Action Research: Exploring the Theoretical Divide between Practical and Critical Approaches

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Abstract

Advocates of action research propose formalizing teacher inquiry to empower teachers to leverage their "insider" knowledge to change classroom practice. Currently there is disagreement between theorists who promote action research as practical or critical inquiry. This article defines the characteristics and history of action research in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. This review provides evidence of the theoretical divide between practical and critical action research, promoting the exploration of a middle ground. By encouraging a dialogue between proponents of both forms of action research, educators will gain new insights about teacher practice and the factors that promote or hinder critical teacher reflection.

Action research formalizes teacher inquiry and empowers teachers to leverage their "insider" knowledge to change classroom practice. Teacher researchers study their classrooms in a systematic and intentional manner and share their knowledge with the larger educational community. According to Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1994), "...what distinguishes more productive from less productive teachers may not be mastery of a knowledge base, but rather standing in a different relationship to one's own knowledge, to one's students as knowers, and to knowledge generation in the field" (p. 31). Action research transforms the traditional "outside-in" relationship between teachers and the educational community.

There are differing proposals regarding the mode of inquiry pursued in the action research process. According to proponents of practical action research, teachers study classroom practices by posing questions related to discrete pedagogical strategies and issues of practical interest. Proponents of critical action research encourage teachers to investigate the social, cultural, and political contexts of schooling in the pursuit of more democratic schools and society (e.g. Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Elliot, 1985; Hyland & Noffke, 2005; Kincheloe, 1991, 1995). In the literature, practical action research and critical action research have been theorized as dichotomous forms of inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; McCutcheon & Jung, 1990). While the theoretical frameworks of both versions of inquiry have been well-developed, they sit as if separated by a gulf with little dialogue between the two.

This lack of dialogue has led to a bifurcation of the theoretical basis of action research. This situation seems similar to the polarization of qualitative and quantitative research which "not only distorts the conception of education research but also is fallacious" (Ercikan & Roth, 2006, p. 14). Anyone familiar with the world of teaching knows that it cannot be divided into practical (e.g., lesson planning, skill development, communication) and critical issues (e.g., cultural relevancy, hidden curriculum, gender).

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Teaching and questions related to teaching are messy. Both practical and critical concerns are interwoven in the work of teachers and should be included in the types of questions teacher researchers study. Current theoretical conceptions of teacher research fail to capture this complexity.

Huebner (1966) warned against accepting “tyrannical myths” in curriculum studies. He wrote, “Other conceptual models are possible for curricular problems and phenomena, and concepts which inhibit their development must sometimes be violently uprooted in order that the phenomena of concern can be clearly seen” (p. 12). In the case of action research the “tyrannical myth” perpetuated is the existence of a dichotomy between practical and critical action research. This myth has circumscribed the inquiry of teachers into two discrete categories. This dichotomy stifles the notion that action research could explore questions that reside in the middle ground between practical and critical action research - where teacher researchers concerned with practical questions could also study critical issues (Van Manen, 1990).

This article provides a contextual background of action research by defining its characteristics and history. This review relies on published histories of action research (e.g., Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 1999; Lagemann, 2000; McKernan, 1996; Noffke, 1997) to identify significant developments in the field. The review follows the trajectory of action research in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia to provide evidence of the division of practical and critical action research. Ultimately the aim is to encourage a reconsideration of the theoretical divide that separates the two forms of action research. Exploring a middle ground between practical and critical action research will provide new insights into the world of teacher practice and the factors that facilitate or hinder critical reflection.

“Teacher research” is often used interchangeably with “action research” or “practitioner research” (Johnston, 2005). Throughout this article, I use the term “action research” unless “teacher research” appears in direct quotations taken from authors. In general, “teacher research” is used to describe action research that occurs when teachers investigate their own practice.

Action Research Process

Due in part to a growing interest in qualitative methods, action research holds a more prominent position within the American educational research community than in previous times (Lagemann, 2000). Increasingly, action researchers present their work at national conferences, including the American Educational Research Association (AERA) annual meeting and share their findings in educational journals and texts. Teacher conducted, classroom-based inquiry has not always enjoyed such a prominent place in American educational research. According to Lagemann, “During the 1980s, owing to the expanding conceptions of research associated with qualitative studies, teacher research gained new standing" (p. 223). Lagemann traced this revival to the work of teacher educators, in particular Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle. Lagemann wrote, "Even though some educationists remained skeptical, this work

convinced others that, beyond its value to teachers so engaged, teacher research could help elaborate the knowledge base of teaching" (p. 224).

According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) teacher research is “systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers” (p. 7). Teachers conduct inquiry by collecting data within the classroom through qualitative (e.g., observations, interviews, document analysis) and quantitative (e.g., surveys, questionnaires, comparison of test data) means. The action research cycle includes data collection, analysis, conclusions, and planning for change. The cycle continues when teachers implement changes and study their outcomes. According to Glesne (1999), “During the reflection phase [of action research], the data are interpreted and the multiple viewpoints are communicated and discussed among those with a stake (the stakeholders) in the process. This is followed by the action phase which involves planning, implementation, and evaluation" (p. 13). In each phase the aim is to change and improve some aspect of teaching. According to Johnston (2005), “Taking action and studying its consequences for student learning is the hallmark of action research. The action is intended to create change for the better and the study is intended to find out if it does” (p. 60). Action research promotes classroom change, initiated by careful self-examination and planning.

Role of the Teacher

The self-reflective nature of action research shifts the traditional role of the teacher. No longer just a technician within the classroom, the action researcher evolves into a “decision maker, consultant, curriculum developer, analyst, activist, school leader” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 17). According to Mohr et al. (2004), action research involves more than just conducting research within the classroom; it is a public endeavor in which educators "define teacher research as inquiry that is intentional, systematic, public, voluntary, ethical, and contextual" (p. 23). The emphasis on sharing research findings with the public signifies a qualitative change in the role of the teacher relative to the educational research community.

Action research, by affirming teachers as professionals within the classroom context, allows new space for teachers to explore (Price & Valli, 2005). Instead of simply implementing outsider knowledge, teachers engage in decision making and curriculum theorizing. They become responsible (and responsive) to both theory *and* practice. According to Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1994), "If we regard teachers' theories as sets of interrelated conceptual frameworks grounded in practice, then teacher researchers are revealed as both users and generators of theory" (p. 28). The notion of teachers as generators of theory moves teacher researchers into a space traditionally reserved for outside educational researchers.

The History of Action Research

Action research originated from industrialist Kurt Lewin’s work in the 1940s about "how participation in decision making could lead to enhanced productivity" (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002, p. 40). While Lewin’s original model applied to factories, its core

premises appealed to educators (Glesne, 1999). Lewin's effort to "find ways to involve social actors with research through group decision making and elaborate problem solving procedures" (Hollingsworth & Sockett, 1994, p. 3) contributed to contemporary perceptions of the action research process. Stephen Corey (1953) explicitly integrated action research into the field of education in his book *Action Research to Improve School Practices*.

The initial excitement over action research in the U.S. eventually ebbed. Partially to blame for the loss of interest was the centrally funded, large-scale research initiative known as the "Development and Diffusion Model" that gained favor in the 1960s during the Cold War (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002). According to McTaggart (1997), action research in the U.S. was effectively "pushed aside by a dominant positivist research ideology" (p. 11). The tide change in educational research effectively blunted the growth of action research in the U.S. until new interest appeared in the 1970s and 1980s.

Teacher-as-Researcher in the United Kingdom

Contemporary notions of action research in the U.S. draw on the work of British educator Lawrence Stenhouse and his colleagues at the Centre for Applied Research in Education (CARE). According to Stenhouse, the goal of CARE included, "The commitment to systematic questioning of one's own teaching as a basis for development; the commitment to and the skills to study one's own teaching; the concern to question and to test theory in practice by the use of those skills" (as cited in McNiff & Whitehead, 2002, p. 144). Under Stenhouse's leadership, CARE began to push for acknowledgment of the "educational researcher's social and political purpose" (Goodson, 1999, p. 279). Importantly, CARE emphasized emancipatory strategies and more critical outcomes of action research. According to McNiff and Whitehead, "He [Stenhouse] saw teaching and research as closely related, and called for teachers to reflect critically and systematically about their practice as a form of curriculum theorizing" (p. 43).

Stenhouse nurtured an emphasis on critical inquiry during his tenure at CARE and against the backdrop of the conservative federal "New Right Programme" (which marked the end of many social welfare projects in 1970s' Britain). He encouraged educators to push for social change beginning in schools. According to Goodson (1999), "During the 1970s, besides conducting a wide range of curriculum development and evaluation projects, CARE became a centre for defining educational research modalities in the public sphere" and its major task became finding "intellectual answers to the problems of empowering education for all" (pp. 283-284).

Stenhouse's ideas were extended by John Elliot and Clem Adelman with the Ford Teaching Project from 1973 to 1976 in Britain (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Elliot (1985), the coordinator of CARE beginning in 1991, continued the tradition established by Stenhouse of moving beyond objective curriculum research to a focus on the process of teacher inquiry. According to McNiff and Whitehead (2002), Elliot insisted that rather than consistently pursue a single aim in action research, the "general idea

should be allowed to shift" (p. 46) as the study progressed. Elliot emphasized a continual cycle of research and action, of planning and implementation. Elliot and Adelman were joined in their work by Australian educators who transformed “teacher as researcher” into “participatory action research.”

Participatory Action Research in Australia

Reflecting the work of their British colleagues, Australian educators created a model of action research, which they described as classroom-based inquiry or “educational action research.” This model followed a spiral process involving devising a question, planning, implementing, observing, reflecting, and re-planning. According to Carr and Kemmis (1986):

> Action research is a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants (teachers, students or principals, for example) in social (including educational) situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of a) their own social or educational practices, b) their understanding of these practices, and c) the situations (and institutions) in which their practices are carried out (p. 162).

Significantly, Carr and Kemmis (1986) applied Jürgen Habermas’ (1972) three “knowledge constitutive interests” – “technical control,” “practical knowledge,” and “emancipatory interest” – to the action research cycle. They used Habermas’ three-tiered framework to articulate the levels at which a teacher could engage in inquiry, with special emphasis placed on the emancipatory interest. They encouraged teachers to critically interrogate their understanding of practice, move to new ways of understanding, and work toward democracy in schooling. *The Action Research Planner* (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) became a well-known text for practitioners and university-based educators around the world. It outlined the action research cycle and its emancipatory interest.

Grounded in critical social theory, action research abroad emphasized the liberating function of classroom-based inquiry as a means to achieve greater democracy in schooling and society. According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999):

> Although varying somewhat, the visions of educational research embedded in these writings [from British and Australian publishers] shared a grounding in critical and democratic social theory and in explicit rejection of the authority of professional experts who produced and accumulated knowledge in 'scientific’ research settings for use by others in practical settings (p. 16).

The critical social theory that educators in the United Kingdom and Australia integrated into action research differed greatly from the more practical versions that appeared in the U.S.

Modern Action Research Movement in the United States

While interest in action research gained momentum in the United Kingdom and Australia throughout the 1970s, it was not until the early 1980s that American educators grew interested in classroom-based inquiry. According to Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1993) this was partly due to a "paradigm shift in researching, teaching, and assessing writing that evolved during the 1970s and 1980s" (p. 6). Influential texts such as Donald Schön's (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* and Ann Berthoff's (1987) phrase, "The teacher as RE-searcher," marked a new interest in teacher inquiry. In 1999 Cochran-Smith and Lytle contended that five major trends in action research had occurred in the United States since the mid 1980s: (a) growth in the prominence of action research in teacher education, (b) development of conceptual frameworks and theories of action research, (c) dissemination of action research findings in journals and conference proceedings, (d) critique of action research, and (e) belief in the transformative potential of action research in education. American proponents of action research did not always espouse the same critical views as their British or Australian counterparts. The growth of action research in the United States for the most part contributed to the development of more practically oriented versions of classroom-based inquiry.

Practical versions focused on the empowerment of teachers by encouraging them to conduct their own classroom research and form conclusions about best practices. It extended from an interest in making professional development more relevant for teachers. Critical action research built on the work of British and Australian educators who, while acknowledging the importance of empowering teachers to form their own conclusions through systematic study, hoped to also bring about more democratic forms of schooling and society.

Practical Action Research

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) believe that action research theorized as practical inquiry is a "way to generate or enhance practical knowledge" (p. 19). In an overview of the different forms of action research, they explain that "theorizers in this [practical] group assume that some of the most essential knowledge for teaching is practical knowledge" (p. 19). Proponents of practical action research argue that inquiry can illuminate important issues of teachers and their students and, through reflection on practice, generate new knowledge about teaching and learning (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2005). Within practical inquiry, teachers study and redefine their "professional knowledge landscapes" (Clandinin & Connolly, 1995) and "craft knowledge" (Grimmett & MacKinnon, 1992).

The emphasis of practical action research is on "real classrooms and real schools" (Allan & Miller, 1990, p. 196). For instance, Falk and Blumenreich (2005) write, "Conducting research has helped teachers we know to consolidate new knowledge, learn about new issues, and develop new teaching methods and strategies" (p. 176). Proponents of practical action research emphasize the *practicality* of action research for

teachers as they strive to become better practitioners. According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999), "practical inquiry is more likely to respond to the immediacy of the knowledge needs teachers confront in everyday practice and to be foundational for formal research by providing new questions and concerns" (p. 19). Practical action research is viewed as more relevant and authentic for teachers. According to Glanz (1999):

> Action research is a kind of research that has reemerged as a popular way of helping practitioners, teachers, and supervisors to better understand their work. In action research, we apply traditional research approaches (e.g., ethnographic, descriptive, quasi-experimental, and so forth) to real problems or issues faced by the practitioner (p. 301).

Glanz not only emphasizes the practicality of action research but also downplays its "generalizability" outside of individual classrooms in favor of understanding particular issues faced by specific teachers. Similarly, MacLean and Mohr (1999) offer the following definition of action research, "It is research conducted by teachers as they go about their daily work. It is enmeshed in the context of the classroom" (p. ix). MacLean and Mohr advise teachers to ask questions about teaching and learning within the classroom and offer these examples, "Why do so many students fail this part of the course? Why was this lesson so successful? What can I do to motivate my students to learn?" (p. 1). The emphasis repeatedly focuses on practicality and individual classroom contexts.

Practical action research, especially the emphasis on inquiry and pragmatic aims, alludes to the work of Dewey (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; McNiff & Whitehead, 2002; Noffke, 1997). According to Johnston (2005):

> There is an assumption underlying these research approaches that we benefit from a careful reflective attitude that examines what we are doing as teachers and the consequences of our actions for students and student learning. This is a very Deweyan idea—that reflection and inquiry create and inform future purposes (p. 65).

Dewey (1933) emphasized the process or method of inquiry which he insisted must become "persistent." So too, Cochran Smith and Lytle (1993) wrote, "Dewey emphasized the importance of teachers' reflecting on their practices and integrating their observations into their emerging theories of teaching and learning" (p. 9). Proponents of practical action research emphasize Dewey's belief in the importance of teacher reflection and inquiry to improve teacher practice.

Practical action research can help preservice and experienced teachers gain a sense of professionalism and improve their practice (Levin & Rock, 2003; Price, 2001). Rogers, Noblit, and Ferrell (1990) note, "Action research is a vehicle to put teachers in charge of their craft and its improvement" (p. 179). Teacher researchers make the choice of "burning questions" to study and issues to confront. As a result, they often find

their personal theories of teaching and learning validated. According to Falk and Blumenreich (2005), "Research about a personal burning question has, for many teachers, fostered their self-efficacy and given them a sense of possibility that they never had before" (p. 180). Rather than simply having a hunch that their teaching practices work, by systematically and intentionally studying those practices, teachers find evidence to support their "craft knowledge." Falk and Blumenreich explain, "An unanticipated, but pleasant outcome for teachers who have engaged in research about their own questions has been finding affirmation for ideas and practices that were previously intuitive" (p. 177).

In addition to supporting the work of individual teachers, practical teacher research can also benefit communities of teachers. Mohr et al. (2004) wrote a descriptive study of the development of the "Teacher Research Network" located in Fairfax County, Virginia from a U.S. Department of Education Grant. Groups of teacher researchers from three "project schools" met, planned, publicized their work, and developed cross-school professional networks. According to Mohr et al, "Teachers' research generates new programs and contributes to thoughtful implementation and ongoing assessment of existing programs" (p. 117). The teachers in the Teaching Research Network developed a sense that their work mattered to the larger school community.

Critical Action Research

Action research envisioned as critical inquiry or "critical action research" departs from the practical notions of classroom-based research as envisioned by Glanz, MacLean, Mohr, and others. Here the aim is social change and movement toward a more just and democratic society (e.g., Elliot, 1985; Gitlin & Haddon, 1997; Gore & Zeichner, 1991; Hyland & Noffke, 2005; Kemmis & Grundy, 1997; Kincheloe, 1991; Noffke, 1997; Van Manen, 1990). Rather than describing schools and classrooms, the goals of critical action researchers involve changing educational structures and transforming society. According to Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1999), "The emphasis is on transforming educational theory and practice toward emancipatory ends and thus raising fundamental questions about curriculum, teachers' roles, and the ends as well as the means of schooling" (p. 18).

The critical conceptualization of action research is based on critical theory (Brown & Jones, 2001). According to Kincheloe (1995), "The critical teacher researcher asks questions of deep structure of his or her school or classroom settings – in other words, he or she takes Habermas' (1972) notion of emancipatory interest of knowledge seriously" (p. 81). Proponents of critical teacher research repeatedly emphasize the socio-historical aspects of classrooms and raise questions about deep structure (e.g., Hyland & Noffke, 2005). They are not content to encourage teachers to study "craft knowledge." Rather, critical action research is intended to interrogate the structures, processes, and practices of education in order to change them. According to Johnston (2005):

> On this [critical] view, we are encouraged to critique the social norms and practices that underlie our teaching practices and that may obstruct schooling for social justice. From this point of view, it is not enough to examine only teaching practice; teachers must also consider social and political influences on the teacher and students, as well as on schooling more generally (pp. 65-66).

Rather than restrict their study to specific classroom strategies or practices, critical action researchers look beyond their classroom context to explore the political and social issues that impact student learning and become “agents of systemic change” (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1994, p. 36).

Proponents of critical action research criticize “versions of teacher research that have goals that are more or less instrumental and/or that lack clear connections to larger social and political agendas" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 20). According to the critique, “benign” versions of teacher research ignore the “political sphere” (Noffke, 1997). Practical action research serves to “further solidify and justify practice that is harmful to students” (Zeichner, 1994, p. 66) and is "dangerous" in that it "upholds status quo" practices and "reproduces extant ideology" (Kincheloe, 1995, p. 82). Critics of practical teacher research argue that practical inquiry disregards the historical roots of action research in critical theory. According to Kincheloe, "Action-research concepts such as the promotion of greater teacher self-understanding of his or her practices, conceptual change, and an appreciation of the social forces that shape the school are ignored in the traditional teacher research classes" (p. 71).

In the past, critical action research has been done mostly abroad. As already mentioned, Stenhouse and his colleagues at CARE and the Ford Teaching Project encouraged teachers to fundamentally alter their position relative to university-based educators and governmental policy makers by pursuing critical action research (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002). Similarly, the work of Australian action researchers sought emancipatory outcomes (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Grundy, 1997; McTaggart, 1991). They included participants in all portions of the research process including determining the focus of inquiry, methods, and plan of action. Their version of participatory action research emancipated the “researched” – placing them in control of the research process. One notable example is Bunbury, Hastings, Henry, and McTaggart’s (1991) work with Aboriginal peoples.

In the United States, there has been increasing interest in critical action research. Hollingsworth and Sockett (1994), for instance, worked with collaborative teacher research groups who used feminist theory to guide their inquiry. Kincheloe (1991, 1995) has argued in favor of critical action research to replace what he regards as the practically-oriented but potentially “dangerous” brand of teacher research. For him all research is political in nature and those that claim to be objective hide their true politics under rhetoric.

The notion of action research leading to social change is the most radically transformative of the purported benefits of action research. Collectively, the action research literature provides a host of exciting possibilities for classroom-based research. The benefits described include alleviating the gap between theory and practice, enhancing teacher education, improving teacher professional development, improving student learning, affirming and empowering teachers, reforming schools, and changing society.

The Division of Action Research

The history of action research and its conceptualization in the U.S. and abroad resulted in a division between practical and critical action research. Practical action research is theorized as illuminating the day-to-day issues teachers face. Critical action research seeks to not only improve teaching and learning in the classroom but also to improve society. Table 1 summarizes the differences between the two types of action research – practical and critical – as described in the relevant literature.

Table 1
A Summary: Practical Action Research Compared to Critical Action Research

Practical Action Research:	Critical Action Research:
• "Practical-Deliberative" (McKernan, 1996) • Concerned with practical knowledge or "craft knowledge" • Interest in day-to-day issues of teacher practice • May result in improved practice and student performance but not social or cultural change	• "Critical-Emancipatory" (McKernan, 1996) • Concerned with social and cultural factors that impact school • Interest in democratic participation and emancipation • Seeks deep change and enlightenment within the classroom • Implicit goal towards improving society

Currently there is no real dialogue in the literature between the two (other than a critique of practical research) and it appears as if the two types are separated across a divide with little middle ground. A dichotomy has been nurtured by educational theorists on both sides.

While advocates of action research agree that it provides a means to formalize teacher inquiry and empower teachers to share their "insider" knowledge, they disagree about the types of questions teachers should ask. As a result of this divide between the two forms of action research, important questions about teacher practice have been allowed to go unanswered. Missing within the gap between practical and critical action research is a sense of the nuance of teacher practice - the reality of classroom life that is mutually steeped in practical and critical concerns. It is probable that teachers who engage in critical research also study practical questions. In order to harness the

potential of action research to both change the world of practice and lead to empowerment and emancipation, proponents of both forms of action research must reconsider the insistence that there are mutually exclusive forms of teacher inquiry. Instead they should work to develop integrative approaches to action research that value both practical and critical inquiry into teachers' experiences. Demonstrative of this view, Brause and Mayher (1991) wrote, "There are two complimentary purposes for conducting educational research: *to enhance the quality of life,* making our practices more democratic, more equitable, and more humane; and *to enlarge our understandings*, moving our practice from intuition, lore, and beliefs to more principled decision-making..." (italics in the original, pp. 47-48). By promoting the exploration of a middle ground we can begin to encourage dialogue that results in new insights and understandings about the world of teacher practice and the factors that help and hinder critical teacher reflection.

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