

**THE ABC OF ACTION RESEARCH:  
SUPPORTING TEACHERS PERSONALLY AND PROFESSIONALLY**

**A paper presented at the conference**

**SUPPORTING TEACHERS IN A CHALLENGING ENVIRONMENT**

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**Introduction**

In this presentation I would like to explore some ideas about supporting teachers personally and professionally in education settings, using an action research methodology. The ideas have to do with finding ways to encourage teachers to think critically and reflectively about what they are doing, and especially to engage with questions of the kind, 'How do I improve my practice?' (Whitehead 1989). Through engaging with these kinds of questions, teachers can position themselves as having the authority to take control of and make discerning judgements about their practices, as they seek to exercise educational influence in their own learning and in the learning of others.

I shall speak primarily about the teaching profession in Ireland, and also about some of the work I have been doing in South Africa; what I have to say is relevant to teaching in the rest of the world. I shall also make the case that, by developing their capacity to engage with such critical questions, teachers in countries such as Ireland and South Africa can make significant contributions to new thinking and new practices globally, and position themselves as ranking alongside the best in the world.

I would like to begin by showing two photographs. The first is a picture of Mary Roche from Cork and myself on the occasion of her graduation at the University of Limerick, in January 2008.

Place picture 1 here: Picture of graduation in Limerick

The second photograph is of a group of ten teachers from Khayelitsha and myself on the occasion of their graduation from the University of Surrey, in September 2009. Khayelitsha is a township of a million people, situated just outside Cape Town.

Place picture 2 here: Picture of graduation in Cape Town

I am presenting these pictures because they represent the realisation of my educational values in relation to teachers in different social and educational contexts claiming their rightful positions as master and doctor educators who have had their claims to professional excellence validated and legitimated by the Academy in the form of their higher degrees. In both contexts, this has been achieved against considerable odds (see McNiff 2000 and McNiff 2010), and the photos show how, with determination and tenacity, the teachers have won through. These kinds of events give meaning to my own personal and professional life.

So, to develop the ideas, let me outline what action research is, what it involves, and how it is done.

### **About action research**

Action research is a form of self-reflective enquiry that enables practitioners to take control of their practice by asking questions about how they can improve it, and then make their ideas public for critical evaluation. It is about

1. taking action to find ways to improve classroom practice and other situations;
2. doing research into how we can offer descriptions and explanations for what we have done, and how we can make judgements about the quality of our practices.

Both aspects are crucial, because demonstrating quality in professional practice is not only a case of demonstrating practice improvement, but also of knowledge creation. It is about practice as a form of enquiry; about making claims to improved practice that may be tested against authenticated evidence, and having those claims agreed by the critical feedback of a peer community.

A popular way of doing action research is to think about the following as a framework for researching your own practice:

- I review my current practice;
- Identify an area I wish to improve;
- Ask focused questions about how I can improve it;
- Imagine a way forward;
- Try it out, and
- Take stock of what happens.
- I modify my plans in light of what I have found, and continue with the action;
- Evaluate the modified action;
- And reconsider the position in light of the evaluation.

(see also McNiff and Whitehead 2009a)

You can then turn this into a set of practical questions, such as:

- What is my concern? What is my research question?
- Why am I concerned?

- How do I gather data to show the situation as it is, and as it evolves?
- What can I do about the situation? What will I do?
- What kind of evidence can I produce to show that what I am doing is influencing someone's learning?
- How do I communicate the significance of what I have done?
- How do I ensure that any judgements I make are reasonably fair and accurate?
- How do I modify my practices and ideas in light of my evaluation?
- How do I write a good quality report?

(McNiff and Whitehead 2009b)

These are the kind of questions I encourage practitioners to ask about their own practices. Furthermore, because I believe strongly that I should not ask someone to do something that I am not prepared to do first, I undertake my own action enquiries on a systematic basis. For me, action research is both about doing projects, as well as (and more so) about adopting an attitude of enquiry throughout one's life, which I try to do, and encourage others to do.

So, to illustrate how to do action research in action, let me outline my own action enquiry, and show how I theorise my practice of supporting teachers in doing their action enquiries. I shall also invite you to map out in your minds how you might also develop such frameworks as the basis of your own action enquiries.

## **MY ACTION ENQUIRY**

### **What is my concern? What is my research question?**

My concern is that teachers are often positioned as implementers of other people's knowledge and theories, rather than being seen, and seeing themselves, as creators of their own knowledge and theories. I am concerned that teachers are often persuaded not to see their own knowledge as valuable, as having to look outside themselves for answers to their professional dilemmas, rather than having the confidence to believe that they already have those answers within their own practices. I am not alone in holding these concerns; others share them. The last time I was in this room, earlier this year, to celebrate the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the granting of Kilkenny's Charter, I was privileged to attend a presentation by President Mary McAleese, as shown in the picture below.

Place picture 3 here: Picture of President.

The President spoke about the need for people to know their practices and their histories, to celebrate their knowledge of where they come from, and their heritage. Her words were that, from her school days in the North, her then curriculum required her to know more about Bismark than Belfast. Like Seamus Heaney, however, she believes that knowledge of their history enables people better to stand their ground in relation to their own identity and beliefs. I share her concerns from my own Scots-Irish heritage, and my commitments involve giving back to Ireland some of what Ireland has given me; and fulfilling my own professional commitments, always to do with learning and knowledge creation, to enable practitioners to celebrate their capacity to theorise their practices and

produce their living educational theories of practice (Whitehead and McNiff 2006). The pictures above of the two graduations show what can happen when practitioners do so. Furthermore, this fits well with policy recommendations, such as those of the European Commission (2007), which I shall speak about shortly.

### **Why am I concerned?**

I am concerned because I believe passionately that practitioners, in all walks of life, should accept the responsibility, first, of doing good work, and second, of explaining how their work should be understood as 'good', and how they make judgements about these things. In this way they can explain how they hold themselves accountable for what they do. This fits with my overall commitments to personal accountability and a sense of gratitude for life, for being in the world.

I believe that all people are capable of thinking and speaking for themselves, and should do so, and should not be prevented from doing so. I believe that practitioners in higher education should support the classroom enquiries of teachers, not from a perspective that theirs is a better form of knowledge, but from their position as knowing what is required to have teachers' practical embodied knowledge validated and legitimated by the Academy, and sharing their knowledge with teachers. I believe in developing communities of collaborative practice and critical enquiry, where we share our knowledge from our different perspectives, and find ways of co-creating the kind of knowledge that will help us to make our present world a better place and the grounds for creating a better future.

You can see in what I am saying that I am setting out my educational values. When we ask questions such as 'Why am I concerned?' we articulate our educational values, and explain how these give meaning to our lives. We explain how we work to overcome the experience of ourselves as living contradictions (Whitehead 1989) when our values are denied in our practices; and how we work to live more fully in the direction of those educational values.

### **How do I gather data to show the situation as it is at the moment, and as it evolves?**

Having set out some of my educational values, I now need to show the current situation that grounds my concerns, in the sense that my values may or may not be realised in practice. I need to explain how I gather baseline data to show the reasons for my concerns, and how I continue to gather data to show the situation as it evolves. I will explain how I do this from (a) a personal perspective and (b) a policy perspective.

#### ***Personal perspectives***

Last week I was working with a group of university-based lecturers, encouraging them to see their work as a form of research. It is a key institutional requirement for all academic staffs to engage in research and publish their findings; and a major criterion for judging the quality of the work is whether it makes an original contribution to knowledge of the field. As so often happens, several colleagues

began looking outside themselves for a research topic, so I suggested that they investigate their own practices as their topics of enquiry. One colleague in particular was puzzled. 'What is special about my practice?' she asked. 'How can what I find out about myself be in any way an original contribution to knowledge of my field?'

This kind of question is asked too often. For the past seventeen years, since I first began working in Ireland, developing with others the professional education programmes that would enable 65 teachers to achieve their masters degrees (McNiff and Collins 1994) and eight to achieve their doctoral degrees through investigating their own practices, I have heard many teachers comment, 'I'm just a teacher. There is nothing special about me.' This kind of attitude is contrary to my own beliefs that we are all special, and that we all have something really valuable to share. We can all learn from one another, from the sharing of our stories of everyday practice. This belief inspires my own commitments to enable teachers and other practitioners to write their research stories, get them published, and influence thinking and practices in the wider world.

I can show, in this instance, how I gathered data, using a range of sources such as field notes and other documentary data, interviews and video recordings, about how teachers felt marginalised, and how they learned to value themselves and their educational contributions. In relation to teachers in Ireland, you can read teachers' stories in books such as McNiff and Collins (1994) and Collins and McNiff (1999), and in relation to teachers in South Africa you can see some of their accounts at

[http://www.jeanmcniff.com/khayelitsha/gerrie\\_AERA\\_2008.htm](http://www.jeanmcniff.com/khayelitsha/gerrie_AERA_2008.htm) and  
[http://www.jeanmcniff.com/khayelitsha/tsepo\\_AERA\\_2008.htm](http://www.jeanmcniff.com/khayelitsha/tsepo_AERA_2008.htm)

### *Policy perspectives*

I also gather data on a regular basis in relation to how global trends are influencing the development of new policies in relation to education and teacher education. Among the most important trends I would identify the following:

- The global epistemological shift in what counts as knowledge and who counts as a knower
- A focus on the contribution of work-based learning for economic sustainability
- A recognition of the need for more democratic forms of working in relation to the development of professional education and its assessment

*The global shift in what counts as knowledge and who counts as a knower* There is now wide recognition that individuals' personal practical knowledge is as valid and legitimate as traditional academic knowledge, which remains the most widely accepted form of knowledge in the western intellectual tradition. The relationship between 'pure' academic knowledge and practitioners' work-based knowledge was well illustrated in 1983 and 1995 by Donald Schön, who painted a graphic caricature of the 'high ground' of academia, where 'pure' knowledge and theory is created; and the 'swampy lowlands' of everyday practice, where 'ordinary' practitioners create practical knowledge. The dilemma for Schön was

that, although practitioners' practical knowledge is generally perceived as of greatest benefit to the problematics of daily life, normative understandings held that it should not, under any circumstances, be understood as 'real theory'. Furthermore, both academics and practitioners alike should accept this story: and of course they do, possibly because another powerful story of the western intellectual tradition was (and still is) that people should not question the idea that social status and 'official' knowledge automatically go together, i.e. the more official knowledge you have, the higher up the social rankings you are. Many influential scholars such as Bourdieu (1984) and Stephen Jay Gould (1996) have pointed out the misguided basis for this idea; but the idea is deeply entrenched in the western psyche, and therefore much emotional and intellectual work is needed to dislodge it.

A good deal of deconstruction work has been going on in the educational research community for many years, so Schön's caricature no longer holds universally, though it is still the situation in many places in the world. It is now widely accepted that practitioners' everyday knowledge should be seen as a valid form of knowledge creation, equal in status to academic knowledge. The kind of data available can be found in the accounts of teachers on my own website (<http://www.jeanmcniff.com>), and on influential websites such as <http://www.actionresearch.com> A glance at accounts such as those by Mary Hartog (<http://www.actionresearch.net/janespirophd.shtml>), who is a higher education tutor, and by Kevin Eames (<http://www.actionresearch.net/kevin.shtml>), who was a classroom teacher, indicates that both teachers' and academics' knowledge of practice can hold equal epistemological status.

However, while there is little argument today about the usefulness of practitioners' different kinds of knowledge, new important arguments have emerged, mainly to do with demonstrating the validity of different kinds of knowledge. I will come to this point shortly.

### *A focus on the contribution of work-based learning for economic sustainability*

Now let me show how documents in the public domain can act as data.

In 1994, Gibbons et al made a distinction between 'Mode 1' forms of knowledge, the conceptual, abstract forms I have just spoken about, and that tend to be located in higher education settings; and 'Mode 2' knowledge, the practical everyday knowledge of people working in workplaces. They explain that this traditional hierarchical relationship between different kinds of knowledge is being levelled out so that 'Mode 2' knowledge should be understood as equivalent in relevance and status to 'Mode 1' knowledge. I agree. I also think that the underpinning hierarchical arrangement of knowledge should be done away with too, and that the very notion of hierarchy should be deconstructed. This is already happening, especially in relation to a clear message in the literatures that workplace learning could be a major route to economic recovery and stability, as communicated, for example, by recommendations of the European Commission:

Teachers are supported to continue their professional development throughout their careers. They and their employers recognise the

importance of acquiring new knowledge, and are able to innovate and use new knowledge to inform their work.

(Commission of the European Communities, 2007: 12)

*A recognition of a need for more democratic forms of working in relation to the development of professional education and its assessment*

Yet while I agree with this view, I also emphasise that the realisation of this capacity for the contribution of all carries certain conditions, the most important of which are (1) an appreciation that teachers can create – not only acquire – new knowledge; and (2) power must be devolved by the Academy to practitioners, with an agreement for power sharing between academics and teachers in relation to issues of knowledge creation for the improvement of practice, and the capacity to make judgements about how the quality of practice should be judged. Yet this view raises other questions, about

1. first, what is judged, who judges it, and how it should be judged;
2. second, who is seen as qualified to make judgements, and on what basis.

It is, as Foucault (2001) says, not so much a question of what is known, but of who is legitimated as a knower, and who says. It is question of the relationship between knowledge and power. And this returns me to the idea of action research, and how these ideas are now embedded within policy documents, such as those of the European Commission who recommend that teachers should:

- continue to reflect on their practice in a systematic way
- undertake classroom research
- incorporate into their teaching the results of classroom and academic research
- evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching strategies and amend them accordingly

(Commission of the European Communities, 2007: 14)

I fully subscribe to this view, having been saying it since the 1980s (McNiff 1984, 1988). Yet I have also been calling not only for recommendations about what should be done, but also for practical strategies and methodologies for enabling the rhetoric to be turned into reality. The question becomes not only 'What should be done?' but also 'How is to be done?' and, most importantly, 'How is its quality and effectiveness to be judged?' – in other words, actively to engage with the practicalities of the questions and how teachers may be supported. And, from my own commitments to epistemological democracy, I also ask, 'By whom should such judgements be made, and who makes decisions about these things?'

**What can I do about the situation? What will I do?**

My response to the situation is to find ways of supporting the action enquiries of all practitioners, in work-based learning programmes, and also for higher degree

accreditation. I currently work with practitioners in a range of work-based settings. In Ireland I have worked with the Marino Institute of Education, on what was then a Schools-Based Action Research Project (McNiff and Collins 1994); with the National Centre for Technology in Education; with the National Centre for Guidance in Education; and with various schools to enable staffs to investigate their practices. I work with school-based teachers in global settings: in the UK, Malaysia, India, Canada, the USA, Iceland, South Africa, and Ireland.

I also work with practitioners in third level education in those same countries. Here in Ireland I have been working intensively with the University of Limerick, and have given lectures and workshops at many other third level institutions. I aim always to exercise my influence in practitioners' learning, as well as my own, to develop our views about the form of knowledge most appropriate for social transformation. Those higher education practitioners themselves influence the thinking of new and experienced teachers in schools and other education settings, and support them in producing their accounts of practice to form a robust knowledge base that has the potential to influence new policy formation. Thus I work for systemic influence; for I believe it is important to aim to influence all aspects of systems, as they constantly shift in relation to new internal and external developments.

I also gather data on an ongoing basis. I use a range of data gathering techniques, from a personal journal and email logs to video tape recordings that show the live action of practice. Some of these video recordings can be seen on YouTube, to share and celebrate the achievements of practitioners in all aspects of education systems. And from my data archive I then generate my evidence base that I use to test the validity of my emergent and provisional knowledge claims.

### **What kind of evidence can I produce to show that what I am doing is influencing someone's learning?**

A key debate in the international educational research community became prominent in the 1990s about how it is possible to demonstrate quality in educational research. The debate was intensified in relation to the question of how practitioner research should be judged when submitting scholarly work for consideration in evaluation exercises associated with funding, such as the Research Assessment Exercise in the UK. The point was made by influential scholars such as Furlong and Oancea (2005) that, if the practitioner research community wished to have its work judged in terms of its own appropriate criteria, the community itself should identify criteria and standards of judgement that would be agreed by the community. My colleague Jack Whitehead, I and others, have been working on this problem for some years; and we have put forward the idea that one's values can emerge as living criteria and standards by which we may judge the quality of our work and educational influences in learning (McNiff and Whitehead 2006; Whitehead and McNiff 2006).

A powerful knowledge base now exists, in the form of books, journal articles, websites, and other sources to show the realisation of this idea. The development of this knowledge base is in keeping with the call from Catherine Snow (2001), then President of the American Educational Research Association for a

systematisation of teachers' knowledge and the dissemination of their work. You can see some of the knowledge base on my own website, at <http://www.jeanmcniff.com>, where some of the masters dissertations and doctoral theses of teachers in Ireland stand as evidence that they can speak for themselves and offer their explanatory accounts of practice. Each of the accounts shows how teachers hold themselves accountable for their work as they strive for and achieve social justice for the young people in their care.

Here are some of the accounts:

Margaret Cahill (2006) *My Living Educational Theory of Inclusional Practice*. PhD thesis, University of Limerick. Retrieved 9 September 2009 from <http://www.jeanmcniff.com/margaretcahill/index.html>

Chris Glavey (2008) *Helping Eagles Fly – A Living Theory Approach to Student and Young Adult Leadership Development*. PhD thesis, University of Glamorgan. Retrieved 8 September 2009 from <http://www.jeanmcniff.com/theses/glavey.html>

Caitriona McDonagh (2007) *My living theory of learning to teach for social justice: How do I enable primary school children with specific learning disability (dyslexia) and myself as their teacher to realise our learning potentials?* PhD thesis, University of Limerick. Retrieved 9 September 2009 from <http://www.jeanmcniff.com/mcdonaghabstract.html>

Máirín Glenn (2006) *Working with collaborative projects: my living theory of a holistic educational practice*. PhD thesis, University of Limerick. Retrieved 9 September 2009 from <http://www.jeanmcniff.com/glennabstract.html>

Ray O'Neill (2008) *ICT as Political Action*. PhD thesis, University of Glamorgan. Retrieved 8 September 2009 from <http://www.jeanmcniff.com/theses/oneill.html>

Mary Roche (2007) *Towards a living theory of caring pedagogy: interrogating my practice to nurture a critical, emancipatory and just community of enquiry*. PhD thesis, University of Limerick. Retrieved 9 September 2009 from <http://www.jeanmcniff.com/MaryRoche/index.html>

Bernie Sullivan (2006) *A living theory of a practice of social justice: realising the right of Traveller children to educational equality*. PhD thesis, University of Limerick. Retrieved 9 September 2009 from <http://www.jeanmcniff.com/bernieabstract.html>

There is no reason why this kind of work should not inform professional education programmes for all teachers in Irish schools, as teachers and their supporters ask, 'How do I/we improve what I am/we are doing?' and development communities of practice (Wenger 1999) that engage in critical reflection on and modification of their practices.

## **How do I communicate the significance of my action research?**

Furthermore, by asking this kind of question, teacher professional education moves from its currently dominant form of a focus on skills development and the transfer of existing knowledge to a view that engages critically with the transformation of existing knowledge into new knowledge that is relevant and essential for moving the field forward. A key issue here in relation to explaining the significance of what one has done is to appreciate that the practice of placing oneself at the centre of one's own enquiry, and explaining how you are influencing learning, is not a question of arrogance or self-aggrandisement but of showing how we hold ourselves accountable for our work and exercise extreme caution in what we say and do. Action research therefore enables people to find ways of evaluating their work that demonstrate their own commitments to accountability and the development of a good social order.

## **How do I ensure that any judgements I make are reasonably fair and accurate?**

I explained above how knowledge claims need to be subjected to the critical feedback of peers. A key methodological strategy of action research is to present one's findings to a group of peers, acting as critical reviewers and evaluators, and invite comment on the potential validity of the claims under scrutiny. This means engaging in appropriate validation procedures, in two ways.

### ***Personal validation***

The first form of validation takes the form of personal appraisal in relation to whether one is living one's values in practice. In my case, do I satisfy myself that I am living in the direction of my educational values? Can I explain how I test the validity of my knowledge claims against my own evidence base, in relation to how my values come to act as my living criteria and standards of judgement?

### ***Peer validation***

The second form of validation takes the form of seeking the critical feedback of yourselves to my claims and its accompanying evidence base, and in relation to criteria such as those articulated by Habermas (1976) and Lather (1991). In relation to the criteria identified by Habermas, do I show that my claim is

- comprehensible, in that I am communicating my ideas in a way that is understandable and speaks to your own experience?
- truthful, in that I am prepared to test the validity of my claims against a public evidence base?
- sincere, in that I can show how I try to live in the direction of my values over time?
- socially, historically, politically and culturally aware, in that I show that I pay due regard for what is going on in the contexts I am working in?

In relation to the criteria identified by Lather (1991), do I show that I can reflect critically on my own thinking, and modify my practice in the light of more advanced critique?

## **How do I modify my practices and ideas in light of my evaluation?**

So I am now requesting your critical responses to my ideas, and will listen, and where appropriate, act on your advice. Do you think I should continue working as I am working, or should I change? Do I also see areas where I could improve? I like the ideas of philosophers such as Said (1997) who says that there are no endings, only new beginnings. All the moments of my life are new beginnings. What do I begin now? What do I do differently, in light of my new knowledge?

I have recently identified one area where I feel improvement is essential, which is about supporting practitioners in writing and producing research reports; and this forms the beginnings of a new action reflection cycle.

### **How do I write a good quality report?**

I have become acutely aware of the need for practitioners to produce reports that will enable them to do justice to their research by writing in such a way that people will want to engage with their ideas (McNiff and Whitehead 2009b). I am now focusing my attention on how to do this. And so I begin a new enquiry, with a new focus; and I show, through this practice, how the 'end' becomes a beginning, a new question that takes the form 'How do I ...?'

### **Conclusion**

And this is what I do, as I move forward through life, in which each new day presents new opportunities for educational influence. On Monday I fly to the Middle East, where I hope to work with practitioners, investigating how they can improve their practice through personal enquiry, and produce their descriptions and explanations of practice in the form of their living educational theories, that show how they hold themselves accountable for their work. I work consistently to encourage people to have the courage to demonstrate their ontological, epistemological and social accountability, in the interests of contributing to a better social and world order than the one we have at present. Doing what I do is my choice. We all have choices, and it is up to each one of us to make the choices we can stand over and that help us to give meaning to our lives.

Thank you.

Jean McNiff, 10 October 2009.

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