Action Research: In the Company of Friends

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In a recent talk Karen Gallas spoke of the effect of the "self" on classroom research, indicating that much that we take for granted in the research process is determined subconsciously by our own personal perspectives and experiences. These not only influence the questions we ask and the methodologies we choose, but also the way we analyse and interpret data. In doing so, we inscribe our own history of experience into the research act and fail to grasp the visceral realities that comprise people's lives. This history is often only challenged when we come up against situations where our position of privilege fails to provide us with the means to impose our own versions and visions of reality on the people with whom we work.

Often this challenge comes from those who are "culturally different", their responses to our activities so inappropriate that we are forced to confront our own realities, our own "self". Karen describes her experience in a Navajo community, where the children she taught absolutely refused to acknowledge or respond to her "adult" authority, forcing her to re-think her whole approach to teaching and learning. What she discovered in this context mirrors my own experience working with Aboriginal people in Australia, where the remarkable differences between Aboriginal world-views and their response to events, caused me to become, in the true sense of the word "a researcher". Today I recognize that the people with whom I work, even middle-class Australians or Americans, often view and respond to the world in ways quite different to my own. I necessarily need to start from a position of ignorance and struggle to find the question/s that will open their world to my gaze, for the way I conceptualize and frame the questions will determine the extent to which they are able to reveal the world they see and experience.

The rewards for "getting it right" are immense, as people feel reaffirmed in their view of the world and in their personal and cultural identities, their first tentative words increasing in power, color and complexity as I listen and, from time to time, read back their own words from my field notes. "Yes," their non-verbal responses tell me, "He's really listening to me and not changing my words or meanings. And he's treating my words as important, even writing down what I say just as I've said it." The verbatim principle reigns supreme in my methodology! This in itself creates a relationship that is at the heart of the research process—a relationship of trust, where the people

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with whom I am working can see exactly what I am doing, and feel comfortable in the knowledge that, at least at this time, I am not "colonizing" their worlds by taking their knowledge and refashioning it to suit my own purposes.

This relationship is amplified further as the "stakeholders"--the people who have a central "stake" in the research—proceed with the processes of investigation. Participants discover that they are able to determine the purposes of the research, to focuses on issues about which they are concerned, and to produce outcomes that assist them and those with whom they who work, to achieve tangible and meaningful—from their perspective—outcomes. This turns much classroom research on its head, child-centered instruction having as its counterpart in child-centered research – research that takes the perspective of the child as the central focus on investigation.

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Methodologically, this creates an imperative for researchers to "bracket" their own experience and perspective, to put it aside their own agendas, and to allow the central stakeholders to conceptualize and frame the research in their own terms. This is no easy task and requires years of practice and experience to find the techniques and strategies that minimize the extent to which researcher perspectives determine the course of the research. The professional educator not only must damp down the effect of their own personal and cultural histories, but also keep at bay the conceptual structures—the concepts, practices, materials and theories--that form the basis of their professional life.

In the past year I've experienced the rewards of taking this research perspective. Confronted with a school system that continued to fail the children of their community dismally, a group of four grandmothers suggested to the school principal that they start a school breakfast program. In an impoverished Aboriginal community, where people still lived according to age-old hunter-gatherer traditions, school often started before most of the adult members of the community had risen for the day. Children either came to school late or hungry, an inauspicious start to their day that left both they and their teachers at odds with the needs of the classroom. This small program immediately changed the nature of the school day, most of the children responding immediately by turning up to school before classes commenced, eating a wholesome breakfast prepared by women they knew intimately through their kinship system, and playing happily in the yard till classes commenced.

That single act transformed the school to a child-friendly place that, while still an alien place in many respects, now has a significant "presence" of community adults who continue to expand their activities and their influence. While assisting them to organize the school breakfast through action research processes (What do we want to do? How can we do that? Where will we get

food? How will we pay for it?) I developed a relationship of trust that enabled the women to start exploring other issues and taking action to resolve them. Now, a year later, the women have a fully operational catering service that provides for community and regional functions, a recent carnival had them prepare and deliver 1800 meals in two days to 300 participants. They have acquired funding for a building from which they can continue to expand their activities, which includes the teaching of local language, arts and crafts, and an emergent possibility of a school-community garden. Today I saw a display they had created, a series of charts comprised of photographs and captions that told the story of their many activities over the past year. This information they intend to use to compile newsletters, booklets and books that will be used for school and community literacy purposes, and they have already many hours of footage that will be used to produce video productions for the same purposes. An informal training program, whereby the original grandmothers over time trained around 25 younger women in the preparation and presentation of meals, will morph into more formal multigenerational training programs that extends their vision yet further.

In the early eighties I learned the value of "listening to the people", taking their perspectives seriously, and using them as the basis for any developmental work in which I wished to engage. Over the years this simple perspective has provided the foundation for my now extensive work in action research. I hope that this journal, the latest addition to the resources of the action research community, will provide readers with the means to enrich their personal, professional, community and family lives. In the end I hope that it provides the impetus for you all to re-envision the research act so that it is not just a means to make marginal improvements on your educational practice, but "a search for understanding in the company of friends" that provides the means to transform your professional lives.

After an early career as teacher and school principal, Ernie Stringer, Ph.D., joined the Faculty of Education, and then the Centre for Aboriginal Studies at Curtin University. For many years he engaged in action research in community and organizational contexts in Australia, the United States, and East Timor. He is the author of six texts on action research. You may contact Dr. Stringer at erniestringer@hotmail.com.