice alongside that of the teachers.

Data for this paper is drawn from both phases in Study One and the first phase of Study Two.

### **Data collection**

The adoption of action research as a methodology for both studies was determined to a large extent by the focus of the research. There was a cyclical process in which the action allowed for the specific focus and research aims to be further

clarified. Interview, conversation, survey and journal data for Study One, along with survey and journal data for Study Two, were analysed using a qualitative approach. Key themes and patterns were identified, with data then tagged, categorised and resorted (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Quantitative data were collected via a Likert scale during both studies including information on self-perceived confidence levels and teacher attitudes to various areas of the creative arts as well as professional learning preferences.

### **Action research and action learning**

The benefit of applying action research and/or action learning strategies within teacher professional learning is widely supported (Aubusson, Brady, & Dinham, 2005; Aubusson, Ewing, & Hoban, 2009; Husby, 2005; McDonagh, Roche, Sullivan, & Glenn, 2012; McNiff & Whitehead, 2005). While there is a move toward development that is individually focused, much teacher professional learning still remains separated from classroom practice.

Action research was appropriate for both studies to allow a personal and fluid approach to investigating the research aims. The facilitated action research process that emerged is an expression of this broader methodology and draws on, but is not part of existing traditions of action research. The general design of both studies incorporates a collaborative focus that emphasises the situated nature of learning (Anderson, Reder, & Simon, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991; McLellan, 1996; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Stein, 1998) as it is addressed within these methodologies.

#### *Action learning, action research and practice*

The broad purpose of each study was to gain an in-depth picture of participating teacher's understanding, teaching practices, and professional learning experiences as a means of working toward the enhancement of drama use in their classrooms. This ensured the need for a research environment that built "...a complex, holistic picture..." (Creswell, 1998 p15) and also emphasised the importance of

conducting the study “...in a natural setting...” (Creswell, 1998 p15). Qualitative research locates itself primarily in the social context for investigation, making this overarching approach particularly relevant to educational research of this kind (Merriam, 1988; Schratz, 1993).

Traditional research is viewed as commonly taking place separate to the lives of the participants, and as a result can be considered deficient when investigating “...experienced reality...” (Stringer, 1999 p6). Action research is a methodology that places the participant at the fore, with participants most often the researchers themselves (Altrichter, Posch, & Somekh, 1993). The work context to be investigated is inseparable from the participant, with a researcher needing to be embedded and respectful of this relationship. At the end of the research a change in practice is expected (Stringer, 1999) with the need for making the gained knowledge public.

Action research as an approach to improving professional practice is viewed as growing from school-based or educational settings and is possibly a response to the relative isolation within which many teachers work and hence develop. This isolation differs from other professional organisations in which the primary workplace may be more team-oriented and suitable for true action learning (Aubusson, et al., 2009). While not adopting a pure action learning approach, the way in which it shapes the role of the facilitator as well as relationships between participants needs to be considered.

A common theme across the various discussions of action research and action learning centres on encouraging a change in practice in the environment within which a person works (Altrichter, et al., 1993; Aubusson, et al., 2009; McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 2003; Sagor, 1992). Furthermore, community is emphasised in some explanations (Aubusson, et al., 2009; Sagor, 1992; Stringer, 1999) with the focus on change being both individual and social (McNiff, et al., 2003).

A key consideration I faced when adopting action research was its similarities to good research practice (McNiff, et al., 2003) or professional practice. Professionals would argue that the process of problem identification, action taking and reflection on that action would constitute good professional practice within any occupation (McNiff, et al., 2003):

...It [action research] lies in the will to improve the quality of teaching and learning as well as the conditions under which teachers and students work in schools. Action research is intended to support teachers, and groups of teachers, in coping with the challenges and problems of practice and carrying through innovations in a reflective way... (Altrichter, et al., 1993 p4)

Identifying the differences between good practice and action research was important. A key difference comes from the ability of action research to address broader issues of curriculum development, assist with development of the profession, and advance educational research. This is only possible through the rigorous collection of evidence and thorough reporting required in action research. In further support of this distinction, Stenhouse (1975) advocates that action research has a responsibility to make theories of education and teaching available to others in addition to improving personal practice.

Various writers have offered suggestions on what constitutes 'action research' (Altrichter, et al., 1993; Aubusson, et al., 2009; Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009; McNiff, et al., 2003; Sagor, 1992). That presented by Altrichter, Posch and Somekh (1993) was most influential in developing the broader understanding of the action research paradigm embodied in the first study:

1. Action research is carried out by people directly concerned with the social situation that is being researched
2. Action research starts from practical questions arising from everyday educational work
3. Action research must be compatible with the educational values of the school and with the work conditions of teachers

4. Action research offers a repertoire of simple methods and strategies for researching and developing practice...Methods are tailored to what is achievable without overly disrupting practice
5. ...it [Action research] is characterised by a continuing effort to closely interlink, relate and confront action and reflection, to reflect upon one's conscious and unconscious doings in order to develop one's actions, and to act reflectively in order to develop one's knowledge
6. Each action research project...has a character of its own...we hesitate to provide an elaborate step-by-step model. (Altrichter, et al., 1993 p6)

When considering these characteristics, five key areas emerged from literature that were helpful for the development of both research studies, and in distinguishing action research from other expressions of good professional practice. These were:

- Social/cultural emphasis;
- Focus on values;
- The connection of action and reflection;
- Links to real practice; and
- Practical assistance for teachers.

Combining principles from each of these five areas provided a further rationale for the way in which action research differs from just good practice or good research and connect directly with what is considered effective professional learning in drama.

### **Collaborative and community-based action research**

Understanding forms of collaborative and community-based action research is important for what they contribute to the facilitated action research process adopted and the in-built role of the facilitator.

There have been a number of definitions offered as to what collaborative and community-based action research involves (Bruce, Flynn, & Stagg-Peterson, 2011; Oja & Smulyan, 1989; Sagor, 1992; Stringer, 1999). These explanations focus on *"...teams of practitioners who have common interests and work*

together to investigate issues related to those interests..." (Sagor, 1992 p10). The environment supported within community-based action research assists in encouraging equality, maintaining harmony, avoiding conflict and encourages cooperative relationships rather than fostering isolation (Stringer, 1999).

Altrichter et al. (1993) present an alternative approach acknowledging that teachers can work collaboratively, with the benefits as outlined, but do not need to share a focus. This perspective respects the individuality of classroom practice and the change process that enhances it and is adopted in the facilitated action research process.

### *The role of the facilitator*

Traditionally in action research, "...there is a clear intent to intervene in and improve one's own understanding and practice..." (McNiff, et al., 2003 p19). Applying this perspective became problematic in the first study due to myself, as researcher not being located in the school. This resulted in the adoption of a facilitator role reflecting that considered in both action learning and collaborative or community-based action research perspectives.

A number of characteristics of the facilitator in collaborative action research (Bruce, et al., 2011) and community-based action research are typical of the role adopted:

...In community-based action research, the role of the researcher is not that of an expert who *does* research but that of a resource person. He or she becomes a facilitator or consultant who acts as a catalyst to assist stakeholders in defining their problems clearly and to support them as they work toward effective solutions to the issues that concern them... (Stringer, 1999 p25)

Within the facilitated action research process, researcher/facilitator acts a *catalyst*, to *stimulate change* through addressing current concerns. The emphasis is on *process* by which teachers are encouraged to *develop their own analysis* of issues. The role of facilitator is to *assist in the*

*development* of plans of action and to aid in *implementing* the plan (Stringer, 1999 p25-26).

Action learning theory also supports this view of the facilitator within a collaborative approach to learning. The facilitator works with learners to “...*release and enhance the set member’s capacity for understanding and managing his life, his development...*” (McGill & Brockband, 2004 p193). The role of the facilitator is not to instruct or teach the participants, but to act as resource and guide. Core qualities, particularly, responsiveness (Avgitidou, 2009), empathy and response to emotion (McGill & Brockband, 2004), are important and drawn on in the shaping and conduct of interactions with teachers. The need for empathy links also to overcoming a key factor of decreased confidence cited by teacher in hindering their including of drama in the classroom.

While acknowledging links to collaborative or community-based action research, these conventional methods were not adopted directly in the facilitated action research process. Qualities of both were drawn on to inform the general structure, assist in the development of certain professional learning activities and guide, along with characteristics of action learning, the role of the facilitator.

## **Facilitated action research**

The facilitated action research process that emerged within the first study stands as a unique adaptation blending aspects of various recognised methods or traditions of action research. Synthesising the key features, facilitated action research involves the following characteristics of traditional action research methods, community-based and collaborative action research. The facilitated action research process:

- Resides with practitioners;
- Respects the ‘social situation’ and is context-based;
- Allows for and encourages engagement with values;

- Respects the need for ‘making knowledge public’, or ‘sharing outcomes’;
- Encourages a change in practice;
- Emphasises the importance of balancing action and reflection from an individual and social perspective; and
- Focuses on sharing experiences (but still locating individual learning with individual focus).

This approach also meant that the process deviates from traditional approaches to action research through the:

- Interpretation of the role of facilitator;
- Emphasis on flexibility and responsiveness; and
- Adaptation of the plan-act-observe-reflect cycle.

### **Not a method! The growth of ‘facilitated action research’ (Study One)**

The research was guided by an original conception of action research that does not rely on a model, or set of tools (Altrichter, et al., 1993; McNiff, 2002a, 2002b; McNiff, et al., 2003). It argues for not applying specific methods within an action research approach to classroom change, but considers the process undertaken as shaped by broad guidelines (McNiff, 2002b). By doing so, spontaneity and the unexpected can be addressed.

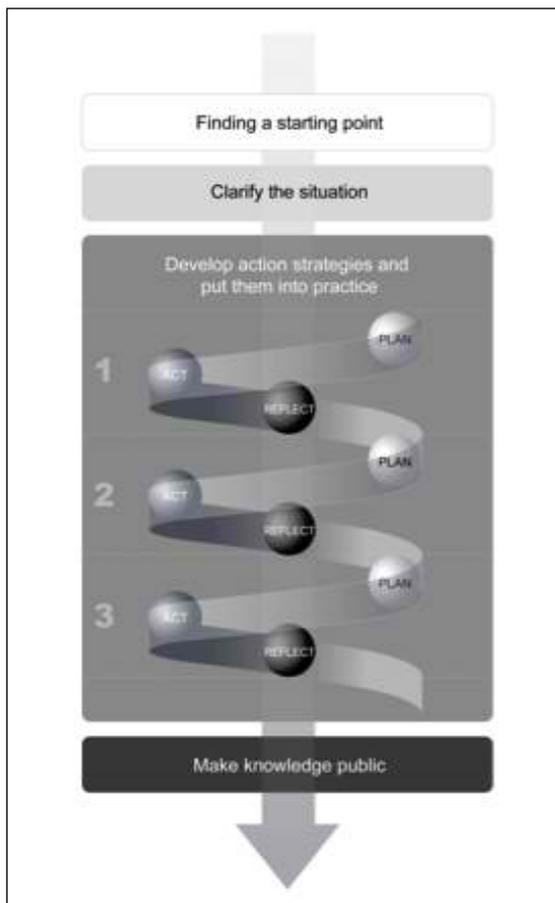
Adopting this flexible approach to action research enabled me to view a variety of basic models, but not be constrained by their procedures. This freedom ensured that I continued to respond to my own and the teachers’ self-identified needs and experience for enhancing the teaching of drama, and resulted in a natural process of professional learning.

Action research can take a variety of forms and as a result a number of models are offered. There is also a perspective that views action research as “...a set of techniques, a ‘tool’ that aims to ensure specific behavioural ‘outcomes’...” (McNiff, et al., 2003 p2). This shift is problematic as it takes action research from considering processes where people work together on

goals to being a more fixed series of steps to be followed (McNiff, et al., 2003). While these various tools may share common elements and be helpful to some practitioners, the extent to which they are adopted as a method by some, remains problematic and may jeopardise the fluid nature of the research.

The basic structure for the facilitated action research process was influenced by the following four stages of action research.

- Stage 1. Finding a starting point
- Stage 2. Clarifying the situation
- Stage 3. Developing action strategies and putting them into practice
- Stage 4. Making teachers' knowledge public. (Altrichter, et al., 1993 p7)



*Figure 1 – Facilitated Action Research Process*

The growth of the facilitated action research methodology is presented below in a step-by-step format following the visual structure developed in the research and offered in Figure 1. How it developed and any links to various action research traditions and theorists is embedded in the discussion along with data from Study One. Findings from the second study are discussed in the final section of this paper reinforcing the need for such a development process in drama to still take place today.

### *Stage 1: Finding a starting point*

The process of action research begins with *finding a starting point* (Altrichter, et al., 1993) from issues within one's practice. Study One was triggered by my personal experiences of a living contradiction (Whitehead, 1989), by which a person is "... unable to live according to what we believe, for a variety of reasons..." (McNiff, 2002a p13). I strongly believed, and valued the use of drama, but was not applying this belief in my daily teaching practice. I considered drama beneficial for students from a social learning perspective and also for what it could offer in terms of an alternative and meaningful learning experience. Despite being skilled in the teaching of drama, I was frustrated with my inability to translate values into practice.

My focus then began to shift to my colleagues and their practice. What I saw and heard anecdotally about other classrooms supported concerns with my own practice and fostered a passionate conviction to investigate what teachers know, and what and how they learn. It became evident that my concerns about teaching practice not matching beliefs were common. An issue of teachers being restricted in their professional learning due to school structures and classroom-based isolation also became evident.

### *Stage 2: Clarify the situation*

Clarify the situation (Altrichter, et al., 1993) is the second stage in the framework, and allowed for exploration of the

factors that facilitate or constrain the teaching of drama in primary school classrooms for both studies. Data drawn from surveys, conversations and interviews in Study One were analysed (Altrichter, et al., 1993) revealing a number of personal and contextual factors that were considered to facilitate or constrain the teaching of drama. Findings from Study Two reaffirmed the ongoing relevance of these factors including the belief that professional learning was ineffective if it did not address teacher contexts, needs or experiences.

Appropriate action strategies for effective professional learning were developed and put into practice (Altrichter, et al., 1993 p7). The emphasis in this second stage is similar to that of a "...reconnaissance phase..." (McNiff, et al., 2003 p60). In a reconnaissance phase, steps are often tentative and muddled, with collected data being less convincing than later in a study. The process becomes clearer as the action research develops and becomes more systematic through developing appropriate action strategies.

The importance of regularly revisiting the situation to allow further clarification, and therefore enhanced action strategies to be undertaken, is an important feature of the next stage of the process. When considering learning through action research, it would be rare to reach closure within the situation being investigated, as any solutions would lead to new questions (McNiff, et al., 2003 p13). As a result, emphasis is placed on the understanding of learning that takes place, and subsequent development of ways forward.

### *Stage 3: Develop action strategies*

Once the situation has been clarified, the third stage in the process is to develop action strategies (Altrichter, et al., 1993) and put these into practice.

All teachers identified professional learning that respected their experiences as well as being able to address classroom-based needs as critical. This finding is supported by a move toward school-based professional learning (Aubusson, et al., 2009; Clark, 1992; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992; Hoban, 2002; Husby, 2005; McDonagh, et al.,

2012; Professional Support and Curriculum Directorate, 2003; Thiessen, 1992). Respect can be given to the importance of context and allowing for an emphasis on a teacher as a 'person'.

It was during this stage of Study One that other models of action research influenced the process. A number of adaptations have occurred since Lewin (1946) initially presented an action research spiral, including work by influential educational action research theorists such as Carr and Kemmis (1986), Elliott (1991), and McNiff (2002a; 2003). The simple action-reflection cycle offered by Lewin (1946) is used in this framework to describe the cyclical process within which the teachers' understanding and ownership of their own learning grew.

Within Study One, the *observe* and *reflect* aspects of Lewin's (1946) cycle were referred to using the term *reflection* resulting in an adapted cycle. While incorporating formal sessions for reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983), participating teachers were encouraged to undertake reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983). Through so-doing, the need to observe and reflect became entwined, and the reporting of practice incorporated both aspects simultaneously.

Unlike the original cycle offered by Lewin (1946), the process undertaken in Study One resulted in the formation of three action-reflection cycles. These connected cycles are indicative of the self-reflective spiral presented by Carr and Kemmis (1986) as a way of taking action to improve an educational situation. Allowing for flexibility within the cycles enabled unexpected issues and concerns to be addressed.

As the cycles progressed, teachers participating in the facilitated action research guided professional learning process began to take more control of their learning, and that learning was enhanced by increasingly critical reflection of their own practice and ongoing needs. What occurred has been referred to as connected cycles of action-reflection (McNiff, 2002b p.40), where the reflection from action taken in one cycle informs an altered plan for the next.

#### *Stage 4: Making knowledge public*

The final stage in the broad framework is that of making knowledge public (Altrichter, et al., 1993). Action research has a responsibility to contribute to a theory of education, and making this knowledge accessible to other teachers is crucial (Cohen & Manion, 1994). The importance of sharing the learning, and knowledge gained, sets action research apart from participation in effective self-reflective practice. Through making knowledge public, evidence of learning and claims to knowledge are provided (McNiff, 2002a). By doing so, lived experiences are shared within a broader educational community.

The aim of Study One was to make the knowledge public from two perspectives: the teachers' and mine, the researcher. The teachers engaged in peer reporting with other participants in the study and with the wider staff community in the school. This reporting took place at various stages during and after the conclusion of the research.

For me as researcher, the final stage in the facilitated action research process has been engaged in formal and informal ways including collegial conversations, a dissertation, conference presentations as well as being engaged through this paper.

#### **Then and now: Factors facilitating or constraining the use of drama**

The facilitated action research process emerged through the professional learning experience of teachers working to address and overcome the factors facilitating or constraining the use of drama. While being drawn predominantly from Study One, initial data from Study Two reinforced many of the factors previously identified as influencing the teaching of drama in primary school classrooms. Discussion of these factors, while not directly contributing to the enhancement of drama use in the classroom is important for the way it

influences teacher engagement in the process and highlights the importance of:

- The teacher's *purpose*;
- The teacher as a *person*;
- The real world *context* in which teachers work; and
- The *culture* of teaching: the working relationship that teachers have with their colleagues inside and outside the school. (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992 p5)

This structure as presented by Fullan and Hargreaves (1992) connects directly with the key style and aims of the facilitated action research process previously outlined.

Teaching is located primarily within two specific and individual contexts, or in and out-of-classroom spaces (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995). As the in-classroom space (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) is unique for each teacher, both studies were designed to acknowledge that factors reported were specific to each school and classroom context.

Emerging *personal factors* included:

- Teacher beliefs (students, classroom and academic material) as influenced by general beliefs (familial, religious, societal) and the valuing of drama;
- Beliefs about the social factors that influence pedagogical choice;
- Confidence and perceived skill level; and
- Experience (personal, with schooling and instruction and with formal education).

Emerging *contextual factors* included:

- Syllabus outcomes and parental influences;
- Space;
- Programming;
- Time pressures; and
- Professional learning.

It is the combination of these personal and contextual factors and their relationship to pedagogical choice in drama that is unique to the studies being considered. The relationship between beliefs, experience and pedagogical choice is viewed as critical in understanding and shaping teaching practice and based on the assumption that beliefs and experiences have a strong influence on pedagogical choice (Chen, 2008; Kagan, 1992; Richardson, 1996). These factors were influential in shaping the responsive design of the facilitated action research process undertaken in Study One. They are again being considered alongside initial data from Study Two.

### **Personal factors**

Data from both studies revealed that the factors considered to facilitate the use of drama in primary school classrooms were predominantly personal rather than contextual. This contrasts with those factors considered to constrain the teaching of drama. These were viewed as largely contextual.

Teachers referred primarily to their teacher beliefs (Chen, 2008; Kagan, 1992), or professional beliefs (students, classroom and academic material) when considering curriculum choices. Their experience had a direct bearing on their teaching practice in general rather than on their teaching of drama in particular. The benefit to student learning was stated as a factor motivating teachers to incorporate drama in their classrooms. Personal factors included reduced confidence and a lack of personal skill, with the contextual factors of inadequate or ineffective professional learning, and being blamed by the teachers for what was perceived as their insufficient use of drama.

Beliefs were revealed as one of the three key areas considered to influence and impact upon the learning process. The other two key areas were experiences and social interaction.

## **Teacher beliefs and valuing of drama**

There have been many studies recording the benefits and value of using drama in the classroom (Author, 2004; Bolton, 1979; Burton, 1987; Chan, 2009; Cusworth & Simons, 1997; Ewing, 2010; Heathcote & Bolton, 1995; Johnson & O'Neill, 1984). For drama use to be a conscious pedagogical choice, teachers need to value it as a positive learning experience for their students (Garcia, 1993).

Data from teachers in both studies clearly valued the use of drama and were able to provide a number of reasons why it was beneficial to their students. Teacher belief in regard to the benefit of drama for students was positive despite its less than frequent use. Teachers from both studies provided a number of reasons supporting their belief in the benefit and value of drama in the classroom. Drama:

- Encourages creativity and imagination;
- Enables the expression of appreciation;
- Promotes hands-on, meaningful experiences;
- Engages a variety of skills;
- Allows students to express what they may be unable to in words (difficult topics or troubled pasts);
- Helps develop self-esteem, confidence and enjoyment; and
- Develops cultural and social awareness as well as life skills.

While a majority of teachers were not regularly using drama, their participation demonstrated a desire to improve their practice in this area. What became increasingly clear during Study One was that in all cases, the facilitating and/or constraining factors involved a blend of both personal and contextual issues. It is anticipated that a similar pattern will be seen as Study Two moves into its in-depth professional learning phase. It is recommended that teachers acknowledge and engage with their individual beliefs regarding the valuing of drama as a basis for curriculum choice.

## **Social influence as influencing pedagogical choice**

Four areas of social influence were identified in Study One as influencing pedagogical choice: students, parents, colleagues and school leaders. The influence of students was evident for all teachers with a positive student response considered a motivating factor for pedagogical choice. Parents and their influence were discussed as inhibiting classroom choices and are viewed as a contextual factor.

The influence of colleagues was not freely volunteered, leading me to question the culture of teaching and learning (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992) in the school. Minimal information was volunteered in regard to the influence of school leaders during Study One. Comments presented this social influence as a constraining factor, with teachers expressing frustration about the perceived pressure being placed on them by the school leaders.

A more in-depth consideration of each of these areas and what they contribute to the culture of teaching and learning has been built into the emphasis for the facilitated action research process for Study Two. Teachers will be encouraged to acknowledge and work with the potentially conflicting views of stakeholders within their school community (students, parents, colleagues and school leaders) to provide a transparent process of pedagogical choice in their classrooms.

## **Confidence and perceived skill level**

Two factors were revealed in Study One that influenced the teaching of drama: confidence with the subject area and a teacher's self-perceived skill level. The level to which a teacher felt confident and knowledgeable regarding a subject area was shown to directly link to classroom practice. The majority of teachers expressed a self-identified lack of confidence and/or skill with the use of drama, which they then directly attributed to their minimal application of it in classrooms.

Being aware of confidence as a constraining factor for drama, is consistent with a focus on the *teacher as a person* (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992), and was crucial in allowing for a responsive and empathetic process of professional learning. Over the course of Study One, these two areas, an increase in skill, and increased confidence, proved mutually reinforcing.

Teachers in Study Two will explore the implications of limited confidence and impact on pedagogical choice explicitly within the facilitated action research process as a means of addressing and overcoming this contributing factor. Connecting with a key recommendation from Study One, the professional learning process will provide time for subject-based knowledge development, as well as fostering general classroom management and programming skills. The varied roles of the artist and teacher facilitators have also been built in to support this area.

## **Experience**

As with belief, the role of experience is a well-recognised factor guiding pedagogical choice. Experience is divided into three distinct areas influencing the development of teacher beliefs and knowledge (Richardson, 1996):

- Personal experience;
- Experience with schooling and instruction (teaching and learning); and
- Formal education experiences (Richardson, 1996).

Past personal experiences were viewed in Study One as having a definite influence on a teacher's attitude to the creative arts in the classroom, although this attitude did not necessarily translate into practice. All teachers who had experienced drama in their personal lives were positive about drama despite only two having made any attempts to incorporate it into their daily teaching. Issues with confidence and perceived skill levels were two factors constraining its use.

This pattern of limited experience continued within initial data collection for Study Two with less than half of teachers acknowledging any prior experience or training in the creative arts. Of those who had, the training was largely informal including instrumental lessons, childhood dancing classes and participation in school musicals. Less than ten percent of teachers engaged in arts-based activities on a regular basis (Author, 2011).

Past schooling experiences were identified for the teachers in Study One as influencing pedagogical choice more than influencing the teaching of drama per se. Teachers' approaches to teaching and learning were heavily influenced by their own schooling experiences. All the teachers placed value on fostering a collaborative classroom environment conducive to drama activities.

The influence of formal education was not given much priority by these teachers, raising interesting questions regarding teacher education programs and the way in which they guide student teachers in various subject areas. Only one teacher in Study Two had any formal arts-based training. While not within the scope of either study, the influence of teacher education as directly constraining or facilitating the teaching of drama, is considered important for further research.

Experience, be it personal, with schooling or formal education, does play a role in a teacher's pedagogical choice. The role of these different forms of experience as a factor in facilitating or constraining the use of drama became clear in Study One. The lack of experience by participating teachers from rural and remote communities has implications for the professional learning process yet to be undertaken in Study Two. Greater consideration of this area has been built into the initial clarification of experience phase in the facilitated action research process.

## **Contextual issues**

In contrast to the personal factors viewed as facilitating the use of drama, teachers in Study One identified contextual factors as constraining their teaching. Six key contextual factors were revealed: syllabus outcomes, parental expectation, space, programming, time and professional learning. All teachers referred to time as the biggest constraining factor in the teaching of drama. Its influence is overarching and it has an implied relationship to the five other identified factors.

The importance of acknowledging and respecting these constraining factors in promoting the professional learning of teachers is acknowledged and has been built into the planning process for Study Two. Of particular interest is a consideration of where teachers place their locus of control (Lefcourt, 1976). Taking personal responsibility for classroom choice, as opposed to feeling constrained by external factors, is being considered as an important focus for effective professional learning.

## **Professional learning**

A lack of effective professional learning that respects needs and past experiences was identified during Study One as constraining pedagogical choice and the teaching of drama. A process of professional learning addressing these identified deficiencies was viewed as one means of enhancing the process.

The following key points were drawn from data in both studies in relation to the preferred style and location for professional learning. These points support current literature focusing on school-based and self-directed professional learning and add further weight to a shift away from external forms of development:

- Modeled lessons should be used as a strategy for learning;
- Professional learning should be predominantly located in the school and classroom context;

- A balanced approach to theory and practice should be evident in professional learning; and
- Learning should show respect for past experiences and current needs of teachers; and
- Development should build in a high level of active participation.

The use of technology to assist in the facilitation of professional learning for rural and remote teachers is being explored as a way of supporting the ongoing support implicit within the facilitated action research process for Study Two. A majority of teachers were positive about this inclusion in the professional learning as long as the technology was reliable.

It is the responsive and situated nature of the facilitated action research process specific to the teachers in Study One that allowed learning that was designed to enhance the teaching of drama, to be effective.

## **Conclusion**

Knowledge gained during both research projects supported my belief in regard to locating professional learning within the school context and the necessity of having the teachers' self-identified needs and preferred learning styles guide the direction of their learning. The personal and contextual factors identified in this paper are significant not for what they contributed to directly enhancing the teaching of drama, but for the influence they had on the focus, style and direction of facilitated action research that guided the professional learning.

It is not simple to consider the various contextual and personal factors through identification of clear-cut relationships. It would militate against the context-embedded methodology of this research to do so. However, five general observations regarding the connections between factors can be made.

First, a positive belief or valuing of drama led in all cases to a view of teaching and learning that promoted creativity and imagination. All teachers who wished to improve their teaching of drama shared a common belief in its benefit for student esteem, creativity, confidence and enjoyment of learning. In addition, a majority of teachers considered drama beneficial for developing social awareness skills.

Second, teachers who felt negatively influenced by social groups (parents, school leaders) within the school, or syllabus outcomes, felt their pedagogical choice was constrained. In comparison, positive influence by students assisted in facilitating the teaching of drama, with teachers citing student response and enjoyment as motivating factors.

Third, a lack of confidence and/or self-perceived lack of skill were cited by a majority of teachers as constraining their ability to incorporate drama effectively. It was clear, however, that for all teachers identifying such a concern, their belief in the benefits of drama drove them to overcome such personal inhibitions through professional learning. By doing so, the effective teaching of drama was facilitated.

Fourth, despite the diverse melting pot of personal experience, this factor was considered highly influential in relation to pedagogical choice, approach to schooling and instruction, and the development of the classroom environment. Personal experiences were seen to have more influence on the teachers' beliefs and approaches than any formal training experiences.

Finally, time was considered by all teachers to be the most influential contextual factor constraining the teaching of drama. The other four contextual areas (outcomes/parental expectation, space, programming and professional learning) are related to time's negative influence. Professional learning was also referred to in isolation through past ineffective experiences where learning was not linked to prior experiences or individual needs. As previously discussed, it is with professional learning that I believed the teaching of drama could, and still can be, practically influenced.

While raising important issues, including the need for a collaborative culture of teaching and learning to foster sustainable change, both studies involved the enhancement of drama in the classroom for all teachers. The extent and focus of drama use varied, but for the teachers in Study One a positive change and growth in understanding was witnessed through participation in professional learning.

As demonstrated through data from both studies key factors facilitating or constraining the teaching of drama remain consistent and support the need for effective learning to enhance the teaching of drama. Facilitated action research as outlined in this paper provides such a framework, resulting in a responsive process, tailored to the school context and working from the needs and experiences of teachers.

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## About the author

Dr Rachel Perry, Australian Centre for Child and Youth:  
Culture and Wellbeing, University of Technology, Sydney

[rachel.perry@uts.edu.au](mailto:rachel.perry@uts.edu.au)



Rachel is a casual academic and Senior Research Officer with the Australian Centre for Child and Youth, Culture and Wellbeing at the University of Technology, Sydney.

Rachel worked as a primary school teacher for a number of years prior to beginning an academic career. After completing her PhD in 2006, Rachel took time out of academic life to focus on family, reconnecting with her work in action learning, action research and drama in mid 2010. Rachel is particularly passionate about work with teachers and students in rural and remote communities as well as those experiencing access issues to the arts through socio-economic disadvantage or disability.

# Action research on action research: A facilitator's account

Allen Trent

## Abstract

*This article describes research conducted by a facilitator of a statewide action research network, the Wyoming Teacher Policy Institute (WTPI). This group of teacher/action researchers organized with an aim of inserting teachers' knowledge and perspectives into educational policy-making conversations. Teachers are typically excluded from the educational policy-making process (Kumar & Scuderi, 2000). The WTPI initiative attempts to change this situation by supporting teachers as they conduct action research and interact with policy-makers. The purpose of this study was to use action research methodology to document and analyze facilitator interactions with the teacher researchers. This research focused on support strategies that enabled teacher researchers to conduct action research and affect educational policy. The study's methodology is explained, findings are summarized, and resultant recommendations are outlined.*

**Keywords:** action research, educational policy-making, teacher researchers, educators' action research, facilitation

## Introduction

This article describes action research I conducted as co-facilitator of the Wyoming Teacher Policy Institute (WTPI), a group of teacher/action researchers formed with an aim of inserting teachers' knowledge and perspectives into educational policy-making conversations. WTPI is an affiliate of the national Teachers Network Leadership Institute (TNLI).

WTPI (also called the “Policy Institute”) began as a professional development program offering teachers the opportunity to participate in the educational policy-making process through action research. Seventeen teachers participated in the inaugural year, and in subsequent years the cohort has included up to 45 teachers with two co-facilitators. WTPI is a collaborative effort that includes the Wyoming Department of Education (WDE), the University of Wyoming (UW), and public school teachers in districts across Wyoming.

As facilitators, we:

- Worked with the WTPI teachers to frame action research questions related to improving student learning and impacting educational policies;
- Assisted teacher researchers in the conduct of their action research in classrooms and schools;
- Participated with the teachers in a professional community of educators;
- Collaborated with the teachers to develop policy recommendations based on research findings;
- Organized events designed to engage policymakers and other stakeholders in conversations about action research and educational policy; and finally,
- Helped the teacher researchers publish and disseminate their research findings and recommendations locally, statewide and nationally.

My roles included presenting action research workshops and providing ongoing research support to the teachers, attending and participating in whole and small group meetings, conferring and planning with WTPI and TNLI Directors, and conducting my own action research focused on Policy Institute activities. While my research purview has included documenting and analysing Policy Institute activities as well as assessing the initiative, this article focuses on my role as facilitator of action research. This focus

includes the action research-derived understandings of this role, and the teacher researchers' perspectives related to the program generally, and the facilitator's support specifically. Action research was an appropriate methodology for me as participant, to study my role(s), improve my facilitation and identify findings to share with others facilitating action research.

The inquiry pursued the following questions:

- What support/facilitation strategies enable teacher researchers to understand and conduct meaningful action research that impacts on their practice?
- What are teachers' perspectives related to participation in an action research collaboration, especially as these relate to the facilitation of the initiative?

The research findings support a series of recommendations for facilitators of action research. These recommendations, presented later in this article, are grouped in five thematic areas: relationships, collaboration, the progressive role of action research facilitators, communication, and modelling.

There seems to be a tremendous need for research of this sort. While a great deal of scholarship has focused on the relationship between researchers and their subjects, scholarship specific to the relationship between beginning researchers and those facilitating their research, is absent.

Necessarily, tensions are present. How much support is enough? How much is too much? In instances when facilitation occurs in a course or class context, how can facilitators balance the roles of critical friend and ultimately, the evaluator of the research? I speculate that most action researchers began under the tutelage of a more experienced action researcher. This may have been in a course, workshop, or perhaps in a collaborative action research group. Few, I'd guess, wake up, decide action research is an appropriate methodology to investigate their practice, and begin crafting data collection tools. Investigating the appropriate role(s) of an action research facilitator should yield findings relevant

to many around the globe that teach action research courses, form action research groups, and support others throughout their action research inquiries.

This article begins the conversation by exploring findings specific to my role as an action research facilitator. It does so in the context of the WTPI initiative, though I also wear the action research facilitator's hat as an instructor of a university action research course. The remainder of this article describes the research methodology, details specific interventions and activities, summarizes outcomes and findings specific to these activities, and outlines resultant recommendations.

## **Methodology**

### *Action research*

The present study is "action research about facilitating action research," as I hold dual roles as both facilitator and action researcher. However, "action research" encompasses a wide range of philosophical, epistemological and methodological perspectives and approaches. Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) for example, differentiate between "critical action research," "classroom action research," "action learning," "action science," "soft systems approaches," and "industrial action research" (pp 568 - 572). Theorists further delineate and define action research within these broad categories of action research approaches.

Elliot's definition best describes the intent of this inquiry. Elliot (1991 p69) writes, "action research might be defined as the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it." Kemmis and McTaggart (2000 p 596) elaborate:

Through action research, people can come to understand their social and educational practices... Focusing on practices in a concrete and specific way makes those practices accessible for reflection, discussion, and reconstruction as products of past circumstances that are capable of being modified in and for present and future circumstances.

This inquiry is practical action research in that it “is reflective and interpretive, taking account of the perspectives of others, an ongoing study of a dynamic case in which the enquirer takes deliberate, strategic action” (McTaggart & Kemmis, in McTaggart, 1991 p29).

The research couples this practical nature with emancipatory aims: “The advocates sought not only the transformation of individual practitioners and the profession of teaching, but ultimately a transformation of the language, organisation and practice of education” (McTaggart 1991 p30).

Educators’ action research aims typically include improvements in classroom and/or school practices, student achievement, and/or classroom climate. WTPI teachers embrace an additional aim of sharing classroom-derived knowledge with educational policy-makers to inform and influence educational policy. My aims in this context are to both better understand and evolve my role as facilitator and to positively impact the effectiveness of the Wyoming Teacher Policy Institute and other action research networks.

#### *Data collection*

Multiple data sources were collected throughout the inquiry. Data was collected over a period of 3 years (2006-2009). Data source triangulation allowed for corroboration of themes and findings across sources. To answer the questions targeted by this study, I used:

- Written questionnaires completed by participating teacher researchers;
- A series of semi-structured focus group interviews conducted with the teachers at the completion of the research cycle;
- My personal field notes and journal; and
- Written correspondence, mainly e-mails and list-serve entries.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Each data source is explained.

## *Questionnaires*

The questionnaire allowed for the collection of “large amounts of data in a relatively short period of time” (Mills 2000 p 58). The questionnaire combined open-ended and closed questions. The open-ended questions allowed respondents to be descriptive and to elaborate on thoughts and ideas. Open-ended questions included:

- What types of support do you feel you need in order to maximize the benefits and value of your action research?
- What activities and/or information have been helpful to you in the context of the WTPI action research network?

In addition to the open-ended items, closed questions combined both Likert scales and semantic differentials. These attitude scales allow researchers to determine participants’ beliefs, feelings and perceptions (Mills 2000). Additionally, these responses can be quantified and serve as descriptive statistical information to convey findings.

Likert scale items asked teachers “to respond to a series of statements indicating whether they strongly agree, agree, are undecided, disagree, or strongly disagree with each statement. Each response corresponds with a point value...” (Mills 2000 p60). Teacher researchers responded to Likert scale items that included:

- I will continue to pursue action research projects in the future;
- My roles in my school/district will/have shifted as a result of my action research;
- Educational policy-makers will be influenced by my research conclusions.

Semantic differential items ask respondents “to give a quantitative rating to the subject of the rating scale on a number of bipolar adjectives” (Mills 2000 p60). Typically, semantic differential scales have “five to seven intervals with a neutral attitude being assigned a value of zero” (Mills 2000 p61). Again, the totalling of these quantified responses

allows the researcher to display findings as descriptive statistics. Semantic differential questions included the following:

- Action research as professional development is

Useless \_\_\_\_\_ Useful.

-3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3

- I believe that WTPI action research will have impact on educational policy that is

Minimal \_\_\_\_\_ Extensive.

-3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3

Following Mills (2000) suggestion I employed a data collection plan that followed up questionnaire responses with the collection of in-depth, interview data.

#### *Focus group interviews*

Interviewing focus groups was another primary data source. A focus group is usually comprised of individuals with interests in a similar area or involvement in a particular project. The goal is “to encourage discussion and the expression of differing opinions and points of view” (Marshall & Rossman 1999 p114). This method is based on the assumption that people’s attitudes and beliefs are formed in contexts of social interaction.

Marshall & Rossman argue that participants may be more relaxed in a focus group than in a one-to-one interview. Since many people are interviewed at once, this format can produce more results during a particular time than an individual interview. Morgan (1997) suggests that the interactions in a focus group help participants to clarify their opinions.

Teachers were interviewed in groups of approximately eight, with each interview session lasting between 45 minutes and an hour. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. A set of questions was used to guide the interviews and to allow for consistency across groups. As the interviewer/facilitator,

I was open to emergent ideas that presented themselves in these discussions. Protocol questions included:

- What Policy Institute activities and/or information have been helpful to you? Unhelpful?
- What types of support do you feel you need to maximize the benefits/value of your action research?
- What other forms of support can facilitators provide to make concrete the link between teachers' practical knowledge and education policy-making?

### *Journal*

Throughout the inquiry, I kept a personal professional journal to record my field notes, reflections, methodological notes, and emergent findings.

"Journal writing can include the structure, descriptive, and objective notes of the log, and the free flowing, impressionistic meanderings of a diary...Many researchers keep detailed journals, documenting their ideas and working hypotheses and collecting evidence (data) along the way. They use the journal as documentation for both formative and summative analysis and evaluation". (Holly 1989 pp 20- 21)

In this study, my journal served as a place for reflections, documentation, and brainstorming. Additionally, the journal allowed me to record the ongoing, recursive data analysis and themes that were emerging specific to the research questions.

### *Written correspondence*

Lastly, written correspondence was also used as data to deepen understandings. As a facilitator I was in frequent contact with the teacher researchers via e-mail, collaborating with them on their projects and discussing strategies.

Additionally, two list-serves were used to promote dialogue and ongoing, open communication. A statewide list-serve allowed the group to share questions and receive research support from colleagues around the state. A national (TNLI) list-serve kept teachers abreast of national discussions. Both sources of written correspondence provided insightful data

that illuminated teachers' perspectives and the overall operation of the Policy Institute.

### **Data analysis and interpretation**

I agree with Mills' (2000) notion that data analysis as a process of summarizing data and data interpretation "is an attempt by the researcher to find meaning in the data" (p 99). I briefly discuss each in this section and close by addressing validity concerns.

#### *Analysis*

Data analysis "is the process of bringing order, structure, and meaning to the data..." (Hubbard & Power 1993 p65). As noted, semantic differential and Likert scale items were quantified, totalled, and expressed as descriptive statistics. Two primary activities guided the analysis of the open-ended questionnaire responses, the focus group interview transcripts, my research journal, and the collected written correspondence.

First, data sets were repeatedly reviewed to identify emergent themes, patterns, and repetitive ideas (Mills 2000). Secondly, data were analyzed and coded with attention paid to these patterns, emergent themes, and repeated occurrences. In coding, the data was grouped by thematic findings, and an appropriate label (code) was assigned to each group. These coded themes will be used in this article to describe findings related to action research activities and support strategies.

#### *Interpretation*

"Researchers interpret data to make sense of the research findings, to answer the question, 'So what?'" (Mills 2000 p 109)

The analysis and interpretation techniques that I used in this study follow what Freeman and others have called a "grounded approach." A researcher employs a "grounded approach to build up an interpretation out of what you are seeing in the data" (Freeman 1998 p 102). The findings,

meanings and understandings presented in this study are grounded in the collected data sets and have been triangulated (discussed below) to corroborate and/or refute the themes and theories that emerged.

## **Validity**

Sagor (2000) writes: “By asserting validity, the researcher is asserting that the data actually measure or reflect the specific phenomena claimed” (p 110). Validity is a much-debated concept amongst researchers. In this research Sagor’s definition is appropriate. Also applicable is Mills’ description of “outcome validity...That is, your study can be considered valid if you learn something that can be applied to the subsequent research [and action] cycle” (p 79).

Qualitative action research is subjective, but still, certain safeguards can be employed in an attempt to insure the validity of interpretations, findings, and understandings. This research utilized triangulation and member checking. “Triangulation means including multiple sources of information or points of view on the phenomena or question you are investigating” (Freeman 1998 p 96). Triangulation forms (described in Freeman 1998) included data triangulation (several sources of data), methodological triangulation (collecting data in multiple ways), and theoretical triangulation (using more than one perspective to analyze the data). The latter of these triangulation methods was in the form of member checking.

“Member checking is asking the members of the population being studied for their reaction to the findings” (Sagor 2000, p 136). Interpretations and findings of this research, in draft form, were shared with teachers (for member checking) on multiple occasions throughout the study. Additionally, teachers reviewed and provided feedback on the final draft of this article.

Using the strategies of analysis, interpretation, and validity described above, the data yielded some clear themes specifically related to the research questions. I present these

findings alongside descriptions of group activities and interactions. The aim here is to couple descriptions of activities, support strategies and interventions with the findings specific to these activities. A section detailing resultant recommendations follows these descriptions.

### **Policy Institute activities, research support, related findings**

A variety of activities, meetings, and work and informational sessions were planned and carried out during each year-long cycle of the Policy Institute. WTPI facilitators believe that teachers can and should have significant control over their professional development activities, but some structure, planning and scheduling is essential in a state-wide action research effort designed to impact policy in both the short and the long term. Balancing appropriate degrees of support for teachers, balancing short and long-term concerns, and making the appropriate behind-the-scenes arrangements were all a part of the facilitation efforts.

School districts state-wide were contacted about having teachers participate in WTPI. Those districts that decided to participate in collaboration with the WTPI facilitators, selected the initial and subsequent groups of teacher researchers. The opening meeting each year was a two-day retreat during which teachers:

- Received intensive seminars on action research that included developing initial questions for study;
- Engaged in contextual and vision/mission building activities;
- Met with state level policy-makers about state and national policy issues; and finally
- Began the critical process of building a collaborative network of educators.

The opening retreat laid the groundwork for the rest of the year (and beyond). New relationships were formed, initial

action research questions were formulated, and procedures for continued communication were devised.

The next sections discuss Policy Institute activities in more detail and include research findings related to each area. These findings are presented as they relate to five thematic areas:

- Framing research questions;
- Creating a community of professionals;
- Supporting action/teacher researchers;
- Engaging policy; and
- Professional development and dissemination of research-derived findings and recommendations.

#### *Framing research questions*

Assisting the teachers as they engaged the process and developed their action research questions presented several tensions. At this early stage action research was new to most of the teachers. "I'm both excited and overwhelmed," remarked one teacher during a retreat event. Others echoed these sentiments. Ultimately, this disequilibrium proved healthy and teachers left the retreats feeling good about their experience, the WTPI action research network initiative generally, and their impending research projects and related activities.

As facilitators, we used retreat time to guide teachers through a series of reflective activities to help them identify areas of their practice that were of interest or needed to be better understood, presented difficulties, or were areas in which they wanted to promote changes. These activities included brainstorming, free writing, sharing with and questioning peers, and initial question development.

Teachers attempted to pose research questions with the dual aims of improving practice and informing policy. As facilitators we privately questioned whether the research foci went far enough in the policy direction. We also realized that

the teachers needed to own these questions, and too much intervention on our part would decrease this ownership significantly.

We worked with all teachers in shaping their topical ideas into research questions, but as facilitators we agreed that of primary importance was helping teachers frame questions that met these criteria:

- Questions had to be meaningful to the teachers personally;
- Questions needed to focus the teacher researchers on improving school and/or classroom practice;
- Questions needed to have the potential to impact policy (realizing we construe this broadly); and
- Research questions had to be reasonable ones that could be pursued within a single academic year.

Improving practice was viewed as the paramount aim; impacting policy, while important, was ancillary. In the end, data showed all teacher researchers asserted a better understanding of classroom/school practice and were able to demonstrate improved teaching and student learning that resulted from their projects. Some participants asserted policy impacts, but others questioned the relevance of their research to educational policy-makers. One teacher wrote:

I have a concern that the action research will not be taken seriously by policy-makers at any level, other than the individual conducting the research, but you have to start somewhere. Until a clear connection is made between how classroom research advances education and how it can be used to validate practice beyond the individual classroom, we may not have the impact we wish.

Is improved practice enough? Or, should teacher research be disseminated in ways that influence broader audiences? We continue to debate answers to these questions. Both the national and state Policy Institute groups believe that raising the level of classroom and school level practice is of primary importance. It is also our belief (as facilitators) that if teachers focus on issues they deem meaningful, then policy connections, implications, and impacts will follow.

Teachers' action research projects (while not specifically the focus of this article) encompassed a wide range of inquiries. Project foci included: parental involvement initiatives, curriculum materials, professional development programs, service learning, school climate, and a variety of strategies designed to promote student achievement.

### **A community of professionals**

From the very beginning, we realized that for this initiative to be successful, we needed to foster a community of professionals. In a state that is geographically very large, this required special attention to communication and collaboration. WTPI utilized a variety of methods to foster ongoing communication and collaboration. Regional groups of approximately five teachers met monthly, and one of the facilitators attended these regional meetings. Periodic whole group meetings used live compressed video technology, as well as strategic face-to-face conversations.

The two list-serves kept teachers and facilitators connected. The state-wide list-serve allowed the group to share questions and receive research support from colleagues around the state. The national TNLI list-serve kept teachers abreast of national discussions. E-mail also proved to be an effective way to share information with each other, policy-makers at the Department of Education, and members of the legislature.

In addition to discussing action research projects, these communication channels allowed us to discuss common readings. Teachers read books on action research methodology, curriculum and instruction, and cognitive development and brain research. Discussions of these texts threaded throughout the year. Additionally, we participated in electronic discussions of monthly articles disseminated via the national list-serve.

These readings focused on teacher leadership, effective teaching, action research, and the connection between educational policy and teachers. All of these activities built

relationships and trust within the group. As a community of professionals, we all (including the facilitators) felt supported. One teacher commented, “you [the facilitators] brought us together, kept us in touch, and encouraged us when we needed it.” Another added, “Without the vision and efforts of our facilitators, the institute would not be nearly as successful.”

### **Supporting teacher research**

Supporting the teachers’ research endeavors was a primary role for facilitators. Action research support during the initial retreats included sessions to elaborate on the action research texts. These interactive sessions allowed teachers to better understand action research as a whole and the components and strategies (e.g., question formulation, data collection and treatment, ethical considerations, etc.) individually.

Participating teachers were provided binders that contained action research templates, copies of facilitators’ presentation materials, articles to extend understanding of the process, and resource information that would be utilized throughout the coming year/cycle.

After the retreats, research support often happened individually via e-mail and phone conversations and in the small regional group configurations. Sometimes, teachers in these regional groups collaborated to solve research related problems (like adapting/evolving research questions, or coupling appropriate data collection tools with research questions).

On other occasions, teachers wanted to hear directly from the facilitators about how to handle research related dilemmas. This was possible because at least one facilitator attended the regional group’s monthly meetings. These monthly meetings typically involved discussing a few questions from the facilitator about overall research progress, specific questions from the teachers about their projects or WTPI activities (readings, meetings, communicating with policy-makers,

etc.), and also allowed the facilitators to collect data specific to the initiative.

As one of the facilitators, I came to prize these meetings. Typically, I arrived at the site the day before the meeting, spent the next day in the teacher researchers' classrooms (assisting teachers with their action research when possible), and then met with the teachers after school. Most often these meetings would last hours and conversations carried over to dinner with the group. These meetings provided research support but also continued to build the community of professionals discussed above. We came to be colleagues that cared about each other and each others' work and developed mutual visions for our field: visions we believed we could shape. One teacher e-mailed with the following: "Allen, I can't tell you how much I appreciate working with you and being a part of WTPI. We all look forward to your visits. I truly feel like a professional and believe my opinions are being honoured. Your support has been awesome. I've never worked so closely with someone from the university..."

A tension for facilitators concerned the balance between what comprises effective facilitation of research and what constitutes intrusion. As facilitators, we sought to form and participate in a community of critical friends, regionally, statewide, and nationally. Simultaneously, we worked to find ways to support and sustain the community of professionals to accomplish the goals of the program. Throughout, we wanted the projects to be owned by the teachers, not us. We had our own roles and research. Often, this balance was achieved by simply communicating with the teachers. I frequently asked questions like, "what can I do at this point to help you with your research?" "Are there specific problems or concerns you'd like to address?" and, "Are you hearing from me too much?" Once relationships were established, teachers responded frankly to these queries. One group (engaged in a collaborative action research project), upon being asked what I could do to help them, responded, "We need more time, time during the

school day to meet and work with this data.” The following week, I volunteered to plan and teach an activity to their entire grade level. While I engaged the children, the teachers worked with their data sets. Because of our attention to teachers’ perceptions of the support level, we generally had positive feedback about it. One teacher asserted, “you seemed to know when to intervene and when to back off. I knew I could always call you if I had a question or needed help, but I didn’t feel like you were pushing too hard.”

In addition to the monthly small group regional meetings, we held two whole group live compressed video meetings each year. While these had some value, teachers thought they were less meaningful than our face-to-face interactions.

During one meeting, we had technical problems and lost some of the groups. On another occasion, a group could hear the meeting, but we couldn’t see or hear them. One teacher claimed, “these meetings are best for conveying information to the group, like when we had the legislative liaison talked to us about policy. They are less useful for sharing among the group. The group was too large, and we had to rush just to hear from everyone. Maybe an online discussion would serve us better.”

We came together as a whole group in February each year to attend the legislative session and meet with policy-makers (discussed below); we also planned time for teachers to collaboratively share about and work on their action research projects. Teachers created charts to state their research questions and describe the related data they’d collected. Teachers also used this medium to share early analyses and interpretations. Two common themes related to support emerged from these interactions and data we collected during the February meetings. Teachers needed the most support in two primary areas, 1) developing data collection tools (e.g., creating survey or interview questions or formats), and 2) analyzing and interpreting collected data sets. Many had the “now that I’ve collected all this, what do I do with it?” syndrome.

We utilized the whole group February meetings to allow teachers to collaborate to analyze and interpret data across regional groups. Because teachers were meeting monthly with their local action research colleagues, we provided them opportunities to discuss and critique the action research and data of teachers outside their regional group. In turn, they were able to receive feedback, questions, and suggestions from teachers outside their regional cohort.

These activities were well received. One teacher said, “I feel better about my project now. I was a bit unsure if I was proceeding in the right direction, and then came to find out many others felt the same way! We had the chance to help each other, and I now think we’re all on track to finish by the end of the school year with very solid projects.”

### **Engaging policy**

Each year we planned a series of conversations with policy-makers to develop teachers’ understandings of educational policy and national and state political contexts. We also built in observations of policy-making activities and interactions with teachers around the country.

#### *Introduction to educational policy*

Our initial retreats included presentations by school district administrators and Wyoming Department of Education officials. This allowed teachers to hear multiple perspectives on policy issues and concerns on both national and state levels. The combined emphasis at the retreats on action research and educational policy enabled the teachers to formulate action research questions to pursue in their schools and classrooms. While the action research seemed to parallel what many of these teachers already believed about professional development and good teaching, the introduction to policy was perceived as new, even perplexing. We (facilitators) anticipated this reaction.

During early interactions with the group it became clear that teachers had a narrow view of policy. Many thought educational policy was beyond their realm. Bartell’s

perspective is illustrative: “The policy world has seemed too distant, too complex, too fragmented, and often unapproachable. Yet the policy world influences and shapes the world of practice in vital ways” (2001 p189).

Most also viewed the policy arena as being confined to upper echelons of hierarchical education systems (state departments of education, legislators, superintendents, and school boards). This is not to cast blame on the teachers. They were/are already performing complex combinations of tasks and are doing so in systems structured to circumvent them in policy-making processes. “In education, policies are usually made by school board members and administrators, but teachers are rarely part of the process” (Kumar & Scuderi 2000 p 61).

### *Changing conceptions*

As the year progressed, conceptions of policy broadened. WTPI embraces a broad definition of policy similar to Kumar and Scuderi’s definition of policy as “a definite method of action selected from among alternatives to guide present and future action” (2000 p 61). A teacher later in the second year of this research described policy as “anything that deals with changes or has influence on what the teacher does in the classroom.” Early conceptions were that, “policy is something they make and I have to do.”

Teachers also came to realize the political nature of the policy-making process. “When I went into education, I never knew how political education was. I really never understood until WTPI. Now it makes me nervous because I realize how important teachers’ voices are and too many of us are still asleep” (WTPI teacher). This and other exemplars illustrate another major thematic finding of this research. Once teachers begin to understand the educational policy-making process, they begin to re-envision their roles in the process as shifting from passive receptors, “just tell me what to do and I’ll do it” (WTPI Teacher), to active participants in policy-making at all levels.

### *Legislative meetings*

As mentioned above, the WTPI held a yearly series of meetings in Cheyenne (the State Capital) to coincide with the opening of the legislative session. The whole group attended the opening legislative session and was pleasantly surprised one year to hear the Governor mention the initiative in his State of the State Address. On three different occasions, the group was able to meet directly with the Governor. The Governors were fascinated to hear about each teacher's project and often provided each with a suggestion for further reading, research, or potential funding sources.

This series of meetings also included informational sessions with policy-makers. We planned for the teachers to hear from and have conversations with the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, The Dean of the University of Wyoming College of Education, and the State Department of Education's Legislative Liaison. In addition to these more formal sessions, we wanted to continue to build relationships with policy-makers in order to inform them about our action research and policy recommendations. Legislative members and state level policy-makers received personal invitations to WTPI meetings and receptions. During these meetings, teachers were able to share teacher knowledge and theories that included emergent findings of their action research projects. Policy-makers seemed receptive to teachers' perspectives and openly solicited input on current educational policy matters (often including pending or forthcoming legislation).

Data collected after these meetings confirmed that teachers were evolving their understanding of educational policy, the policy-making process, and even their roles in the process. They asserted that the planned balance between action research activities and policy related conversations was the right thing at the right time. The Cheyenne meetings also provided the teachers impetus to continue to build relationships with their local legislators in their home communities. We suggested that the teachers contact these

policy-makers upon their return home and invite them to visit them in their schools. They did so, and many teachers were successful in bringing members of the legislature into their classrooms. Others (including myself) established regular e-mail contact with legislators. This allowed us to regularly update them about current matters and related teacher positions on the issues.

Unanimously, teachers asserted increased awareness of the need to centre teachers' perspectives in policy matters. To do so, they came to view themselves as change agents: "I think teachers' idea of reclaiming their classrooms should be at the forefront of policy focus and discussions... teacher reactions and input into policy decisions are not just a right, but each teacher's professional responsibility" (WTPI Teacher). Teachers credited the Policy Institute activities with moving them forward in this regard.

Teachers agreed that to participate in the policy-making process they must develop relationships with those traditionally viewed as "policy-makers." Consistently, teachers asserted that they needed to seek long term, trusting relationships with policy-makers, but that traditionally, this hadn't happened. "We don't, as educators, take the time to get to know these people. And now, we have an opportunity... We want them to develop a relationship with us so that they'll come back to us and ask us for our opinions. Just bringing us together with these people has been a great start. It wouldn't have happened without this program" (WTPI Teacher).

### *Impacting policy*

Even in the early period of the initiative, teachers were beginning to see their research impact policy. Most agreed that policy was most easily impacted at school and classroom levels but also believed that their sphere of influence should and would radiate to have larger implications. For example, a teacher researching strategies to increase students' writing achievement said "my action research project first impacted

policy at the classroom level, but then I presented to other faculty members and at a district in-service. I also plan to share these research results at state and regional conferences.”

Many teachers claimed that they, their school level colleagues, and their schools were changing practices (like the inclusion of students in assessment development), curricular materials (e.g., a school-wide effort to utilize more non-fiction texts or a department level change to student centered health education), and classroom and school level policies (such as using action research for teacher professional development) as a result of their action research projects.

In addition to school and district level accomplishments, WTPI teachers used the power of their collective voices to impact other state-wide and local policies. After sharing her service-learning action research project data with the Governor a teacher was awarded a grant to conduct further research and develop a model for service-learning in schools around the state. Both participants and facilitators believe WTPI has had some success in its policy efforts, though all understand that much work remains and that major impacts take time and perseverance.

## **Professional development**

As noted, teacher professional development was a primary aim of the initiative, and therefore was a primary focus of my action research. Teachers claimed the collaborative opportunities provided through the Policy Institute were tremendously beneficial. “I cannot imagine doing action research by myself... To me, the professional development is richer when studying and the collection of data occur with other educators” (WTPI Teacher).

Data unanimously supported the Wyoming Teacher Policy Institute as productive professional development in which teachers (in enacting their re-envisioned roles) assumed large degrees of autonomy within the WTPI framework. Teachers

increasingly embraced action research as a means to obtain valuable information that is relevant both to their practice and to policy-makers at multiple levels. "It's simply the best professional development of my career," remarked a teacher. As facilitators, we continually centred the interests of the teachers and coupled these interests with current research, supporting theory, and related exemplars. For example, we regularly reviewed a wide range of publications, and when articles corresponded with individual teacher's research interests we forwarded these to them. In this respect we became a support team that scaffolded the teachers as they proceeded (as opposed to leading them).

We too, as facilitators, believed that WTPI engagement was productive professional development for ourselves. The planning of events, support of others' research, systematic data collection, and constant reflection and adaptation allowed us to grow as facilitators alongside our teacher colleagues. Throughout the year we were in frequent phone, e-mail, and face-to-face contact to discuss teachers' action research projects, our facilitation of the initiative, and the data sets we collected on WTPI.

## **Dissemination**

A problem with action research, I believe, is that it often ends with the researcher. Asserting improved practice (in whatever field) action researchers often proceed to another inquiry, or a follow-up to one recently completed. In the case of teachers, I agree with Dewey when he recognized early last century, "it seems to me that the contributions that might come from classroom teachers are a comparatively neglected field; or, to change the metaphor, an almost unworked mine" (in Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen 1994). An aim for us was to create avenues through which the teacher researchers could share and disseminate their findings.

Much of my time in the spring semesters was spent working with the teacher researchers as they finalized data analysis and prepared to share their resultant findings. At the end of

each cycle, we brainstormed how we could best share our research in ways that would appeal to broad groups of stakeholders. I shared a variety of alternative methods for data display (graphics, video, performances, etc.), and teachers selected methods that best suited their individual projects.

Dissemination strategies included formal presentations to school district administrators and state policy-makers, published booklets that highlighted action research projects, findings, and recommendations, and presentations to school boards around the state. In addition to analysing my own data sets to generate manuscripts, I produced a video compilation detailing Policy Institute activities. This video was reproduced, distributed to teachers, and has since been used in a variety of professional presentations at conferences and educational meetings (including the TNLI national conference).

## **Recommendations and conclusion**

Teachers (as evidenced in collected data) asserted that: the Policy Institute served as meaningful professional development, that their action research enabled them to better support their students' growth and achievement, and that they had affected policy in varying degrees. Our collective successes included recognition of our efforts by the national TNLI organization, the publication of WTPI project results and recommendations, and continued increases in the number of teacher participants in the institute (from 17 to 45 teachers).

As one of the Institute facilitators I continue to believe it is my professional obligation to engage in both action research and the policy-making process. My personal action research has enabled me to better understand and evolve my role as a facilitator of this group. The descriptions and data presented thus far in this article specifically address my action research questions: "What support/facilitation strategies enable teacher researchers to understand and conduct meaningful

action research that impacts their practice?” And, “What are teachers’ perspectives related to participation in an action research collaborative, especially as these relate to the facilitation of the initiative?” Our facilitation efforts were positively received, at least in part, because the action research process allowed us to formatively assess our facilitation and make changes as needed.

In the remaining portion of this article, I’ll share my recommendations related to action research facilitation that have emerged from this study. Research generated recommendations are often context specific. Still, as noted early in this article, there is a need to begin this conversation. The consumer always determines the degree of transferability of research findings. My recommendations are specific to five areas: relationships, collaboration, the progressive role of action research facilitators, communication, and modelling.

### *Relationships*

Teachers came to realize that a trusting relationship with the policy-makers they were trying to influence was essential; we realized the same was true for the facilitator/action researcher relationship. All of the activities discussed in this article helped us to foster this trust. Initially, we came together from groups that have too often kept to themselves. Teachers have had reasons to mistrust, or at least be sceptical of, the State Department of Education. Some perceived this organization as one that created policy with too little (or no) input from teachers. The same was true of the university, while many teachers engaged university personnel as they pursued graduate level coursework, few, if any, had experienced a truly collaborative relationship with professors working as their partners. As the year proceeded, these barriers disappeared.

Our experiences reveal that when groups are brought together to engage in dialogue about educational issues, all groups benefit. I came to understand that a focus on these

relationships themselves was an important part of my role. Many of the strategies used in this initiative proved successful in building strong, trusting and lasting relationships between the facilitators and the teacher researchers. Being open about our aims and motives, being available for assistance, being accepting of critique and constructive feedback, and being adaptive as we progressed, were all strategies that were positively received and confirmed through our data.

We valued the teacher-researchers' time and so focused our time together on our two primary topical areas: action research and educational policy. Teacher feedback, however, allowed us to broaden our scope. Teachers also realized the importance of relationship building in the group and asked us to include more leisure activities in our agenda. One teacher remarked, "I suggest we do more hiking, biking, rafting, playing together. This fun stuff helps to build those bonds and connections. And besides, we're always talking about our research work anyway. It's what we're excited about!" When I asked teachers about what helped to build the strong relationships we felt between researchers and facilitators, they most frequently mentioned these less formal times we had together, hiking regional trails, or chatting over dinner.

I recommend that action research facilitators plan specific ways to build trust and relationships with the researchers with whom they work. In this experience, I began as a university-based facilitator and ended as a member of a tightly knit group of colleagues and friends.

### *Collaboration*

My second recommendation for facilitators is to build collaborative components into their plans. WTPI teachers in all collected data sources asserted the value of networking and collaborating with their colleagues. As the teacher cited earlier in this paper noted, once teachers began to work in collaborative configurations they couldn't imagine doing it

any other way. The much discussed use of “critical friends” to discuss, critique and trouble one another’s research proved very valuable for this group. The balance between a frequently meeting regional group, and the less frequent whole group meetings proved appropriate.

One teacher’s interview response is illustrative: “Teaching is no longer an isolated profession. Shutting the door and doing your own thing is a thing of the past. By collaborating with this group, we are modelling the future of the teaching profession.” Research, action and otherwise, supports the benefits of collaboration. Our plans included designs that required collaboration in order for both individuals and groups to succeed. An additional benefit of built in collaborative components is that the facilitators begin to share their responsibilities with the group. Their roles evolve from “sage on the stage,” knowing and sharing all there is to know about action research, to that of one among many collaborative partners. This role evolution is discussed in the next section. Collaboration often just happens. I suggest that it be an intentional aim for action research facilitators.

#### *The progressive role of facilitator*

A major finding of my research is that my role necessarily evolved throughout the research cycle. To have done otherwise would have been ineffective and a disservice to the teacher researchers. At first, my role was clearly one of action research expert. I facilitated workshop sessions, worked individually with teachers to create and shape research questions, and assisted in the development of data collection tools.

As we progressed, however, teachers came to understand and embrace the action research process. They began to facilitate the early action research efforts of their school colleagues that became interested in the process. I was needed less as “action research instructor” and more as a critical friend and support person. I began to spend more time finding research articles that connected to teachers’

research projects. I was able to focus more on my research about the initiative on a macro level, and became more of a “documentarian” through my own research. The teachers had their projects under control, but they counted on me (and my co-facilitators) to look after the big picture.

Our roles then melded to fit the needs of the group. As funding has been a continuing problem, we directed energy to finding sustained funding sources. Because teachers felt like they were “out of the policy loop” we researched policy matters utilizing a variety of sources and shared summaries of our findings with the teachers. With relationships established between a number of policy-makers and ourselves, we became advocates for the teachers, their research-based recommendations and the program.

My recommendation for facilitators is to be reflective about their roles and ways these roles can and should evolve. In our case later iterations of WTPI have utilized continuing teacher members as action researcher mentors and facilitators, thus de-centring the facilitators from the outset.

### *Communication*

Recommendations in this section are specific to fostering open, ongoing communication. My suggestions for action research facilitators come in two areas: communication within the action research group, and communication that provides a conduit between action researchers and their audiences.

Data yielded some findings about my role in the “intragroup” communication processes. Importantly, by design, we utilized a wide variety of tools. The list-serves, meetings in various locations and configurations, e-mails and phone calls, and printed materials were all ways in which we promoted communication across the group. Teachers, as idiosyncratic individuals, had their own preferences. Some favoured e-mail contact. They could do this at their convenience and then had concrete documentation of the conversations. Other teachers

preferred phone calls to discuss research dilemmas and questions. One teacher told me, “sorry Allen, I know you like to e-mail, but when I have a question, I’m picking up the phone.” Two important findings emerged: 1) Teachers appreciated the flexibility to use and choose among communication tools and believed that regular communication was essential to achieving our individual and group aims, and 2) Action researchers, especially beginning action researchers, want rapid responses to their questions. When a teacher researcher came to a point where they needed assistance, the research typically ground to a halt until their questions were answered or their dilemma was resolved.

In addition to the intragroup communication suggestions, my research findings also yielded recommendations about communication links between the group and external constituencies. By design, this group of action researchers needed to communicate convincingly with others about their research findings and theories. For us, these “others” are policy-makers. In addition to planning for conversations and interactions with policy-makers (legislators, university, State Department, and local/regional) we soon realized that just setting up the meetings wasn’t sufficient.

Teachers, like other professionals, have a particular discourse and a fluid body of inter-subjective terminology. So too do legislators and other policy-makers. Bridging this gap we found, could be problematic. A teacher noted, “Most legislators don’t speak the language. Few understand the life of students and teachers in the classroom. The ‘job’ part of teachers’ jobs are a mystery to many, and the ways we explain it don’t seem to help. Class instruction, preparation and work hours are widely misunderstood.” This misunderstanding of roles and discursive patterns is a two-way street. As facilitators we introduced teachers to policy-makers’ terminology and procedures. As teachers prepared materials and remarks to share with policy-makers, we urged them to demystify our terminology, avoid our

penchant for acronyms, and speak and write in concise language.

My communication-related suggestions for action research facilitators include utilizing multiple tools for both internal group communications and communication with researchers' target audiences. Additionally, in understanding the potential audiences for action researchers' products I recommend intense exploration of these audience members' discourse patterns, vocabulary, and communicative procedures. Having done this research, the facilitator's role includes communicating this information to researchers in ways they readily understand.

### *Modelling*

My final recommendations for facilitators are about the modelling of the action research process. As I researched the WTPI initiative generally, and my role as facilitator specifically, teachers saw me *as an action researcher*. They served as informants for my data collection, watched and assisted as I coded data sets in the context of our sessions, and member checked my resultant assertions and documents for dissemination. This gave teachers a concrete example of what action research looked like.

I was surprised by the number of times teachers referenced my data collection procedures in our conversations. One teacher confided, "I'm trying to use more wait time as a part of my interviewing techniques. I saw how effective this was for you when you interviewed us." Other teachers asked if they could utilize my questionnaire format and adapt this for their projects. Still others saw my aim of publishing my findings as impetus to do the same. One teacher, after the end of year presentations said, "I like how you're always thinking about how you'll write up your research and where you might send it. We're wondering if you'll help us publish our study?"

Modelling the process showed my teacher colleagues that I valued action research as a primary way to better

understand and improve my practice. This created a different research culture among the group and allowed me to evolve my role more quickly. We were all action researchers doing action research. This is different than the typical, “you’re doing action research, and I’m here to help you,” configuration. Even if not directly related to the studies of the action research group, I recommend that facilitators engage the process personally and share their experiences with their group of participants. This includes successes and challenges, even disasters. For example, teachers sympathized when I told them about the fantastic interview session I had with one of the regional groups. The interview was great, but the tape remained blank due to a technical problem! Sharing situations of this sort humanize the facilitator and teach action researchers to expect the unexpected.

## **Closure**

Teachers overwhelmingly affirmed the positive effects of participation in the action research network. “Critical conversations with colleagues and policy-makers, in depth study of action research, book discussion, and being involved in the network, have helped me realize and believe in a much broader view of education” (Wyoming Teacher). The same could be said of my involvement as a facilitator. My experiences were positive and energizing. My views of education and of action research are broader, deeper, and better informed.

In this article, I presented a series of activities that I, in part, facilitated to achieve WTPI aims. The findings and reflections related to my involvement have helped me to change my role as the initiative has grown. The action research process provided a theoretical framework, guidance for data collection and treatment, and avenues through which to share my findings and recommendations. These recommendations for facilitators of action research, grouped in five areas (relationships, collaboration, the progressive

role of action research facilitators, communication, and modelling) have emerged from my involvement in a specific action research driven program, but I believe they have potential meaning for many others around the globe that are also supporting action researchers. I invite other facilitators to share accounts of their experiences, thus enriching our understandings of collaboration and the action research process.

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## About the author

Allen Trent, University of Wyoming, Department of Educational Studies, Department 3374, 1000 University Ave.

Laramie, WY 82071, 307.766.2367

[atrent@uwyo.edu](mailto:atrent@uwyo.edu)

Allen Trent is currently the Associate Dean of the University of Wyoming College of Education. His teaching and research interests include action research, the arts in education, integrated curricula, and democratic, culturally responsive teaching. As an elementary teacher, he taught and conducted teacher research in 1st, 4th and 6th grade classrooms in urban arts magnet schools in Ohio.

# Breaking down barriers in building teacher competence

Dr Pip Bruce Ferguson

## Abstract

*Teachers may well be made, not born, and appointments to academic positions are often made without regard to the appointee's prior experience or competence in teaching. In most New Zealand universities, compulsory teaching development is not required. Furthermore, enrolment in opportunities to help teachers to develop further, frequently do not attract high numbers. How can those of us who work in staff development work effectively with resistant staff? How can we ensure that what we offer has optimal value in diverse areas? This paper reflects on an action research process currently under way in a New Zealand university, which seeks to investigate the usefulness of current and new staff development initiatives and to maximise benefits to staff. The work was presented at the recent ALARA conference and reflections from this presentation are interspersed with accounts of the work. I have used italics to highlight the 'process' parts of the work as it was presented at ALARA.*

**Keywords:** action research, resistance, teacher research, advocates/advocacy

## Introduction

Action research practitioners who usually work as 'insiders' in their own organisations can often encounter resistance as they work with others to change and improve established practice. *When this work was presented at ALARA in Brisbane (September 2011) I started by asking people in pairs to discuss examples of resistance they had experienced in their own work, and how they had addressed this resistance. Most had few problems in*

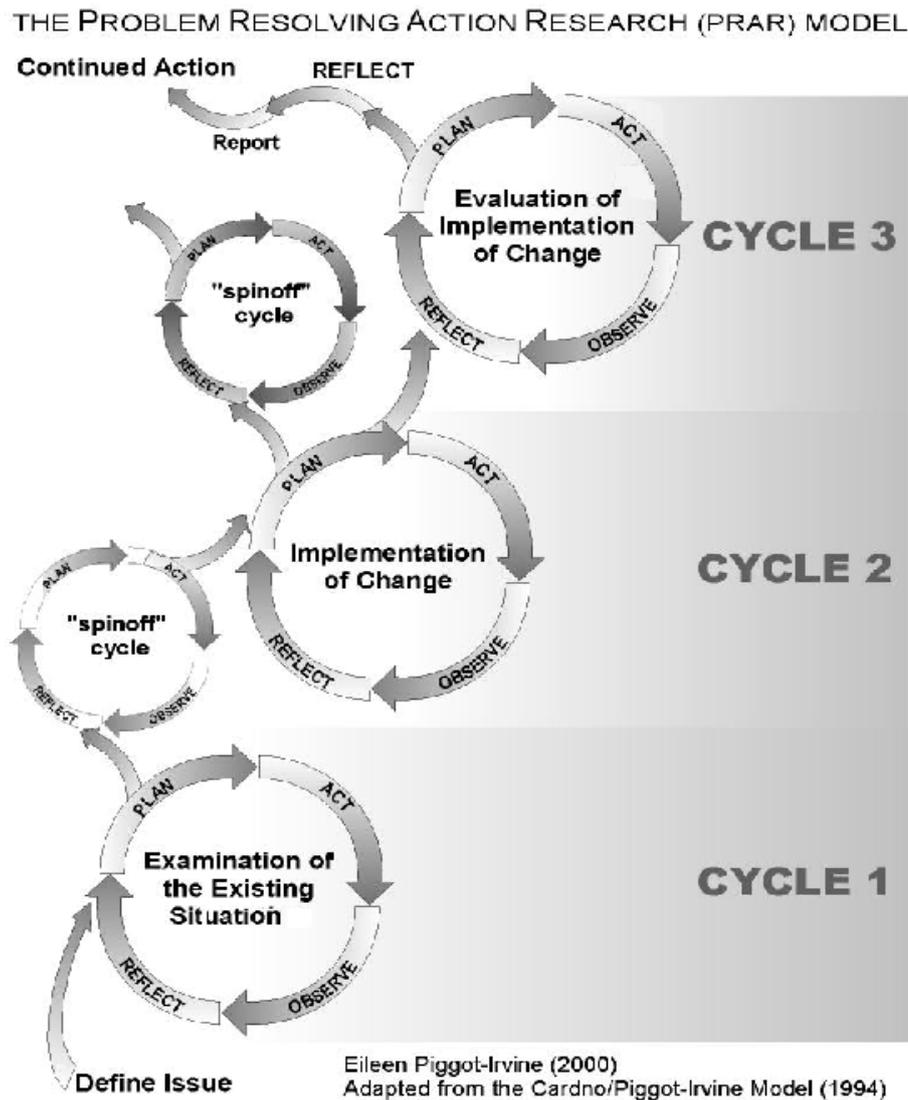
*recalling these, and solutions ranged from including the resisters in the design group, engaging in mediation to help resolve the problems, by-passing the resisters in the work, and accepting that resistance is a regular response to change. I then provided some brief scenarios that volunteers read out, providing a context for the kinds of resistance that our team have encountered in our own practice. As these were read, there were frequent exclamations of agreement or nods from others working in academic contexts who identified with the scenarios presented. I then used the diagram below, blown up to poster size, to discuss the work that my colleagues and I are undertaking as we seek to improve our practice.*

Action research is an appropriate way forward when one is seeking to improve practice (McNiff 2010; Stringer 2007;) and there is a plethora of models, case studies and related writing when one wishes to engage in action research. While there are those who would argue that action research must always be collaborative and aim to bring about broader social change (e.g. Carr & Kemmis 1986, 2005; Kemmis 2006; Tripp 1990; Zeichner 1993) others state that it can also be used to promote the improvement of individual practice without necessarily involving change in a wider context (e.g. Punia, 2004). Because I was familiar with the action research process as a way of improving practice, I recognised that it would be a good way for us, in a turbulent environment in which our unit was likely to be moved from its 'independent' positioning, to gather data on our effectiveness and to look critically at our practice. It could also help us to address needed social change in our University, which has a tendency to value research more highly than it does teaching, when we work with staff here. Together, we can help to redress the balance.

### **Action Research Cycle One: How well do we do what we do?**

Accordingly, I introduced my colleagues – two teaching developers, an appraisals administrator and our unit's

administrator - all important members of our team - to an action research model designed by Cardno and Piggot-Irvine (1994) and Piggot-Irvine (2000). This model proposes a three-phase process in which the first plan, act, observe and reflect cycle gathers baseline data. It is called *reconnaissance*, or as Piggot-Irvine titled it in her 2000 adaptation, 'examination of the existing situation' (see model below).



*Diagram 1: a problem-resolving model of action research*

Personally, I dislike the model's use of 'problem-resolving' in its descriptor, as in my experience action researchers are often seeking to understand their practice better or to be innovative in it, rather than being fixated on problems. This was the case in our action research; we wanted to see how effective we were being across a range of activities rather than being specifically aware of problems with any of these activities.

Although we are only a small unit, we strive to cover a range of activities, from a certificated programme, through one-to-one consultations and tailored workshops for specific areas, to the ongoing publication of our in-house magazine, TDU Talk, and mentoring for staff on developmental issues. Two recent initiatives, introduced only in 2010, included "Teaching Network" conversations (an opportunity for staff from across the university to come together and 'talk teaching' over a provided lunch; held approximately six weekly) and the Teaching Advocacy scheme, in which designated Advocates in each area, with support from their Dean and the Teaching Development Unit, facilitated teaching-related activities within the Faculty that would best meet the needs of discipline-based staff. There had been no evaluation of either of those initiatives, so it was important that they were included in our reconnaissance cycle. These initiatives too, were an attempt by us to strengthen the voices of those committed to valuing teaching within and across Faculties.

*The poster below, which I used to help convey the range of our work to participants at ALARA in Brisbane in 2011, shows the various initiatives. I will refer to these by their numbers used on the poster, forthwith. Use of the poster freed me from a slavish dependence on power point, and modelled presentation processes that might be more appropriate for people working in environments where there isn't easy access to computers and data show equipment. Feedback from participants at ALARA indicated that the poster had been a helpful way for them to grasp the complexity of our work, and to see how we eventually decided to narrow down*

to two initiatives in Cycle Two – but that is racing ahead at this point. (Thanks to our administrator, Preetha, for design work on the poster).

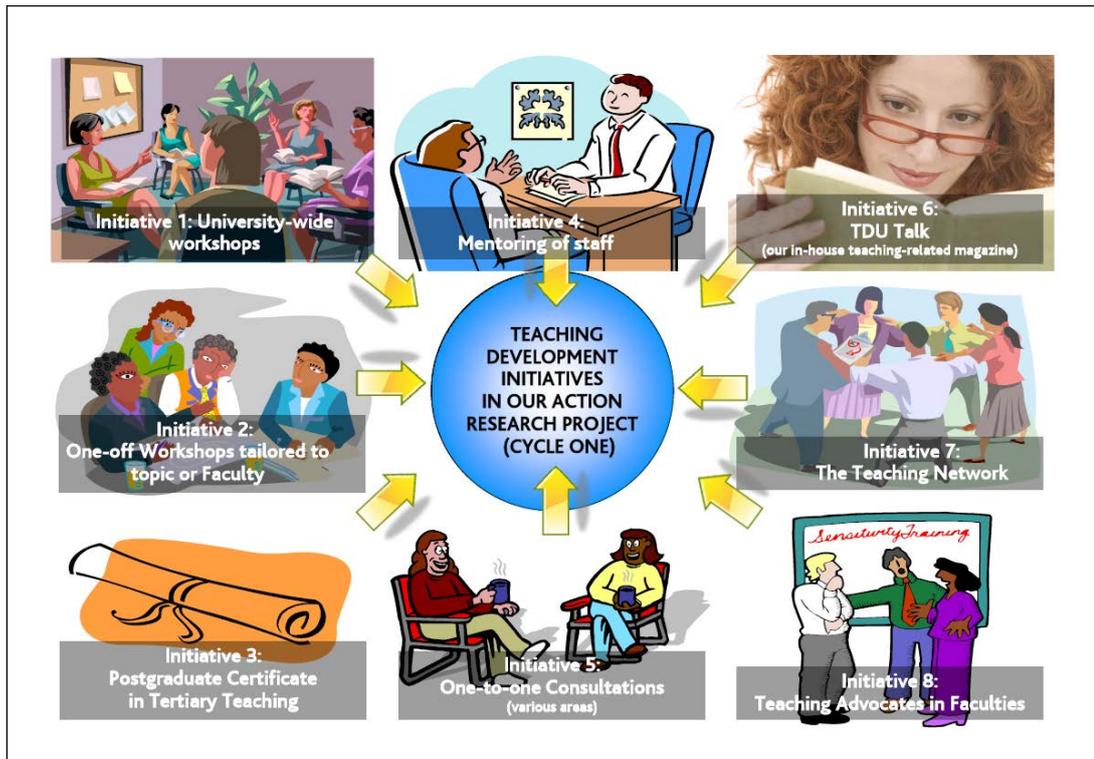


Diagram 2: ALARA conference display poster

We had to seek ethical clearance from the Faculty of Education, through which our PostGraduate Certificate in Tertiary Teaching (PGCert Tert Tchg) is accredited, for the research to proceed. This took some time; the complexity of the project required us to evaluate each initiative slightly differently, and complicated the process. There was a standard teaching appraisal process in place that gave us feedback on workshops for the PGCert Tert Tchg (Initiative 1), but after the workshops are held, much of the teaching happens through one-to-one supervision (Initiative 3). Accordingly, we organised and paid for a PhD student from outside our area to conduct interviews with all available graduates and current enrolees who agreed to participate (n=15). Feedback from this group was overwhelmingly

positive<sup>1</sup> and informed our External Review of the Certificate that happened in 2011. General workshop appraisals were also very positive. For the purposes of the project and because we could not retrospectively include work, we appraised only the midyear workshops (n= 12 participants). As no specific one-off workshops (Initiative 2) were evaluated over the reconnaissance cycle period, we did not include those in the data examined.

Mentoring (Initiative 4) is evaluated by general feedback in a group process, and/or by emailed feedback at the end of each year. These data were not formally collated as the numbers were low (n=7, for people mentored by TDU staff) but the gist of feedback was that folk were satisfied with the mentoring they have been receiving and that nothing needed to change. All staff being mentored by TDU staff opted to continue with their current mentor if they wanted mentoring in the following year. Almost all of the one-to-one consultations held during this data collection period were related to PGCert Tert Tchg work so these (Initiative 5) were covered by the interviews conducted by our PhD student.

It proved quite difficult to evaluate Initiative 6, the effectiveness of TDU Talk, except by questionnaire, and we had already decided to use questionnaires or interviews to evaluate our work with the one-to-one consultations, the Teaching Network conversations, and PGCert Tert Tchg participants. So we included a couple of additional questions on the perceived effectiveness of TDU Talk in helping staff with their ongoing teaching development, in each questionnaire or interview. Again, feedback indicated that staff found it either “very helpful” or “helpful”, with just a couple of suggestions for improvement. Sadly, budgetary restrictions in 2011 meant we had to cut down from monthly (8 editions per year) to six editions, with a further restriction to four editions planned for 2012.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In-depth results are indicated in a joint paper – Spiller *et al.* 2010 – that was presented at the Critical Ethnography Across the Disciplines conference in November of that year. Paper available from author.

<sup>2</sup> E-copies of this publication can be accessed from <http://www.waikato.ac.nz/tdu/resources/index.shtml>

We promoted the action research project and invited input on Initiative 7, the Teaching Network conversations, both face-to-face with participants at the conversations, and by email to contact any who had not come to recent conversations. But we got so few respondents for this initiative that we chose not to include it in the next cycle of action research. Comments passed were that people enjoyed the conversations, but didn't want to give formal feedback on these.

Initiative 8, the newly-introduced "Teaching Advocates in Faculties", was evaluated via a focus group and follow-up emailed feedback. This revealed that in our attempt to be non-prescriptive around how Advocates ran their sessions, we had left some feeling under-supported. The Advocacy initiative was our attempt to combat the occasional criticism that university-wide workshops did not adequately meet the needs of some staff in discipline-related areas. So we sought to support them better by using a passionate teacher from each discipline area to better promote teaching-related work. Subversively, perhaps, we were also seeking to influence the cultures of some Faculties where teaching, and conducting research on teaching, was anything but the norm. Some excellent workshops and lunch-time conversations occurred that appeared to be filling this identified gap, but the Advocates themselves, being new in their roles, had wanted more direction from TDU than we had provided. They also sought more opportunities to meet together as a group. Being an identifiable 'change agent' in some more conservative Faculties could have been quite hard for them, and perhaps we should have better anticipated feelings of isolation.

At the end of 2010, having considered all the feedback on all initiatives, we decided in 2011 to focus just on improving the PGCert Tert Tchg and the Teaching Advocacy scheme. This provided the focus for Cycle Two. *When I explained each of these initiatives during the ALAR Conference, workshop participants made favourable comment about the conversational*

*aspect of some of our initiatives, and certainly recognised the need for discipline-specific input. Staff developers in the group were well aware of criticisms of 'one size fits all' workshops in environments such as ours. The innovation of Advocacy was applauded, although the approach is not necessarily novel – staff at Lund University, Sweden, have followed a somewhat similar process in the development of their pedagogical competencies (see, for instance, Olssen, Martensson and Roxa, 2008, and reinforced via personal correspondence).*

## **Action Research Cycle Two: How can we improve PG Cert Tert Tchg and Teaching Advocacy initiatives?**

Because our original ethics application had covered data gathering from each of these areas, we didn't need to go back to the Ethics Committee again. Part of the University's quality assurance processes requires that programmes be reviewed every three years, and it was time for the PG Cert Tert Tchg to go through this process. As we already had the in-depth consumer feedback from these students in 2010, we didn't need to undertake that aspect of the review process. But we did need to review how the programme was working from the perspectives of the staff teaching on it. Our quality assurance processes meant that we also needed to seek an outside reviewer, and a colleague from the University of Otago agreed to undertake this task for us.

Staff feedback was sought via a focus group facilitated by someone in the unit who did not teach on the programme. She recorded the conversation, provided a transcript and summarised the results. The feedback indicated that there was warm support for the individual meetings format, but that we needed to remember the reluctance of some to sharing some things. The programme was seen to: be good for people's development; prompt them to think in different ways; provide a safe place for them to explore teaching practice; help to 'turn around' people who were feeling disillusioned; positive in terms of its flexibility; contribute to a 'family' feeling among students; help to scaffold people

into higher levels of learning; and contribute to cross-disciplinary communication. Aspects in need of change, from the staff's perspective, were: tightening up on assessment deadlines, given that our students (who are mainly also staff) can behave just like other students; ensuring that with our current staffing levels, we don't take on too many more students; the need to quieten down verbose contributors in PG Cert Tert Tchg meetings; and perhaps to investigate delivering part of the programme online. It was also recognised that some people, because of time and workload issues, did not engage with some aspects of learning in an in-depth way, but this is part of busy people's lives, and to be expected. It was also recommended that one of the tasks should be restricted just to an exploration of assessment, rather than being (as at present) either assessment or classroom-related. This is because the other task *did* require the design and evaluation of a teaching initiative, and otherwise assessment could be left out.

Staff mentioned their excitement about seeing people grow; that they never got bored with the programme or the teaching; that they learned to do new things themselves, and appreciated hearing about the different educational experiences of enrolees from other than university sectors, and those from different disciplines. This showed an increased awareness of contexts outside of the student's own, which is an important way of contributing to culture change. Causes of least satisfaction included uncertainty about the programme's future, with our Unit's merger with the Faculty of Education; the fact that PGCert Tert Tchg is not necessarily counted towards promotion for staff who undertake the programme; and the length of time it takes to 'change hearts and attitudes'.

The external reviewer's very thorough report received in late September 2011, was mainly positive. She identified the programme's comprehensiveness; the adequacy of the graduate profile; the programme's suitability for preparing graduates for further tertiary study; the appropriateness of

the teaching approach, papers and assessments for the clientele; and the 'practice-based' nature of the assessment tasks. She did, however, comment that the tasks seemed to be research-based, and as the qualification doesn't include research skills, were students adequately equipped to undertake these tasks? The team felt that because enrolees have to have completed a first degree (or equivalent) they're likely to have covered research in prior contexts, and in any case there is extensive supervision, with supporting articles and discussions, provided to help them with reflective-practice-based research. We also provide several case studies made available by previous students so that they can get a sense of how others have approached the tasks.

The external reviewer noted that student feedback, both through standard workshop evaluations and through the interviews conducted for this action research project, were 'extremely positive' overall. "The feedback affirms the approach taken in the Certificate, is highly complimentary of the teachers, and it is clear that the programme is changing the way people teach – for the better", she wrote (Spronken-Smith, 2011, p. 3). This was an important piece of feedback, given our desire to build into our institution better valuing of teaching.

As with the staff feedback, the issue of the group meetings being more focussed was raised, as was the need for our team and an e-learning group who contribute a couple of the workshops, to work together more closely. The reviewer noted as a concern, the fact that some staff still indicated a feeling of reluctance to talk about teaching with departmental colleagues, but related this to departmental or institutional cultures, not the programme. "This is indicative of a pervasive culture at our universities which values research more highly than teaching. Some participants called for a raising of the profile of this programme with clear support and promotion from senior management," she wrote (op. cit., pp 3- 4). This reviewer's comments support our perception that widespread culture change is needed in the

University sector in New Zealand. We need to ensure that people who really value teaching, and who are committed to personal and institutional improvement teach our students. The only suggestions the reviewer gave for improvement were changing the title of the paper named “Tertiary Teaching Research and Development”, and more regular evaluation of the Certificate as a whole. She concluded that the programme was “excellent, and indeed a model of good practice for such courses in the tertiary sector” (op. cit., p 4).

Our data collection for the PG Cert Tert Tchg programme had produced rich data that served two purposes: quality assurance for the University, and confirmation of approach plus some ideas for improvement, for the team. *When I shared this in-depth second cycle with the group in Brisbane, we did not yet have the external reviewer’s comments to hand, but I was able to share the other sources of data with them. The general feedback was that the data gathering had been appropriate, with the possible exception of our not including ‘external stakeholder’ feedback. This could have come from Heads of Department/Faculty, or managers of staff from outside the University, to determine their perspectives on how well the programme was meeting the needs of teachers in their specific contexts. This omission is acknowledged as valid in principle. However, advice from our team manager was that some of our students’ managers would not even be aware that they were undertaking the qualification, let alone what impact it might have had on their practice. Few managers in university contexts undertake classroom observations with their staff. While some Chairs of Department do view the formal paper evaluations that are conducted, these are somewhat of a blunt instrument in terms of providing data that could give insight into how well or otherwise our programme was impacting on daily teaching practice. However, the point raised by Conference participants in my workshop was appreciated.*

As far as the Teaching Advocacy initiative was concerned, during 2011 we set out to provide more support for Advocates. Individual meetings were scheduled with

Advocates towards the start of the year to ascertain/suggest ideas for their Faculties during 2011, and group meetings were held three times during the year (March, July and November) at which events that had gone well were shared. We also discussed a couple of events that had not attracted much support, commiserated with the Advocates and suggested ways of encouraging greater participation in future. In these ways we sought to reduce feelings of isolation that the previous year's Advocates had indicated, and to strengthen them as they work to improve the valuing of teaching at our University.

We had Advocates raise a couple of novel ideas besides the more usual catered lunch-with-discussion that had been the norm. The Waikato Management School, which is a Faculty but retains its original name for branding purposes, decided to have *two* Advocates in recognition of the wide spread of discipline areas covered. They shared the one budget, and supported each other in the work, including the identification of a School tendency to have late afternoon meetings. This identification led them to offer Advocacy events over wine and cheese towards the end of the day, an approach that worked surprisingly well, attracting good numbers from across the disciplines, including some senior managers. The new Computing and Mathematics Advocate, from a small Faculty, sought permission to use some of their Advocacy budget to purchase a 'teaching tablet' that could be trialled by several staff in lecture theatres to work out recordable proofs, rather than using whiteboards whose results were erased at the end of the session. The success of this in disseminating conversations about teaching within the Faculty is yet to be reported on, but it was a novel idea.

It was interesting that some Advocates used their position and budget to explain and support institutional requirements such as the need for staff to write or update learning outcomes for papers (a new experience for some!); to compile marking rubrics; to come to grips with new technology such as WIMBA, Moodle or online, on-the-spot

surveys (with the help of staff from the e-learning team). A couple of Advocates also invited University-recognised excellent teachers to come in and share ideas such as how to team teach effectively, and how to encourage student participation in lectures. A guest speaker from outside the University was the drawcard for one of the Advocacy sessions. These 'outside of Faculty' speakers were also an attempt to unseat any resistance to the valuing of teaching as an equal skill with research, by widening the ways in which staff think about teaching practice. As some of our Advocates are PGCert Tert Tchg graduates, they had often encountered relevant literature in the course of their study that they then used to stimulate teaching-related conversations in their Faculties. One example would be the Advocate for the Faculty of Science and Engineering, who used an article by Eric Mazur (1997) to provoke discussion on how better to formatively assess science-related subjects (see Wilson, 2010).

All Advocates agreed, at the 'evaluation' type end-of-year meeting, that Advocacy is a good idea and had provoked at least *some* conversations about teaching approaches in their Faculties. This is 'new territory' in a couple of Faculties however, where the pressure to produce high quality research still appears to be the driving motivation, as indicated earlier. Perhaps the fact that by mid 2012, all academics employed here have to have submitted their individual portfolios for our Performance-Based Research Fund exercise may have exacerbated this motivation. However it has always been a feature of University life, with some (e.g. Zahra, 2011) commenting on the difficulties of publishing teaching-related work in the face of pressure to achieve high scores in discipline-related research.

*In the discussions at the ALARA conference, the idea of using Teaching Advocates from within discipline areas was commended. Those present at the workshop recognised the tendency for some academics to devalue input on teaching provided by people from*

*outside discipline areas, whereas the same information provided by colleagues might be accepted and acted on.*

## **Conclusion (what did we learn?)**

There were a number of benefits gained from our team's action research. It enabled the younger, less experienced team members to see how action research happens, and to have their own part in our work recognised. We took a joint paper to a local conference towards the end of 2010, and this, too, was 'public exposure' of themselves as new researchers that was new to them, and also gave us some outside feedback on our work (Spiller, Bruce Ferguson, Pratapsingh, Lochan & Harris 2010). The collaboration needed to keep an extensive range of activities such as ours going, depends on the initiative, skills and motivation of all of us, and our team approach reinforced this valuing of our joint work. The work also helped us to clarify how we might intervene in less usual ways, to promote the values that we all hold in this unit, values such as working hard to ensure that teaching is valued; working to support staff who are feeling isolated because their efforts to improve their teaching are seen as so far outside the norm in some areas; and ensuring that student feedback on teaching is an important source of critical feedback that can improve teaching. Two of our number has undertaken a three-institution-wide investigation into just this last aspect, in 2010 and 2011.

It was good to get such strong support, in the main, for what we are doing. In our PG Cert Tert Tchg programme we encourage staff to engage in small, in-depth investigations of some aspects of their own practice, and it was good for us to role model doing this ourselves. It was also good to get feedback from staff within the university, and from participants at both of the conferences to which I/we have taken accounts of this work, that suggested ways of improving our practice. It was particularly encouraging that graduates and the external reviewer of our PG Cert Tert

Tchg were so warm in their praise of this programme, in its review year.

Challenges experienced during the process included negotiating ethical approval through the Faculty of Education, a process that is likely to be repeated with other research as we are now formally located within that Faculty; and the ongoing drain of trying to promote teaching in such a research-based environment. However, alongside *that* particular challenge is the encouragement that we receive from those who do choose to support our work, and whose work we do our best to support in turn. Our collaborative pursuit of good teaching is supported by theorists such as Bell, Gaventa and Peters (1990). Their book, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change* with Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, was described by Henry Giroux as:

... a book of compelling passion, politics, and hope. The dialogue between Horton and Freire opens up new insights into the meaning of pedagogy, social criticism, and collective struggle. This book offers hope by demonstrating in the voices and practices of two of the great educator-activists of the twentieth century the reason for making pedagogy practical and theoretical in the service of social justice" (accessed from [http://www.temple.edu/tempresstitles/804\\_reg.html](http://www.temple.edu/tempresstitles/804_reg.html))

The road that we walk together sometimes feels difficult, and the impact of our work hard to ascertain in our research-based culture. Nevertheless, we hope that our slight contribution to the literature will provide a local example of collective struggle by people prepared to challenge dominant hegemonies and to 'make our pedagogy practical and theoretical' in the service of better education for our students.

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## Author information

Dr Pip Bruce Ferguson, Teaching Developer, Teaching Development Unit, The University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand

Email: [pip@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:pip@waikato.ac.nz)



Dr. Pip Bruce Ferguson has worked for many years as both a tertiary staff developer and as an independent educational consultant and researcher, practising mainly in New Zealand. Her PhD thesis (on <http://fergs.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/PipPhD.pdf>), used the action research approach advocated by Jack Whitehead and Jean McNiff in the U.K., to help to develop a research culture in the polytechnic where she then worked.

In recent years Pip has been active in online forums such as BERA, in encouraging researchers to open up their standards so that research presented in non-traditional (but equally valid and relevant) ways can be 'counted' internationally.

# Enhancing learning with authoritative actions: reflective practice of positive power

Wenshin Chen

## Abstract

*Drawing from a classic power perspective, my reflective practice illuminates how power action, traditionally recognized as negative and detrimental to teaching processes and learning outcomes, could be shaped in a positive way to enhance learning. Insights gained from this action research set in a politically charged and culturally homogenous environment provide critical perspectives to the research community and challenge traditional practices of teaching and learning. Implications gained call for attention to critical perspectives of empirical studies that could provide lessons for educators and researchers to create a more effective teaching and learning environment with authoritative power. An action framework is created at the conclusion of the paper to illustrate how a positive authoritative process can be achieved.*

**Keywords:** action research, power practice, critical pedagogy, authoritative power

## Introduction

It is widely recognized that action research continues to strive for recognition in a research community that is largely dominated by positivist approaches (Chen and Hirschheim 2004).

The difficulty of conducting action research, particularly when it is related to critical perspectives such as

empowerment and emancipation, has been commonly faced by contemporary researchers (Polistina and Nolas 2009). Consequently, the existing body of knowledge apparently lacks an adequate understanding of the significance of critical pedagogy in today's business and educational environments that are situated in the information age connected by a vast global network (Castells, Macedo, Flecha, Giroux and Freire 1999). The issue of lacking empirical understanding of critical pedagogy and power perspectives is that proper teaching and learning environments cannot be created for the 21<sup>st</sup> century learners who live a multicultural, networked and globalised society (Chen 2011).

The purpose of this action research is thus to help build empirical understanding of critical perspectives in contemporary education systems and provide practical insights to educators worldwide about how critical pedagogy might enhance teaching practice.

Traditionally, critical pedagogy emphasized social justice and power equality among different interest groups (e.g. students) (Apple 1999; Cherryholmes 1991), advocated multicultural teaching practice and educational environments (May 1999; Nieto 1999), and argued strongly against racism and power practice in education (DeCuir and Dixon 2004; McLaren 1995). Most forms of power practice, which were an essential part of a critical perspective, were often associated with compromising the minority group's interests (Fairhurst and Snaveley 1983) and in education they were even considered just as negative and detrimental to institutions (Chen 2007; Bedeian 2002). Consequently, most power practice was understandably discouraged in education and little about its potential effects in teaching and learning was empirically studied. This led to one-dimensional understanding of power practice and critical pedagogy that was not encouraged by classic power researchers (Bachrach and Baratz 1962).

However, a teaching and learning dynamic inevitably involves power practice because it is naturally inherited in a teacher's position and in the conflict of interests that commonly exists between teachers and students (Chen 2007). Therefore, to better understand power dynamics in the teaching and learning process there is a need to inquire "How can power action be positive in the teaching practice?" and "How can positive effects of power action influence the learning outcomes?"

With its exploratory nature of investigation, action research findings could make contributions in the following areas: (1) help build theoretical and empirical understanding of critical pedagogy; (2) challenge and reshape existing perceptions of power practice in education, particularly its traditional, negative notion; (3) provide empirical lessons to educators about how to enhance teaching practice in alternative ways; and (4) serve as an exploratory foundation for future educators and researchers that are interested in critical pedagogy and critical theory, respectively.

### **Power perspectives**

While the notion of power has been widely addressed (Apple 1999; Hillman 1995; Brass and Burkhardt 1993; Cobb 1984; Saunders 1981; Hinings, Hickson, Pennings and Schneck 1974; Anton 1963), this teaching study is primarily derived from Lukes's (1974) and Bachrach and Baratz's (1970) classic definitions. This choice is made because their conceptualization of power captures its essence and is most helpful in the interpretation and analysis of my storied case.

According to Lukes (1974), the underlying notion of power is that "A in some way affects B" (p. 26). The essence of power, however, is exercised and manifested due to a conflict of interests among actors. Without the conflict of interests, consensual authority or influence cannot be a form of power. Such authority or influence could include inducement, encouragement, persuasion, etc. Although A who exercises these actions could get B to perform in certain ways of A's

preferences, only when the conflict of interests is involved will A's influence over B be significant enough to shape certain forms of power (Lukes 1974). In other words, the existence of power is primarily derived from a conflict of interests among actors.

Bachrach and Baratz (1970) further explain that "to the extent that a person or group – consciously or unconsciously – creates or reinforces barriers to the public airing of policy conflicts, that person or group has power" (p 8). More specifically, power is manifested...

When A participates in the making of decisions that affect B. Power is also exercised when A devotes his energies to creating or reinforcing social and political values and institutional practices that limit the scope of the political process to public consideration of only those issues which are comparatively innocuous to A. To the extent that A succeeds in doing this, B is prevented, for all practical purposes, from bringing to the fore any issues that might in their resolution be seriously detrimental to A's set of preferences (p 7).

They further argue that such a notion of power manifested itself in five different forms as follows (Bachrach and Baratz 1970):

- *Coercion* occurs when A ensures B's compliance by threatening B for depriving B's interests. In other words, A threatens B to take away things of B's interests so that B's compliance is guaranteed;
- *Influence* is realized where A drives B to change his actions without implicit or explicit threat involved. In other words, A simply affects or causes B to make different decisions;
- *Authority* exists when B's compliance is based on his/her recognition that A's command is reasonable for B's own preference and value. In other words, authority is sanctioned by B "either because its content is legitimate and reasonable or because it has been arrived at through a legitimate and reasonable procedure" (Lukes, 1974, p. 18);

- *Force* is exercised to allow A to achieve his/her objectives, when B does not comply, by depriving B's choice between compliance and noncompliance. In other words, if B does not comply, he/she will receive penalty that helps A accomplish his/her objectives;
- *Manipulation* lies beneath a latent state that B may be not even aware of the existence of A's power act upon him/her. In other words, due to either the source or the nature of A's demand, B would potentially comply and might not even recognize it.

To allow in-depth discussions, this study will only focus on the authoritative form of power action to better reflect research purpose and questions. As Lukes explains, the premise for authoritative power to occur is when one party, usually considered as the powerless group, recognizes the other's action as legitimate and reasonable. More specifically, in the teaching and learning environment, an instructor's authoritative power can only emerge when the student group accepts power action imposed on them or vice versa. My investigation described in the Research Methodology and Action Stories sections of this paper is thus primarily based on this premise.

## **Research methodology**

The rationale for my choice of an action research project is largely due to sensitive subject matters, i.e. power action, involved. This purpose is highly related to action research's original essence that advocates comparative research leading to problem solving and social actions (Lewin 1946). More specifically, my personal experiences in the research context allow authentic and subtle issues to emerge that would not be possible by other methods (Clandinin and Connelly 1987). Classic sociologists have suggested that our knowing of the reality exists in everyday life with or without our acknowledgment (Berger and Luckmann 1966). We often do not know how to describe what we know but simply act on it (Schön 1983). Such notions of know-how are similar to what

Berger and Luckmann (1966) call “commonsense knowledge” in everyday life (p 23). This type of commonsense knowledge can often be best reflected in and gained from the teaching and learning processes because a teacher is also considered as “knower” who is inevitably involved in the research process (Clandinin and Connelly 1988).

Due to this dual role of researcher/knower and participant/teacher, action researchers will naturally assume a philosophical position with subjective ontology, non-positivist epistemology, and voluntary human nature (Burrell and Morgan 1979). Ontologically, the reality in the action research context cannot exist independently from the researcher’s subjective interpretation since researchers themselves also participate in the research process (Susman and Evered 1978).

No matter how neutral an action researcher (i.e. me in this project) assumes his/her research position, his/her involvement in the research process will inevitably intertwine with how the reality is perceived (Pasmore and Friedlander 1982). As such, epistemologically, the knowledge gained from action research differs from positivism that is rooted in deductive-hypothetic reasoning (Susman and Evered 1978). More specifically, since my investigation focuses on power issues between two distinctive groups with conflicts of interests, my epistemological position is based on inductive reasoning and most related to critical theory paradigm (Chua 1986).

Consequently, these ontological and epistemological positions lead to my human nature assumption that is based on voluntarism (Burrell and Morgan 1979). In other words, my role as a researcher/knower and teacher/participant is inevitably intertwined with the research context. It is no longer feasible for me to assume a value-free research position because my participation and intervention in the research context will inevitably interact with the teaching

and learning outcomes that my action research project seeks to investigate.

The complexity of such dual roles in the research process thus raises some ethical concerns between the researcher (me) and the researched (students). While these concerns are fundamental issues in or limitation of action research and will be addressed in the concluding section later, my research process gains practical lessons and valuable insights by systematically analysing empirical observations and consistently reflecting in practice beyond personal purpose. More specifically, my research objective is not just for personal growth or professional development but mostly for emancipatory interests in critical pedagogy (Noffke 1997). My reflection in practice does not focus on autobiographical particularity but mostly concerns about the holistic meaning of lived experiences (i.e. collaborative reflection) in relation to issues of empowerment and social justice (i.e. communal reflection) (Rearick and Feldman 1999). As my teaching stories will later narrate, such reflective practices could be typically observed in teaching and learning environments (Day 2000; Goodfellow 2000).

## **Reflective process**

During one academic year in the U.S.A., I taught a Java Programming course two sessions a week. I reflected on my teaching experiences at the end of each teaching day.

Although autobiographic in nature, my reflections were also highly interactive with my colleagues' experiences in the professional setting and electronic communication with students and others. During that academic year, email messages were saved and later retrieved. More than five hundred received email messages helped build a more holistic understanding of my lived experience. Email messages sent to students and colleagues were also retrieved. All of these email messages helped me to reconstruct authentic and rich field notes about the teaching and learning process through which the students and I lived.

The power issues, which became my research focus, emerged subsequently through these reflections and authentic conversations.

### **Action context**

The university where my action research took place was located in one of the major metropolitan areas in the U.S.A. While students came from diverse backgrounds, all faculty members of the department were predominantly White American males. The particular course taught, Java Programming, was an increasingly popular Information Systems (IS) course and had only been offered by the department a year before I taught it. It was designed as the 'gate keeping' course for the department and all sections were 'coordinated' by a tenured faculty member who was given a pseudonym, Dr. Coke.

One particular practice that Dr. Coke demanded was to have a pop quiz before the start of each class and test students with their knowledge about the chapter that we intended to cover during that session. In other words, the students were required to preview the chapter before entering the classrooms. Dr. Coke's expectation of failing rate for those pop quizzes was around 70-80 percent. Eventually, the course gained a reputation as what students called the 'weed out' course. Many students who failed to obtain a grade of C+ (i.e. one level higher than a normal passing mark required by the university) could not graduate as planned. In an urban commuting school, students would naturally consider this 'extra' requirement too harsh and not in their best interests. The collective interest of students and their shared aim to pass the course and desire to graduate on time was inevitably shaped. In turn, the formulation of such collective interests clearly divided the students from the faculty group.

## Action stories

Two stories were analyzed to illustrate how the authoritative power was exercised by me and how students reacted to it.

The first story revolved around a Hispanic male student who struggled in my class while the second story centered on a highly motivated White American male student. These specific stories were chosen because they represented contrasting cases, one in the struggling group and the other in the high achieving group, in a distinctive and authentic fashion that would allow a more compelling analysis. To enhance the authenticity of case stories without violating confidentiality, pseudonyms were given to these two students as Jose and Robert.

### *Jose's story*

I came to know Jose when he enrolled in my class the first semester. He was one of those students who would listen attentively during classes and come to ask questions afterwards. His best friend, Marlon, was also in my section. In the beginning, Jose and Marlon expressed their strong wish to graduate together, which meant passing my course at the same time. Unfortunately for Jose who worked in the Information Technology industry for years with a reasonable programming skill, the decisive factor of passing or failing the course was not about real programming skill but about quizzes and examinations that were designed in a detailed, tactical format.

Under the coordination of Dr. Coke, no programming exercise, assignment, or group project was given to the students. In other words, the student's grade was entirely determined by two quizzes and two examinations that were designed to assess primarily the students' test-taking rather than programming skills. The two examinations were particularly important because they accounted for 75% of final grade.

In the end of the first semester, Marlon received an “A” (i.e. highest mark) and moved onto the next level while Jose did not pass the minimum C+ requirement and had to retake the course. Jose’s dream to graduate with his best friend at the same ceremony was obviously broken. As an instructor, I found Jose’s problem was largely due to his easy-going personality. Since the course was covertly designed to ‘fail’ students, Dr. Coke developed multiple-choice exams that heavily emphasized the syntactical and the symbolic instead of conceptual understanding of programming. Those exams were not testing a student’s programming skills, which should have been the main purpose of the programming course, but a student’s skill to detect detailed symbolic, numeric, or alphabetic errors. Such skill requires rigid, precise, bird-like eyes during a highly stressful, high-stake test-taking situation.

Jose’s easy-going personality would not enable him to focus on the details and this may have caused him to overlook the many intentional errors. In addition, each multiple choice midterm or final exam only consisted of 25 items. Passing or failing it could be determined by one or two items.

Moreover, the average of the exam was always so low that a substantial curve was often applied after Dr. Coke had calculated the results across all sections. Consequently, the difference between the A grade and the failing grade, C, was a raw score of 15 and 12. In the first semester, a female student, Sarah, for example, once honestly admitted her luck in the exam, “I guessed 3 items right in the exam and I went from C to A.” To pass this type of exam, what Jose needed was to develop a habit that would enable him to pay attention to details, even unnecessary ones. With this experienced knowledge in mind, I was determined to invoke my power to guide Jose through his third trial, which would also constitute his last chance. Should he fail, he would no longer be allowed to major in MIS (Management Information Systems).

Before the spring break, he requested an appointment to help prepare for his upcoming exam. Since we both lived far away from the campus, we eventually decided to meet at a local family restaurant in my neighborhood. From my perspective, because Jose had requested an instructor's personal time, I expected him to be on time and to handle the matter seriously and efficiently. Surprisingly, he was late and even forgot some basic concepts. After spending about three hours reiterating many fundamental concepts, Jose must have finally realized that I was on the edge of losing patience and looked rather stern. Our last conversation of the meeting illustrated the beginning point of my exercise of authoritative power:

'Okay, I will discipline myself and prepare...' he tried to excuse himself.

'I don't want to hear that. I want to see it!' I interrupted and "commanded" him with my authority.

'Okay, from now on, I won't say it but do it and show it! I promise!'

I looked at him authoritatively and thought about his easy-going personality, not sure how much he would keep his words.

From that point forward, I became more serious in interacting with him to ensure his understanding that this semester, the third trial, would be his last chance. I saw his attitude had improved in the classroom after our meeting. He would pay more attention to details in daily pop quizzes. A week after meeting Jose, we had the midterm exam. Jose made much improvement and maintained a level of achievement above the median. However, the midterm exam only accounted for 30% of the final grade; if he performed similarly in the final exam, which accounted for 45% of final grade, he would be on the borderline of failing, not just this course but the entire program and perhaps his future career.

While I was concerned about his final outcome, Jose maintained his usual optimistic outlook and continued

improving his detail-oriented skills. Although José's final outcome was not in the best group of my class, after Dr. Coke curved the final exam he obtained an adequate weighted score to pass the course, largely due to a much higher average score of my section than that of other sections.

He and Marlon both came to visit me before the semester ended. As we reflected in this long programming journey, the final closure was a great relief for Jose – and for me – with the realization that he could finally move on after the third and last trial. A year later I ran into Jose in a library on campus. He revealed that he had also passed the upper level course and obtained a full time professional position in the IT industry. It marked the end of struggle for Jose in that MIS program.

#### *Robert's story*

On the spectrum of grade scale, if Jose was someone constantly falling on the borderline of passing/failing, Robert was one of those students that an instructor never had to worry about. He came in with high expectation of the course not just because he intended to apply for graduate schools but also because Java programming language had become such a common application in the industry that he intended to fully develop his skills to enhance future employment opportunity.

I first noticed him in class because he always sat in the front seat only two steps away from the podium. However, the first unforgettable impression was made when he once argued furiously with me. The incident occurred five days before the first programming test when I asked a 'tricky' question on a pop quiz. I showed them a simple programming code and asked:

‘Once the program compiles, what would be the output?’

There was an intentional error in the program.

‘Are you sure it is gonna compile? Are you sure it is gonna have output?’ a student asked—that was him.

Considering the context of the course, I realized that a student who could ask such a question was rather advanced. He basically had read the chapter by himself, understood the key point of the pop quiz and detected the erroneous message. However, his question was precisely related to the answer. That caught me off guard and I could not answer him directly. Instead, I carefully emphasized again, “I cannot directly answer that question but you only need to tell me once the program complies, what would be the output?”

This pop quiz was rather difficult because the students had to not just understand the programming notion and how to generate outputs but also to detect the errors when necessary. Since all sections would take the same exams which were composed by Dr. Coke, the high difficulty of pop quizzes could help students prepare for Dr. Coke’s format and style of exams. This rationale formed the foundation of my authoritative power.

As soon as I apprised my class of the answer – no output would be produced due to the error, Robert was furious and shouted at me in front of the whole class:

‘NO! I SPECIFICALLY ASKED YOU IF THIS WILL PRODUCE OUTPUT. YOU SAID, “YES!”’

I was shocked but replied firmly: “No, I said once the program complies, what would be the output?”

“BUT THE PROGRAM WON’T COMPILE!”

I confronted him with my authority: ‘Yes, it will compile to convert source codes to Java codes, but it won’t run successfully. So it will give you an error message!’

‘THAT IS A VERY BAD ATTITUDE TO ANSWER THE QUESTION.’

Despite knowing the fact that the same instance might repeat itself, I maintained high difficulty for pop quizzes. However, the students soon took their first formal exam that was designed and coordinated by Dr. Coke and realized the necessity of maintaining high difficulty in every session; when they were more used to high difficulty of pop quizzes their results of formal exams were much improved.

My rationale of "*preparing them for exams*," thus, became a recognized authority because it indeed served their best interests in the long run. As the recognition of "*preparing you for the exam*" started to build, they knew that every pop quiz indeed provided a small practice for the exam. In the next meeting after they took the first midterm exam, I revealed that the exam score was available. An interesting interaction occurred.

The whole class went dead silent until somebody asked tentatively and anxiously, 'How was it?'

The result of my section was quite satisfying in comparison to that of other sections. But I only went, 'eh, hmm!' with a smile on my face.

Robert, as usual just two steps from the podium, shouted with a smile, 'Oh that is very cynical!'

Based on Dr. Coke's rules, instructors were not allowed to explain the exam or results in public. Since the exam was curved with a weight determined by all sections' results, if a student's score was significantly higher than the average, he/she would very likely have a perfect score.

Being one of the best students in the class, Robert, not surprisingly, passed the first big hurdle with a perfect score. I explained to the class that there was a distinct line between those who took pop quizzes well and those who did not. The former group followed my instruction from the beginning and thus was well prepared for the exam, not just with their knowledge, but also with their mental attitude. Such a trend continued throughout the semester. Robert who was well

adjusted to the format of the course eventually obtained an A. The following semester, he surprisingly requested a letter of recommendation from me for his application for graduate schools. He was eventually admitted to one of the most prestigious private schools in the U.S. and began to pursue for his ambition.

Due to page limit, many other stories that could also shed light on positive effects of authoritative power were not reflected in this paper. They could collectively, along with Jose's and Robert's stories, paint a comprehensive picture about the connection between authoritative power and teaching/learning processes and outcomes. The positive effect of my authoritative power could also be reasonably supported by students' evaluation of my teaching which resulted in 56.4/60 and 58.6/60 in the first and second semester, respectively. Those scores were higher than other instructors' that were ranged between low 40s and low 50s. They also set the highest record in students' evaluation of Java programming teaching at that time. In a highly technical course that was completely controlled by a strict tenured professor who intended to fail the majority of students, the results of those teaching evaluations could serve as an indication for my teaching effectiveness that revolved around authoritative power.

### **Reflective analysis**

Although both Robert and Jose represented different student backgrounds and grade levels in my programming class, their stories illustrated that positive meanings could arise from authoritative power. In Robert's case, he initially nearly 'resented' the way pop quizzes were set up and perceived them as a conflict of his interests. But as I repeatedly reinforced the notion of 'preparing you for the exam', he, along with the class, eventually came to realize my intention and recognize my authority, which in turn led to their better preparation for exams and subsequently higher test results.

In Jose's case, my stern demeanour could be demanding and my command was evidently authoritative but it provided an atmosphere for the easy-going Jose to become more focused, disciplined and cautious in handling the exams that were designed to test their test-taking skills. While there might be other factors involved, the authoritative power that I imposed on them certainly provided a platform that enabled these students to better prepare the course and in turn achieve higher results.

In reflecting the first research question, "How can power action be positive in the teaching practice?" the answers rest upon the students' recognition of authoritative power. When the students do not perceive power action as their best interests, the instructors' authority will not be sanctioned. Consequently, power action will only create negative effects in the teaching and learning process. This was clearly demonstrated by Robert's first reaction toward an earlier pop quiz that he deemed tricky. Once students' recognition of the authority is established, their compliance with power action can then be guaranteed. In reflecting the second research questions, "How can positive effects of power action influence the teaching process and learning outcomes," these case stories have evidently demonstrated that once positive effects of power action are generated by the students' collective recognition of authority a more collegiate and interactive teaching atmosphere will be created, which might subsequently improve the student's overall performance. This can be largely supported by a much higher average score in my teaching section than that in others. Also, the high rating of students' evaluation for my teaching might suggest that they were mostly satisfied with the authoritative method that I employed and with their own learning outcomes.

## **Implications**

Derived from reflective analysis, it is fair to state that authoritative power could help enhance the teaching process

and learning outcomes. In the case stories narrated above, the students were situated in an urban, commuting organizational context where the course that I taught was a highly technical one intending for 'gate keeping' purpose (step 1). The students' collective interests were to pass the course in order to advance in the program or in their future career (step 2). My compassion for students naturally emerged in such a highly controlled environment that we both faced (step 3). Students would not have difficulty to realize my compassion when I was willing to provide personal tutoring on and off campus to help them prepare for exams (step 4). Consequently, students' recognition of my authority was quickly established even though sometimes it could be demanding or 'tricky' (step 5). Once their recognition was gained, I developed certain mechanism as my authoritative routine such as "I am preparing you for exams" (step 6). The remaining process became more repetitive when I continued difficult quizzes but reinforced the notion "I am preparing you for exams" throughout the course (step 7). When specific events occurred such as Jose's non-promising performance after midterm exam, assessment of the emerging situation was reconsidered to understand how further assistance might be of his best interests (step 8). In the end, students performed satisfactorily and their evaluation of my teaching, which centered on authoritative power, evidently provided reliable evidence of their learning outcomes (step 9).

For researchers, the framework demonstrated in Figure 1 provides a foundation to challenge traditional perceptions of critical pedagogy and power perspectives, which has been generally considered negative and detrimental to the teaching and learning process. As implications suggest, power action can be positive in education and it might be of an educators' best interests to identify the process through which positive power action can be undertaken and by which the teaching process and learning outcomes can be enhanced.

More specifically, the intention of this framework is primarily about understanding students' needs and interests in the beginning and achieving better learning outcomes in the end. Power action in general or authoritative power in particular is not the end purpose but a method, tool or intermediate process to help educators to achieve the aforementioned objectives. For future researchers, empirical investigation of the issues involved in any of those steps and/or their interactive relations might be of the community's interests because they could help extend the existing body of knowledge on critical pedagogy and authoritative power in education.

### **Limitations and concluding remarks**

Since my action research largely relies on personal experiences, insights gained from reflective analysis and implications are inevitably subjective and thus limited to organizational context in which similar issues are faced. My dual roles as teacher/participant and researcher/knower further increase the complexity of the research process where subtle, sensitive issues of critical pedagogy in general and power action in particular are being investigated. The research context is also situated in an environment where a homogeneous faculty is formed and strict rules and policies are applied to the particular course taught. Furthermore, due to the page limit here, only two stories are analyzed in this paper. All these factors call for careful attention if greater implications or conclusion is to be drawn.

Nevertheless, this empirical study has accomplished what it sets out to do and made a contribution to the existing practical and research knowledge. First, it has built on a theoretical foundation of power perspectives and connected to understanding critical pedagogy, which in itself requires more empirical efforts in our community.

It has also challenged the existing perception of power action in education that is widely considered negative and detrimental to the teaching and learning process. A specific

framework has been further developed to help educators and researchers understand how to achieve authoritative power that could enhance teaching and learning. The empirical insights that revolve around authoritative power have subsequently provided a platform connecting our community to critical pedagogy and critical theoretical paradigm. These contributions have served the research purpose stated from the outset.

In retrospect, power action is a fascinating educational issue that is faced by all educators because it is naturally inherited in our positions. This situation also provides an interesting research platform for critical pedagogy that certainly requires more attention in the research community.

However, when practiced inappropriately, power action could be rather negative and detrimental to organizations and thus should be mostly avoided. When considered necessary, power action needs to be based on understanding of and compassion for students' needs and interests first. These are essential elements to gain students' recognition of power authority, which could eventually lead to higher learning outcomes.

In the end, we, as educators or academicians, need to be aware that whether we desire a large proportion of our job content is teaching and in teaching we are primarily facing the learners' minds and souls. Without understanding of and compassion for their minds and souls, we might not just fail in power practice but also fail ourselves in the educational system that fundamentally defines our profession and existence.

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## **About the author**

Wenshin Chen, College of Business Administration, Abu Dhabi University, P.O. Box 59911, Abu Dhabi, UAE

Email: [wenshinchen@hotmail.com](mailto:wenshinchen@hotmail.com)

Wenshin Chen received his Ph.D. from International Graduate School of Business, University of South Australia, and Ed.D. from University of Houston. His primary research interests include social and cultural issues of educational and managerial phenomena. Epistemological and methodological issues and strategic management of emerging technologies are also of his particular research interests. His publications can be seen in a variety of international journals such as *Information Systems Journal* and *Communications of the IBIMA*.

## **Book Review**

Low Kian She

# **Transforming university biochemistry teaching using collaborative learning and technology by Penny J. Gilmer**

In this concise and practical book, Gilmer shares her experience from her research study of an undergraduate-level biochemistry class with the intention of generating ideas for other educators who wish to improve the learning environment in their own science classrooms. As an advocator of teacher change, this book is a natural progression from her efforts in helping elementary and middle school teachers in graduate programs at Florida State University conduct action research.

Gilmer brings to the fore issues with science teaching in the United States after scrutinizing various research studies and emphasizes the urgent need for reform, especially in terms of better preparing existing and future teachers of science and mathematics. She cites Singapore as an example of the importance of devoting financial resources to education and in professional development of teachers, and she

underscores the need to improve teacher preparation, suggesting classroom-based research and self-reflection to enhance teaching. As a Singaporean teacher, I couldn't agree more with her observation and her impetus for writing this book in order to help fellow educators in their teaching and learning. The focus of her research resonates further, because 21<sup>st</sup> century education outcomes in Singapore, and in many other countries, have gravitated towards Collaborative Learning and the use of Information and Communication Technology.

One of the lenses Gilmer chose to use is that of a fictionalized perspective. Compiling actual student responses regarding a workshop she previously conducted, Gilmer wrote a fictional story regarding students, their classroom dynamics, and their collaborative learning. For the writer, it forces keen reflection and empathy to perceive what the students might have experienced. When this fictional story was then given to the students, it forces a deeper and more focused level of reflection as they commented about their experiences in response to the story. The approach seems entirely coherent, and I am fascinated by its novelty, especially that it is used on a science classroom, in which fact would more often be held in better regard than fiction. Subsequently, Gilmer's action research regarding collaboration surfaced out convincing strengths, and weaknesses that any educator could learn from and avoid. I fully agree with her that communication is a key ingredient of collaborative learning that separates it from cooperative learning, and that technology could be utilized to augment collaborative efforts. Specifically, she uses technology in a variety of ways – developing Web sites for communicating with group members, preparation and presentation, and construction of electronic portfolios. She did, however, note a salient limitation that although the students acquired technological skills while developing their own websites, the students experienced challenge and possibly frustration having to learn the content of biochemistry simultaneously with technological skills. I view it as a cautionary note, because

often, in our haste and excitement in incorporating technology into our teaching, we tend to assume, frequently mistakenly, that the younger generation would be savvy in technological skills.

From her writing, it seems evident that Gilmer had collected and pored through a massive amount of rich qualitative data, and chose to evaluate the data using stringent quality criteria. It is interesting that she chose to use a metalogue with her colleague to further critique the data as well as her own work, analysis and conclusions. Both of these choices role-model for the reader dedication and humility in conducting action research. The entire research study further prompted Gilmer to reflect on her beliefs, philosophy and teaching, and I believe that any science educator will be able to identify with the issues Gilmer mentions, as well as her passion to enhance students' conceptual understanding and interest. It is also heartening to see Gilmer set an example for fellow educators in her use of educational theories to inform her thinking and actions. I am certainly tempted to try writing a fictional story to engage my own students in reflection now!

**Author information:**

Low Kian Seh

Deputy Head of Department/Science (Chemistry)

Temasek Junior College, Singapore

On behalf of the Research@EastZone

# **ALARA membership information and article submissions**

## **ALARA individual membership**

The ALAR Journal can be obtained by joining the Action Learning, Action Research Association (ALARA) Inc. Your membership subscription entitles you to two copies of the ALAR Journal per year.

ALARA membership also provides information on special interest email and web based networks, discounts on conference/seminar registrations, and an on line membership directory. The directory gives details of members in over twenty countries with information about interests and projects as well as contact details.

## **ALARA organisational membership**

ALARA is also keen to make the connections between people and activities in all the strands, streams and variants associated with our paradigm – including action learning, action research, process management, collaborative inquiry facilitation, systems thinking, organisational learning and development, for example, and with people who are working in any kind of organisational, community, workplace or other practice setting; and at all levels.

To this end we invite organisational memberships – as Affiliates or Associates of ALARA. Details are on our membership link on our website.

**For more information about ALARA and its  
activities please**

Visit our Membership Link on our web page:

[www.alara.net.au](http://www.alara.net.au)

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# JOURNAL SUBMISSIONS CRITERIA AND REVIEWING PROCESS

The Action Learning Action Research Journal (ALARj) contains substantial articles, project reports, information about activities, reflections on seminars and conferences, short articles related to the theory and practice of action learning, action research and process management, and reviews of recent publications. It aims to be highly accessible for both readers and contributors. It is particularly accessible to practitioners.

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If you have any difficulties or inquiries about submission or any other matters to do with ALARA publications contact the Managing Editor on: **editor@alara.net.au**

## Guidelines

The journal is devoted to the communication of the theory and practice of action research and related methodologies generally. As with all ALARA activities, all streams of work across all disciplines are welcome including:

1. action research
2. action learning
3. participatory action research
4. systems thinking
5. inquiry process-facilitation, and
6. process management

and all the associated post-modern epistemologies and methods such as:

3. rural self-appraisal
4. auto-ethnography
5. appreciative inquiry
6. most significant change
7. open space technology, etc.

## Article preparation

Follow the APA referencing style guide

<http://www.lib.monash.edu.au/tutorials/citing/apa.html>.

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Written contributions should contain:

1. 1 ½ or double-spacing in all manuscripts, including references, notes, abstracts, quotations, figures and tables
2. double quotation marks within single quotation marks to set off material that in the original source was enclosed in single quotation marks. Do not use quotation marks to enclose block quotations (any quotations of 40 or more words) and italicise block quotations
3. APA style referencing – additional guideline notes for new writers are available on the publication section of the ALARA website: [www.alara.net.au/publicatoin](http://www.alara.net.au/publicatoin)
4. maximum of 8000 words for peer reviewed articles and 2000 words for other journal items (including tables, figures and bibliography)
5. an abstract of 100-150 words
6. six keywords for inclusion in metadata fields
7. minimal use of headings (up to three)
8. any images or diagrams should be used to add value to the article and be independent from the document as either jpegs or gifs and inserted as image files into the page where possible. If using MS Word drawing tools, please 'group' your diagrams and images and anchor them to the page, or attach at the end of the document with a note in-text as to its position in the article.
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ALARj is supported by a large team of reviewers. The reviewers are recognised leaders in action learning and action research practices: academics and consultants who specialise in this application. Our reviewers are located throughout the world and collaborate by email as managed by the Managing Editor. Reviewers are asked to deliver at least four reviews of papers per year.

The ALARj publication is supported by the ALARA Publications Working Group, a team of ALARA members who share an interest in the development and progress of the journal and other ALARA publications. We always welcome new members to our editorial review panel. If you would like to gain this experience please contact the Managing Editor on: [editor@alara.net.au](mailto:editor@alara.net.au).

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Articles submitted for inclusion in the journal should maintain an emphasis and focus of action research and action learning in such a way that promotes AR and AL as supported by ALARA members, and contributes to the literature more broadly.

Authors are sent a summary of reviewers' comments with which to refine their article. The author may choose to respond or not on a resubmission. The Managing Editor make final decisions about inclusions, and informs authors accordingly.

The following criteria will be used by the editorial review team to identify and manage the expectations of articles submitted for inclusion in the ALARj.

The criteria are that articles submitted for inclusion in the ALARj:

- be both aimed at and grounded in the world of practice;
- be explicitly and actively participative: research with, for and by people rather than on people;
- draw on a wide range of ways of knowing (including intuitive, experiential, presentational as well as conceptual) and link these appropriately to form theory;
- address questions that are of significance to the flourishing of human community and the more-than-human world;
- aim to leave some lasting capacity amongst those involved, encompassing first, second and third person perspectives; and
- critically communicate the inquiry process instead of just presenting its results, and some reflections on it.

These overarching criteria should be considered together with the following questions:

- Is the article logical?
- Is it based on evidence? If so what kind?
- Does the article consider ethics?
- Has it considered the viewpoints of many stakeholders? Is it dialectical?
- Does the article consider the consequences for this generation and the next?
- Does it illustrate good practice in AR and AL?
- Does it progress AR and AL in the field (research, community, business, education or otherwise)?
- Does the writer present ideas with flare and creativity?
- Would the writer benefit from some mentoring to produce an article of journal-standard?

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