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Writing and
Doing Action
Research



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ONE

What Do You Need to Know About Action Research in Order to Write it?

This chapter outlines what you need to know about action research in order to write it. However, these days this is not quite as straightforward as it used to be, because nowadays it is not possible to say definitively what action research is and what it means, given that there are many different action research traditions, all with varying perspectives. Therefore if you wish to write with authority and understanding you first need to know what the traditions are and what they say.

To help appreciate the different perspectives, first look at what Sowell (1987) has to say about a conflict of visions.

Sowell says that people often have different kinds of social visions: he calls one of them a constrained vision and the other an unconstrained vision. People with a constrained vision tend to see situations as given and closed, so learn how to work effectively within them. An unconstrained vision allows people to see possibilities and opportunities: they exercise personal and collective agency to realise them. A constrained vision errs towards orthodoxy; it is about being, and looks for answers and outcomes. An unconstrained vision is adventurous and on the lookout for new ideas; it is about becoming, at home with openness, optimism and critique.

This chapter looks at how these different visions influence the traditions of action research, and how different people with different visions have at times appropriated and misappropriated action research for their own purposes. The chapter covers the following:

1. The practice of action research as a practice and the study of action research as a topic
2. The misappropriation of action research
3. What does this mean for you as an action research writer?

First, let's consider the differences between the practice of action research as a practice and the study of action research as a topic, and what they mean.

The Practice of Action Research as a Practice and the Study of Action Research as a Topic

Action research is universally acknowledged as about change, collaborative and democratic practices, and a commitment towards humans' and other entities' well-being, including animals and the living planet. Although these days there are multiple traditions in action research, most agree on certain goals. These include:

(a) the generation of new knowledge, (b) the achievement of action-oriented outcomes, (c) the education of both researcher and participants, (d) results that are relevant to the local setting, and (e) a sound and appropriate research methodology. (Herr and Anderson, 2005: 54)

No matter how action research is done, or who does it, these matters are taken as standard. However, there are two key considerations.

First, the fact that action research is about collaborative and democratic practices makes it political. This is nothing unusual; all research is political, with social intent, though the intent may vary from helping others to controlling them. Action research is political because it aims to influence processes of change. This means engaging with different forms of politics, including the politics of research in general, of the social context, of the researcher and of the potential reader. These political contexts form backstories to the main stories of action research. To write and do action research successfully you need to know what the backstories say as well as the main public stories. You also need to think about what influences your own personal backstories as well as the stories you tell publicly.

Second, the rhetoric and practices of action researchers can differ. While many write about the democratic, collaborative, emancipatory and other principles of action research, their frequently territorial practices sometimes deny the rhetoric. This can make life difficult for scholars who take what they read in good faith, and so don't know which story to believe.

To make sense of it all, think about the differences between the practice of action research as a practice and the study of action research as a topic, and how these are communicated.

The practice, study and communication of action research

The practice of action research as a practice and the study of action research as a topic are different and are communicated in different ways. Briefly:

- The practice of action research as a practice refers to what people do, individually and collectively, in particular social situations when they inquire into how they can find ways to improve what they are doing. This is a process of personal and

collective inquiry. They communicate these stories through oral and written texts, often emphasising personal and collective struggles and achievements.

- The study of action research as a topic refers to how an observer observes, describes and explains what the people involved in those social situations do. How the observer studies this depends on how they position themselves in relation to the situation, whether as outsider or insider researcher (see below), and what their aims and purposes are. The researcher is usually from higher education and uses a traditional form of academic writing.
- The communication of action research depends on how writers see action research, whether as practices in the life-world or as a topic of study within a particular scholarly tradition. They communicate their understanding of action research through the texts they produce.

Here is a closer analysis.

The practice of action research as a practice

The practice of action research as a practice has been around throughout history, long before people called it action research. At a basic methodological level it can be seen as a general strategy that people and other organisms use when faced with dilemmas, puzzles and problems. It looks like this:

- Identify an issue that needs attention or investigation.
- Be reasonably clear why it needs attention.
- Show to oneself, and probably others, what the issue and its contexts look like.
- Imagine what can be done about it.
- Try out a possible strategy and see what happens.
- Change practice and thinking in light of the evaluation.

This evolutionary process is evident across the living world. When a plant or animal is under attack from a predator it tries to find a way of defending itself. When one person loves another, they try to find ways to get the other to reciprocate. When people get stuck in routines or lose momentum they try to find ways of leveraging themselves into new directions. All living organisms, including people, do this: they find ways of staying alive and well. In the human domain it is especially visible in the social world, and especially in processes of social and technological evolution. Examples of social evolution are judiciary systems, health services and the recognition of human rights. Examples of technological evolution are pitchforks, computers and cars. People have acted to make their lives more productive and fulfilling through whatever means are available. A good example is the military: a General sends out scouts on reconnaissance. They bring back intelligence, which is acted on to inform strategy. The strategy is implemented, and gains and losses evaluated. New strategies are planned, and the cycle begins again.

The practice of action research as a practice may therefore be seen in the process of life itself where everything is in a process of evolution. One event transforms into another in perpetual motion: the oak tree emerges from the

acorn where it has lain phylogenetically dormant throughout history. Appreciating these processes means adopting an attitude to the world and, instead of simply taking things for granted and seeing them as objects in one's space, seeing everything as in a process of evolution.

If anyone using this strategy were to articulate it, they would say something like the following:

- What do I wish to investigate? What is my research issue? What is my concern?
- Why do I wish to investigate it? Why is this an issue? Why am I concerned?
- What kind of data can I produce to show the situation as it is?
- What can I do about it? What are my options for action?
- What will I do? How will I do it?
- How will I continue to gather data and generate evidence to show the situation as it develops?
- How will I ensure that any conclusions I come to are reasonable and justifiable?
- How will I modify my practices in light of my evaluation?
- How will I explain the significance of my research in action?

From this perspective, action research can be understood as about people doing everyday actions and studying what they are doing as they try to live productive and meaningful lives. They do this in mundane settings such as doing the shopping, or in more recognised practice settings such as nursing and machine engineering. Practices may be formalised as projects but not necessarily so. Whatever the setting, the case remains that people work imaginatively and collaboratively in an emergent, developmental way. People also use symbolic forms, including language, to make what they are doing explicit: they offer descriptions and explanations for their actions, as well as their reasons and purposes. This process is known as theorising: they explain the significance of their actions for different constituencies, and imagine ways in which they could have done things differently. In this way they can develop cooperative and shared forms of learning that can facilitate the processes of social evolution. Action research may therefore be seen as a form of ethics in action, when ethics is understood as 'a discourse for rethinking our relations to other people' (Todd, 2003: 1). It is always about people thinking, working and creating knowledge together, a commitment towards improvement, that is, a move towards however those people understand 'the good'. It is not knowledge *about* ethics so much as the practice of ethics in action.

These processes are communicated through texts in the form of stories. The Mills and Boon industry, for example, takes it as a standard model: boy meets girl, they fall in love, seemingly insurmountable misunderstandings develop (usually through external circumstances), and one party takes strategic action to resolve the dilemmas. Misunderstandings are clarified, conflicts resolved and lovers reunited. The recipe works, time and again. A book is written and sells widely, helped because the transformational dialectic of its plot is communicated explicitly through the structure of the text.

The study of action research as a topic

The study of action research as a topic also has a long history, extending formally over the last hundred years or so and informally long before that. It adopts a range of forms, from personal accounts of learning and practice to narratives about other people's practices. How it is told depends on the positioning of the storyteller, whether they include themselves in the story or tell it as a story about other people.

In the 1930s the process began to be formalised when it was given the name of action research by Lewin (1946) and Collier (1945) (see Noffke, 1997b; 2009). Action research became a noun, a thing you speak about, not a verb, something you do (in the same way, as above, that the study of ethics is *about* ethics whereas the practice of ethics is what you do in relation with others). This formalisation of action research was a critical turning point, for it meant that while the practice of action research would still be located in the everyday social world, the study of action research would now move into institutions, the main institution being the university. Because the job of academics is to look out for new ideas and trends, they immediately saw the potentials of action research as a possibly fertile topic for development, so they appropriated it.

This appropriation of action research by the academy had specific advantages. Once a topic is identified as a university topic, it is immediately seen as legitimate and worthy of public discussion, especially since the university is still seen as the most powerful body for legitimating what counts as knowledge and who counts as a knower. Moving action research into higher education therefore had positive and negative consequences, depending on how you see things. On the one hand it meant that the development of action research was legitimised across the professions and in a range of fields. On the other, it meant that action research could be misappropriated by academic elites who would adapt it to their own uses, and potentially distort its democratic potentials. And this is what has happened – and what you, as a person doing action research with a view to publishing your work, need to appreciate and engage with.

Staying with the positive outcomes before considering the need for critical perspectives, the take-up of action research by higher education has resulted in a broad action research family with a rich heritage, who write different kinds of texts.

The communication of action research

Most action research texts are written by researchers working usually in higher education settings: the aim is to provide theoretical resources. Most higher education researchers write about action research as a topic of study, a discipline, and often use practitioners' workplace accounts as evidence to

show the validity of their theoretical ideas. Most established researchers agree that the practice of action research has a rich heritage; Popplewell and Hayman (2012, online) say:

Action Research has not emerged from a single academic discipline. Rather, Action Research approaches have slowly developed over time within a wide range of disciplines and professions including education, psychology, social policy, community development and international development.

(Note in this extract how 'Action Research' has become a capitalised proper noun, a notional 'it', rather than a set of practices done in real-time and real-space by real people. This is an increasingly common practice in the literatures.)

Focusing on this diversity, here is part of the abstract for a presentation by Steve Gordon and Jovita Ross-Gordon (2014), both from Texas State University, at the 2014 Value and Virtue in Practice-Based Research conference, held at York St John University, where they speak about the history of the different traditions of action research.

Although some scholars and practitioners treat action research as a single concept, there are in fact multiple approaches to practitioner action research, including technical action research, practical action research, participatory action research, self-reflective inquiry, appreciative inquiry, collaborative autobiography and critical action research. These different approaches have varied histories, operating principles, terminologies, phases, and techniques, but what really makes them different from each other are the underlying values that drive them. For an obvious example, critical action research is based directly on critical theory. Esposito and Evans-Winters (2007), proponents of critical action research, believe that 'issues of power, privilege, and difference have to be central to educational research' (p. 222), and 'action research has to take up issues of race, ethnicity, and gender. We cannot conduct research outside of these contexts' (p. 225). Other approaches to action research tend to have multiple theoretical bases. For instance, appreciative inquiry has roots in both social constructivist theory and postmodernism (Bushe, 2011). Also, different versions of the same approach may be based on different values. For example, different versions of participatory action research are grounded in constructivism (Hansen, 2004), critical theory (Torre, 2009), and postmodernism (McCartan, Schubotz and Murphy, 2012).

Virtually all writers in the field acknowledge this diversity of action research. Many locate its historical antecedents in a particular reductionist intellectual tradition espoused by different scientific and social communities. Flood (2001) writes that action research emerged formally during the twentieth century through a critique of this reductionism. He says: 'Reductionism generates knowledge and understanding of phenomena by breaking them down into their constituent parts and then studying these simple elements in terms of their cause and effect' (p. 133), whereas action research is a form of systems thinking.

With systems thinking the belief is that the world is systemic, which means that phenomena are understood to be an emergent property of an interrelated whole. An emergent property of a whole is said to arise where a phenomenon cannot be fully comprehended in terms only of constituent parts. 'The whole is greater than the sum of its parts', is the popularized phrase that explains emergence. (Flood, 2001: 133)

The main categories of texts where you will find studies of action research and some of the most influential voices include handbooks, textbooks and journal articles. Here are some examples.

Handbooks of action research Handbooks that show the diversity of the contexts and fields of action research include:

Reason and Bradbury (2001, 2008), who say:

We see [action research] as a 'family' of ... approaches – a family which sometimes argues and falls out, may at times ignore some of its members, has certain members who wish to dominate, yet a family which sees itself as different from other forms of research, and is certainly willing to pull together in the face of criticism or hostility from supposedly 'objective' ways of doing research. (2001: xxiii)

In their (2008) second edition, they position action research not so much as a methodology as:

An orientation to inquiry that seeks to create participative communities of inquiry in which qualities of engagement, curiosity and question posing are brought to bear on significant practical issues. (2008: 1)

They emphasise it as 'a practice of participation': 'Action research does not start from a desire to changing others "out there", although it may eventually have that result, rather it starts from an orientation of change *with* others' (p. 1: italics in original).

Noffke and Somekh (2009) similarly emphasise the participatory nature of action research, especially regarding issues about the ownership and legitimacy of forms of knowledge:

Action research has been seen as a means of adding to knowledge generated in the academy via traditional methods, but it has also been seen as a distinctive way of knowing. This point is directly related to whether action research is seen as producing knowledge for others to use, or whether it is primarily a means for professional development. (2009: 10)

They emphasise how important it is that:

those using the term action research ... are clear in their assumptions about the kind of knowledge(s) they seek to enhance, the traditions they feel are part of their work, the ends towards which their research efforts are aimed, and the social movements with which they articulate. (2009: 20)

Chevalier and Buckles (2013) give a wide-ranging account, explaining how science may be seen in different ways, including an 'orientation to society and the common good on a global scale' (p. 1). They propose 'concrete ways to reconnect knowledge making in the academic world with the diversity of perspectives on reality and ways to co-create meaning' (p. 1). Participatory action research, for them, 'is an expression of science that assumes reflectivity and self-experimentation in history' (p. 4).

Rowell, Bruce, Shosh and Riel (in preparation, 2016) say that their handbook provides 'a portrait of theoretical perspectives and practical action research activity around the world, while attending to the cultural, political, socio-historical and ecological contexts that localize, shape and characterize action research. Cross-national issues of networking, as well as challenges, tensions and issues associated with the transformative power of action research are explored from multiple perspectives' (see <https://sites.google.com/site/interhandbookar/home>).

One of the editors, Margaret Riel, is Director of the Center for Collaborative Action Research (<http://cadres.pepperdine.edu/ccar/>), and has taught action research for over a decade at Pepperdine University. She is currently working with a team of dedicated action researchers to develop the Action Research Network of the Americas (<http://www.arnacconnect.org>). Margaret's passion is to develop resources to help practitioners learn to be action researchers. One of the many superb resources she has produced is a set of action research tutorials (<http://ccar.wikispaces.com/ar+tutorial>). Each tutorial includes a 10–15 minute video, a set of activities and a set of resources to support the activities. Any instructor or student in an action research programme could use some or all of these activities as part of their study. Additionally teachers could use Action Research Learning Circles (<http://onlinelearningcircles.org>) to support collaborative inquiry at their schools.

Textbooks about action research Textbooks about action research are everywhere. Whereas in the 1980s there was a handful, today the action research textbook industry is massive. Some of the best are as follows.

Greenwood and Levin (2007) work in industrial, community and higher education settings in Europe and the US. They share a 'strong commitment to the democratisation of knowledge, learning, and self-managed social change' and see their work as about offering, 'as skillfully as possible, the space and tools for democratic social change' (p. 9). For them, action research was initiated by Kurt Lewin in the US and developed in the field of industrial democracy, developed both by the Tavistock Institute in the UK and in the Industrial Democracy Project in Norway. Since then it has had international influence

involving 'broad cadres of participants' in dealing with 'pertinent and highly conflictive social problems' (p. 34), as a feature of what has been called Participatory Action Research (PAR). They also espouse Reason's ideas about human inquiry, and Heron's (1996) ideas about cooperative inquiry (see Reason and Rowan's 1981 *Human Inquiry: A Sourcebook of New Paradigm Research*, which is still, for me, one of the best texts in the field).

Burns (2007) in the UK focuses on the idea of systemic action research. Like others who share his vision (including those who draw on complexity theory, including Capra, 1996; Johnson, 2002; and myself, 2000 and 2013a), he speaks about the interrelated nature of social systems, especially in management and organisational development practices, emphasising the need for relational forms of knowing and being.

Coghlan and Brannick (2001) in Ireland focus on understanding organisational life through an action research lens. They see this as when 'a member of an organization undertakes an explicit research role in addition to the normal functional role which that member holds in the organization' (p. xii). I see action research in organisations differently (McNiff, 2000), involving all members of the organisation in researching their practices and negotiating how they can improve themselves, individually and as a collective, for the benefit of all.

The study and theorisation of action research has perhaps been most fully worked out in the fields of education and professional education, and nursing and healthcare. Some of the most influential texts are as follows.

Action research in education **Noffke** (1997b) gives an account of the development of action research in education in 1950s' United States. Like other writers, she identifies John Collier as a founding father of the term 'action research'. She also draws a distinction between the practice of action research in social settings and the study of action research in higher education settings, citing the work of Stephen Corey (1953) who brought critical insights to the potential uses and abuses of action research.

Herr and Anderson (2005) outline the uses of action research for the following fields:

- Organisational and development learning: citing Greenwood and Levin (2007: see above).
- Action science: citing Argyris et al. (1985) and Argyris and Schön (e.g. 1974), about how organisations learn.
- Participatory research: citing Gaventa and Horton (1981) and Freire (1970), who use the term 'Participatory Action Research' to refer to the participation by community in the research field, now further developed by researchers such as Stringer (2007).
- Participatory evaluation: emphasising the need for the involvement of those being evaluated: see also Kushner (2000).

- The work of John Dewey (e.g. 1938) as a major influence, especially his idea of inquiry as a process of identification of problematic areas, which influenced Schön's development of 'reflecting-in-action' (1983) and the need for a new epistemology for a new scholarship (1995).
- The teacher-as-researcher movement in Britain: developed by Stenhouse in the UK (1975), and later by Elliott (1991; 2007) and his colleagues, including Carr and Kemmis (1986) (see also the re-issued *The Action Research Planner*, Kemmis et al., 2014).
- The practitioner research movement in North America, grounded in the original vision of emancipatory and collaborative action research.
- Self-study and auto-ethnography, promoted by authors such as Bullough and Pinnegar (2001; 2004).

Action research in nursing and health care This is a burgeoning field. Early researchers include the following:

Angie Titchen and Alison Binnie in the UK pioneered action research in nursing (see Titchen, 1993 and Binnie and Titchen, 1998; 1999), grounded in real-life experience. The work of Gary Rolfe (1996; 1998) has also had extensive influence.

Patricia Benner, in the US, working with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, has been especially influential in calling for the development of a new knowledge base of nursing through action research (Benner, 1984; Benner et al., 2010).

Action research in nursing is hugely important and widely used (see McDonnell and McNiff, in preparation).

Journal articles Who to include? Where to begin? So many people, so little space. To cite them all would need a book in itself. Consider some names: Marilyn Cochran-Smith, Bob Dick, John Elliott, Wilfred Carr, Allan Feldman, Stephen Kemmis, Ann Lieberman, Susan Lytle, Bridget Somekh ...

Blogs, websites, YouTube ... Then there are blogs, websites, fanzines, webcams, YouTube presentations ... and it goes on and on. A wonderful tower, not of Babel because we usually understand one another, but definitely a carnival, a veritable heteroglossia of voices.

In summary, many action research texts are available, and there is no one *Big Book of Action Research*. This can present difficulties for researchers, especially those new to the field, given the many conflicting and contradictory messages about what it is and how it should be done. It means you need to be alert to the hidden messages that seek to persuade you to buy this brand rather than that one. Gone are the 1940s' and 1950s' days when you could have gone into the action research shop to find only one or two bottles of action research on the shelf. Today you can find dozens of different brands, so you need to know what is on offer before you buy one. They also mix and merge with other bottles: sometimes it is difficult to tell what is action research and what is, say, auto-ethnography or narrative inquiry.

However, any text calling itself an action research text agrees common themes, which include the following.

Common themes in action research

- Action research is collaborative and democratic. All voices are included, including the disenfranchised and marginalised.
- It prioritises the well-being of the other (see Buber, 1937; Macmurray, 1957; 1961).
- It is values-oriented: values pluralism is respected and accommodated. (This presents dilemmas about judging quality in practice: would Al Capone be accepted as an action researcher when he claims that he has researched how to bring law and order to the streets of Chicago, without acknowledging the well-being of others?)
- It is self-reflective: see the work of Ghaye (2010) and Winter (1989). Both outline how self-reflection should be a criterion for judging the value of action research.
- It is goal oriented towards social action: see, for example, Bridget Somekh's (2006) ideas about action research for agency in organisational and social change.
- It is open ended, evolutionary and transformational: all things emerge over time as new versions of themselves, adapted to their conditions and contexts (Flood, 2001).
- It is situated and always contextualised: nothing comes out of nothing. Action research links with the literatures of situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998).
- It is critical: this is also taken as a criterion for judging quality in action research: does the researcher show that they have interrogated their own situatedness when reaching conclusions about the quality of their practices and research?

This need for criticality now becomes a major theme because it has special implications for when you write action research.

The need for criticality in writing action research

When you study action research texts and write your own, be aware of the following issues:

- Attitudes towards others in action research.
- Researcher positionality.
- Human interests.
- The need for critical analysis.

Attitudes towards others and different approaches

Be aware that different writers adopt different attitudes towards others in action research, which influences their approaches, and be clear about your own attitudes and approaches. Torbert (2001), Chandler and Torbert (2003) and Reason and Bradbury (2001) speak about first-, second- and third-person research/practice:

- First-person action research is about individual researchers enquiring into their own practices; they produce descriptions and explanations for what they are doing.
- Second-person action research is when a researcher works face-to-face with others in issues of mutual concern.
- Third-person action research extends the research field to wider groupings, such as organisations or international groupings (see Reason and Bradbury, 2001: 6).

Ask yourself: How do you position yourself in relation to others in the research field? Do you study them, or yourself, or you in relation with them? This raises questions about researcher positionality.

Researcher positionality

Are you an insider in the research situation or an outsider who observes the situation, or somewhere between? Herr and Anderson (2005: 32–45) identify the following positionalities:

- Insider, studying their own practices: this involves self-study, autobiography, ethnomethodology.
- Insider, working collaboratively with other insiders.
- Insider, working collaboratively with outsiders.
- Reciprocal collaboration between insider-outsider teams.
- Outsiders working collaboratively with insiders.
- Outsiders study insiders.
- Multiple positionalities.

Decisions about how researchers position themselves are also influenced by whose interests are being served by doing the research.

Human interests

Ask yourself whose interests you serve when you do research in action. Habermas (1976; 1987) sets out three main forms of human interests: technical, practical and emancipatory:

- Technical interests focus on the production of technical rational knowledge with the aim of controlling the natural and social world. Knowledge becomes instrumental activity that emphasises causal explanations.
- Practical interests focus on meaning-making and interpretation, in order to understand the social life-world and its historical and political emergence. The aim is to make practical judgements, usually through hermeneutical methods such as discourse analysis.
- Emancipatory interests help people to understand the influences that lead them to think and act as they do, to liberate their own thinking and resist closure. The aim is to help people take control of their lives by questioning the stories they are told and persuaded to believe (see also Carr and Kemmis's 1986 *Becoming Critical* and their 2005 'Staying critical').

- In my *Action Research: Principles and Practice* (McNiff, 2002 and 2013a), I added a relational interest, about the need for dialogical relationships, where people talk together to improve their learning as the basis of improving their life-worlds.

So, in any discussion about human interests we always have to ask critical questions: Whose interest? Whose theory? Whose voice? Who says? Whose vision? These questions are especially important when you write your text, because it shows how you position yourself and think about the political norms of the action research tradition you have chosen to work in. It also shows how you think about your historical, social and economic situatedness, the form of language you use and the language game you participate in. This is especially important when you claim your knowledge as the truth. Remember what Foucault says:

Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault, 1980: 131)

Where and how do you position yourself in relation to other people in your research, and how do you communicate this? Be aware also that higher education institutions have specific rules about whose voices may be heard, and under what conditions. Often, the messages that texts communicate, or are allowed to communicate, depend on what kinds of discourses are legitimated in universities and how these are communicated through the orthodoxies of writing.

In 2010 I was invited by a group of Norwegian health professionals from the University of Tromsø (hereafter UiT), the Arctic University of Norway, to support their work in learning about and writing action research, with a view to embedding action research in the university. We regarded our work together as an action enquiry, and gathered considerable amounts of data to monitor progress, many in the form of audiotape recordings. Here is part of the transcript of one of the conversations. We are speaking about what counts as theory in academia. Margareta Törnqvist, a member of the group and a teacher in occupational theory, says:

For us in the former Teaching Colleges, unless we adopted traditional theoretical ways, we couldn't get into the academic world. This meant that we lost touch with practices. Professional learning was about applying abstract forms of theory to practice. We became good at discussing theory but not so good at the craft. In my view you have to compare and interlink theory and craft. I believe that action research could be a valuable way of doing this. (McNiff et al., 2013)

Now let's look at some of the more disturbing outcomes of the appropriation of action research, which then amounts to its misappropriation.

The Misappropriation of Action Research

The term 'appropriation' means to make an existing object one's own, such as when singers and storytellers adapt existing works to their own style. In legalistic terms appropriation can become misappropriation when it uses someone else's work, which then becomes theft. In terms of the publication of texts, it becomes plagiarism.

A good example of misappropriation can be seen in the game of football.

Football (soccer in the United States) is considered by many to have been played informally everywhere throughout history, but in its more codified sense had its origins in England. It started life as an open-space activity, frequently played in the streets for entertainment. It is essentially a democratic activity: you can make a ball from any available material, find a space to play, mark out goals and negotiate sides. You play the game by the rules you know or create with the other players.

During the nineteenth century, clubs and associations were formed to develop the game, agree rules and set up associations and leagues. Notwithstanding, football remained open to everybody and most young males would have played football in some way or another. It has been said that you could shout down any coalmine in the north of England and an England centre forward would pop his head up.

Things began to change in recent times. Groups of local business people began to sponsor teams and gradually took ownership of them by becoming directors. The game itself began to be mediated through television. However, with the end of free-to-air television, the means of communication tightened so that distinct groupings came to own the media. They in turn started bidding to have sole access to top-league football matches and gradually took ownership of football. The money they paid soon became the main source of income for the top line football teams. Kick-off times were changed to suit international television coverage.

Consequently a small number of teams commanded a very high income. At the same time the governing bodies of football, such as FIFA, had the power to decide where tournaments would be played; sometimes individuals were found to have influenced their placing. The ownership of football began to be vested in the hands of small elite bodies. They supported and elected each other into the international football associations, formed background deals, and pledged support to each other and to the huge pay-to-view television channels. They bought football clubs as an investment but had no particular interest in developing a long-term relationship with the club: some even borrowed against the assets of the club to purchase it.

Having thus been leveraged, the clubs often found themselves in debt to the owners. Ticket prices for clubs increased, thus pricing professional (now corporatised) football away from the working-class people from whom it had sprung. A new type of supporter emerged, often referred to derisively as members of 'the prawn sandwich' brigade by more traditional supporters. The relationship of many young people with football moved from their personal engagement with the game to watching the match on cable or pay-to-view television. If you walk past open spaces in towns today you will not see many youngsters kicking a football. Football has gone from being a participative activity that involved a large number of people as players and supporters to a spectator sport where people now cheer for multi-million-pound teams, often playing at a far geographical remove from where the supporters live. To maintain continuous and immediate success, many clubs buy in expensive players who are paid huge bonuses, while focusing less on developing footballers from scratch. The demand is for outcomes; processes have largely been forgotten.

You can now get a degree and executive education in the football business and sports industries. Practitioners who attend such courses may actually know just as much about football as the lecturers who teach them, but to have their knowledge legitimated they need to go to university to buy it back in an appropriately packaged form.

Gibson (1993) tells a similar story, how American football has become commodified through the National Football League (NFL). He cites Oriard (1980) as saying:

Perhaps the powers that run the NFL simply do not understand the nature of the game. Perhaps they have become so concerned with packaging and marketing it that they have forgotten it is not merely a product to be pressed on consumers, but a sport that for many Americans has value and meaning unrelated to its investment potential. Perhaps the NFL will slowly but surely kill football because it forgot, or never knew, what football truly means.

(Oriard, 1980, cited in Gibson, 1993: 43)

My concern is that some people in traditionalist universities will kill action research by packaging it in a form acceptable to themselves, while forgetting, or never taking the trouble, to learn through experience what action research means in practice. You can learn action research only by doing it, not simply by learning about it. However, I wish to emphasise here that all is not lost, for members of universities themselves have the power to change the situation, and many are doing so. But to do this systemically would mean an epistemological and professional paradigm shift, a revolution, because it would mean:

- changing the underpinning epistemology of traditionalist universities (Schön, 1995) and their form of logic, from technical rational to relational;
- changing the self-perceptions of academic staff, from authorised knower to unknowing learner, and from external to insider researcher;

- changing the relationship among participants from separatist ('I-them') to inclusive ('we'); and
- changing the form of institutional discourses from didactic ('I tell you') to dialogical ('We learn together, with and from one another').

Achieving this revolution is a hard task, yet it is being done, in many places around the world, as the case studies in this book show. It is a case of how small acts of resistance (Crawshaw and Jackson, 2010) can lead to big acts of transformation. You can be a participant in the revolution, but it carries implications and responsibilities, as spelt out here.

What Does this Mean for You as a Practitioner-Researcher?

Some of the main implications are that you need to develop your knowledge about different aspects of doing and writing action research; this in turn involves engaging with the politics of academic writing as a means of academic legitimation. You need to ensure that you know what you are doing, so that you can communicate the processes involved in doing action research within a literary canon that was originally created by social scientists for reporting work in the sciences and social sciences.

Here are the main things you need to know as a practitioner-researcher, a researcher-scholar, and a writer.

What you need to know

As a practitioner-researcher you need to know:

- What counts as action research.
- Why you have chosen to do action research.
- Debates about action research.
- How you justify your positioning as an action researcher.

As a scholar you need to know:

- What scholarship means (engage critically with texts).
- What critical engagement means.
- What texts do and don't do.
- Different kinds of texts.

As a researcher-scholar you need to know:

- What counts as research.
- What counts as action research.
- Issues of ontology, epistemology, methodology and ways of demonstrating validity.
- Which variants you choose and why – i.e. you need to justify your positionality.

- Critical engagement with the literatures – identifying conceptual and theoretical frameworks.
- What a dissertation or thesis is and does.

As a researcher-writer you need to know:

- How to write for a reader.
- How to produce a text that will keep your reader on your side.
- How to produce a text that will secure accreditation.
- How to get published.

As a dissertation or thesis writer you need to know:

- What your examiner is looking for and how they will judge your thesis.
- How to communicate the authenticity and legitimacy of your positioning in the field.
- How you can defend your thesis and the choices you have made.

Armed with this knowledge, here are some of the things you need to do.

What you need to do

You need to develop strong intellectual resources to help you withstand pressure to conform to orthodox thinking, practices and writing. You can learn a lot from reading and engaging with public discussions about the nature, origins and uses of knowledge of action research, and about democratic and egalitarian movements.

You need to develop your own capacity for thinking and speaking in a dialogical way. This comes naturally for some people; others, including myself, have to work at it. It means always being aware of what effect your words are going to have on the listener or reader, a constant sensitivity to the dynamics of social interchanges and how each positions the other in the discourses.

You need to influence the development of a new epistemology of inquiry, where thinking is seen as emergent, commensurable with the emergent phenomena it encounters and tries to make sense of. Epistemologies (how we think) influence practices (how we act), and practices influence the development of new cultures of practice. By changing your own form of epistemology, you can influence the development of institutional and organisational epistemologies towards learning and the development of unconstrained visions. Research becomes learning; a research-led institution encourages all its participants to learn with and from one another as a life-long strategy.

You need to learn how to write for publication. This means developing the courage to engage with the politics of writing, finding ways to produce texts of such high quality within orthodox structures that you will be able to influence the establishment from within. Further, you will impress others and find that they become your allies who wish to learn with and from you. This happened with *The Muppet Show*. It was originally ridiculed, but when it gained influence and television ratings, anyone who is anyone wanted to be

on it. You need to adopt a *Muppet Show* strategy to doing and writing action research, so that your star will shine in its ascendancy, and others will join you for the prestige and the fun of it all.

SUMMARY

This chapter has explored the differences between the practice of action research as a practice and the study of action research as a topic. Benefits from the study of action research as a topic include the production of a range of resources such as handbooks and textbooks, journal articles and online resources. Disadvantages include the misappropriation of action research such that it can lose touch with its roots. You are encouraged to develop your academic and political capacity to engage with contemporary debates and speak from the authority of your own experience.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

Here is a checklist of reflective questions to help you work with the ideas in this chapter.

- Can you explain the differences between doing action research and studying action research? Can you explain how both areas can learn from the other?
- How do you position yourself in the research field? Why do you position yourself like this?
- In what way has the co-option of action research by universities led to its misappropriation? Why do you think this has happened?
- Why do you think some people in higher education are doubtful about the capacity of action researchers to generate academic theory?
- What do you need to do if you wish to establish action research as a legitimate form of theory generation, and demonstrate its validity and legitimacy?

RESEARCH EXERCISE

Write a short text about the following.

Explain how you are doing action research and not social science research. Explain what positionality you adopt in relation to your participants in your practice setting, and to your reader in your text. How do you ensure you communicate these issues through your form of writing?

This now brings us to Chapter 2, which explains what is involved in writing action research, and how you can produce a brilliant action research text.