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# Empowerment Research or Equivalent Research: One University's Journey into Action Research

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# Empowerment Research or Equivalent Research: One University's Journey into Action Research

In the last decade there has been a major paradigm shift in education to include practitioner research also known as *action research*. Action research has become the conventional and respected way to address learner-centered curriculum standards. Moreover, action research is a common tool used to address teacher accountability. Historically, action research has been used as a tool of empowerment and emancipation for marginalized people.

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In addition to introducing the term action research after World War II, Kurt Lewin is credited with developing the cyclical methods used in action research consisting of “(1) analysis, (2) fact-finding, (3) conceptualization, (4) planning, (5) implementation of action, and (6) evaluation” (Baskerville & Wood-Harper, 1996, p. 237). Action research’s origins, however, have been traced back to Aristotle and his philosophical concept of *praxis* which is “the art of acting upon the conditions one faces in order to change them” (Susman & Evered, 1978, p. 594). Social research became more popular during the 1930s including the research of progressive educator John Dewey, who believed that “there’s nothing to compare with learning by doing” (Glanz, 2003, p. 243). The concepts of action

research continued to advance in the later part of the century with educator Paolo Freire who “developed an adult literacy approach that focused on learning to read and write about the concrete everyday life and social contexts” (Boog, 2003, p. 431) with oppressed people. Although Dewey applied the philosophical tenets of action research, the term itself in education research is a relatively puerile form.

Action research began gaining popularity in United States during the 1960s. In the U.S. the 1960s and 1970s represented unrest, change, protest movements, civil disobedience, and emancipation. A few of the more popular social movements and significant events during these decades were the civil rights movement, the unpopular war in Vietnam, questions about the military draft, draft card burnings, school desegregation, the bussing of children to desegregate schools, the women’s rights movement, and test reform and assessment in schools. The significant social unrest and its emphasis on empowerment and emancipation could have

presented a climate ripe for action research because it involves dismantling the established way of doing things, evaluating, and reassembling.

Because the intention of action research is to not only understand but also to cause change, often at a deep level within an organization or classroom, it tends to shake up the status quo and raise as many questions as it answers. (Levin & Merritt, 2006, p.4)

However, even with all that happened in the 1960s and 1970s, adoption of action research in the U.S. school system was sluggish. Baskerville & Wood-Harper (1996) postulated that one of the reasons action research was slow to catch on in the United States was political. Because funding for research was granted through public monies, quantitative approaches were easier to justify than qualitative approaches.

Although accountability in education has always existed, during the 1960s the U.S. federal government began placing greater emphasis on testing and assessment—a practice which continues even today. According to Linn & Miller (2005) gathering quantitative data through testing is inexpensive, the process is very public, data can be collected through a third party, and the test results can be made public in a relatively short period of time. As a result, quantitative data collection methods in education are much more attractive than qualitative data collection methods such as action research. In fact, between January 1983 and May 1988 action research contributed only 0.6% of research literature (Baskerville & Wood-Harper, 1996, p. 235). With social unrest and a greater emphasis on educational accountability, action research began to weave its way through the college curricula. It emerged as a way to have graduate students learn about research and reflect on their own teaching. This is the story of one university's entrance into action research.

This article is divided into six sections. Section one describes the methods used to capture the data for this paper. Section two, "The beginning", explores the conceptualization of action research as a paradigm and curricula for graduate education students. Section three, "Gaining acceptance" outlines the processes required by the university for new classes and programs to be accepted. "The merge or status quo" describes the incorporation of ideas into the implementation of action research. Section five provides a discussion of action research and finally section six explores the implications for the continued use of action research in education.

### **Methodology**

The analysis of this case study was grounded in data from the participating professors. There are many definitions for grounded theory (see Charmaz, 2006, 2008; Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Creswell, 2008; Glasner, 1992). "Essentially grounded theory methods are a set of flexible analytic guidelines that enable researchers to focus their data collection and to build inductive middle-range theories through successive levels of data analysis and conceptual development" (Charmaz, 2008, p. 204). Grounded theory analysis begins with the data. The data for this study

was collected through a series of informal, conversational interviews over a period of two years and a single one-hour face-to-face guided interview with each of the participants. The guided interviews began with the following opening comment and grand tour question (Stringer, 1999):

To fully comprehend the scope of action research as it applies to the School of Education it is important to know the background and history of action research at your university. Will you please talk about action research as it applies to your university?

From the opening comment and grand tour question, the interviews proceeded with clarifying, extension, and example questions as needed. Notes were taken from the informal conversational interviews.

The data were then analyzed through a series of analytic and reflective questions based on the work of Charmaz (2006). The questions used to analyze the data included:

- What was happening in the general society?
- What were the psychological processes and implications?
- From whose point-of-view is the information given?
- Whose voice is marginalized?
- Who exerts control over the process?
- What meanings do the participants attribute to the process?
- How do the participants talk about the process?
- What do the participants emphasize? and
- What do the participants leave out?

The interviews were transcribed and coded. The interviews were initially coded for actions rather than themes. The coding was “line-by-line” using one-word color-coded gerunds to generalize the observations in the data. For example codes such as “comparing” “reflecting” and “story-telling” were some of the most frequently used codes.

The initial coding was followed with focused coding. During this phase of data analysis, in-depth memos were written and each participant’s data was constantly compared with the literature and the other participant’s interview. The final phase was concept coding which is when codes emerged into concepts for the writing of this paper. Throughout the entire process, analysis remained close to the data and “in vivo” codes. Portions of the participants’ transcribed interviews are presented throughout this paper.

### **The Beginning: One University’s Journey into Action Research**

In the early 1990s a small parochial university in southern California instituted action research classes as part of its Master of Education program. The professors who created these courses were searching for ways to make obtaining a master’s degree more meaningful to practitioners.

This article focuses on the rationale and development of the graduate action research classes. The story is told from the perspective of the two full-time professors who created and shaped the classes and curricula. The key questions addressed in this paper are, “How was action research defined in this university?” and “How did action research manifest itself in the university based on its working definition of action research?”

I think it was in '96 [1996] that the school of education decided that it was not sufficient [for master's students] to go through a comprehensive exam and write about research methods... So we looked at action research.

When action research began at this university, having teachers examine and research their own practice was a relatively new paradigm in education. Today, however, it is not unusual for schools and colleges of education offer action research courses. These courses are not only offered through traditional face-to-face teaching, but also offered through on-line web-based technology.

When the action research classes were introduced around 2000 by two professors, the definition of action research was nebulous and defined in terms of what it was not, rather than what it was. Importantly, the definition by exclusion framed the way action research was introduced, taught, understood, and practiced in this particular university. Each of the initiating professors was trained in quantitative research design and not in qualitative research design. Based on their experiences with quantitative research both professors compared action research to empirical research thus the action research methodology was framed around traditional quantitative research designs.

I am a researcher by training. I had been teaching [research methods] since about 1990 here on campus. The two of us started thinking about what [it] might look like, and what kinds of things we would need to do in order to convert a traditional research methods class, in which you talk about research as some kind of abstract process and create a proposal for a thesis that might be completely disconnected from your life, to one that really focused on action research by practitioners, and how this would be different than the tradition research methods course. It is a subtle difference [and] once you teach action research you understand that. But, if you are trained as a traditional researcher it's hard to see how this is really any different. You use a lot of the same methodologies but there are some that you don't use. But it's *who* does the research and *what* purpose it's used for that's really the big difference. And of course you know teachers are notorious for not using the literature that is available to them. (*participant emphasis*)

The second professor emphasized a distinction between research methodologies through a rather circuitous definition of action research.

From the beginning my task was to teach research methods in education. We started out with a course labeled Research Methods in Education. It was a rigorous course and it made students look at several methods of doing research. They had to write a proposal that means they had to write chapter one, two and three. That was the introduction, the review of literature and then the proposed project.

Our students needed something practical rather than theoretical. After all, they are not trained to be researchers; they are trained to be practitioners. In 2000, I was asked by the dean to develop a course that actually would help the students to do some aspect of classroom research. The students had to write a small proposal that was doable. They had to have an introduction, and a review of the literature, and propose a project doable within [a] short period of time so that they had the idea of research. Everyone wrote his or her proposal and [the students']...professional ideas would be exchanged in class. The proposals were critiqued by other students in class. The instructor's duty was to help students revise their proposals so [that] they got an understanding and an appreciation towards teaching. I think that was the main [focus of the action research course]. That was the idea originally. [Their research proposals] may not be of great statistical significance but that doesn't matter in practical research, or action research. It's important that the student sees that the outcome is there and [that their K-12] students do have really great value. These [action research] courses were there to help practitioners distinguish between good research and bad research.

Both originators of these classes agreed that they needed to incorporate a research design for teachers that moved from theory to practice and that used the same problem solving methodologies as empirical research. Interestingly, the participants understood action research as a means for teachers to appreciate teaching, and to understand that K-12 students have value.

I understand the phrase "understand and appreciate teaching" and the phrase "that K-12 students do have value" as code words for teacher empowerment. Farrell and Weitman (2007) identified teacher empowerment as decision making, increased teacher knowledge, and increased teacher status all of which are interrelating components. In this way the participants were using language that signified empowerment.

The phrase "distinguish between good research and bad research" might also be interpreted as empowerment. However, when action research is used to evaluate other research, then it becomes a tool to legitimize the research in academia which would encompass the writing of an academic thesis, a skill often reserved for masters in universities. Thus, the emphasis of the research was on academics and less on social change and empowerment. Although their definitions of action research were imprecise, it is believed that their intent was to empower teachers through research and data driven decision making, while at the same time earning a degree that acknowledged them as master's degree in education.

## **Gaining University-Wide Acceptance**

University governance requires the full university professorate to approve new classes as part of the graduate curricula. As a result, the developers of the action research classes in the School of Education set out to explain their vision for teacher research and its incorporation into the existing master's degree program. In order for the new classes to be accepted as part of the university's curricula, the developers of the action research classes incorporated suggestions for the research methodologies from other professors across the university. Some of the suggestions they incorporated were made by faculty members who were not educators and were knowledgeable of neither qualitative or action research designs nor educational policies and K-12 practices. In essence, the suggestions were for the action research design to follow a positivist model, the model with which most faculty members were familiar. As one of the developers of the action research classes stated, "It was a little bumpy at first," and the other developer acknowledged that,

Of course everything [ in the department is done] with cooperation from the entire faculty, that was balanced [trade] off of the fact that we [the two developers of the action research program] had to take suggestions from everyone so it's not just one thing that one person does, it doesn't work that way.

The course developers did however obtain full faculty approval to continue with the development of their action research classes for teachers in the graduate program. Acknowledging the fact that the development of action research was a part of a master's degree program presented a dual dilemma. First, even though the classes had been fully-approved by faculty, there was still concern whether the teacher research projects would be recognized and valued by a wider academic audience more familiar with quantitative research than the reflective, systematic, cyclical methods used in action research. Second, the developers of these new courses—who themselves had been trained and educated in quantitative research methods—were still debating within themselves exactly what an action research design should look like. As one of the course creators stated,

Conventional research is the strict scientific approach. There is a hypothesis, preferably a null hypothesis that the researcher has to prove or disprove this null hypothesis, and data gatherings, really a strict kind of following of the methods of research with established rules.

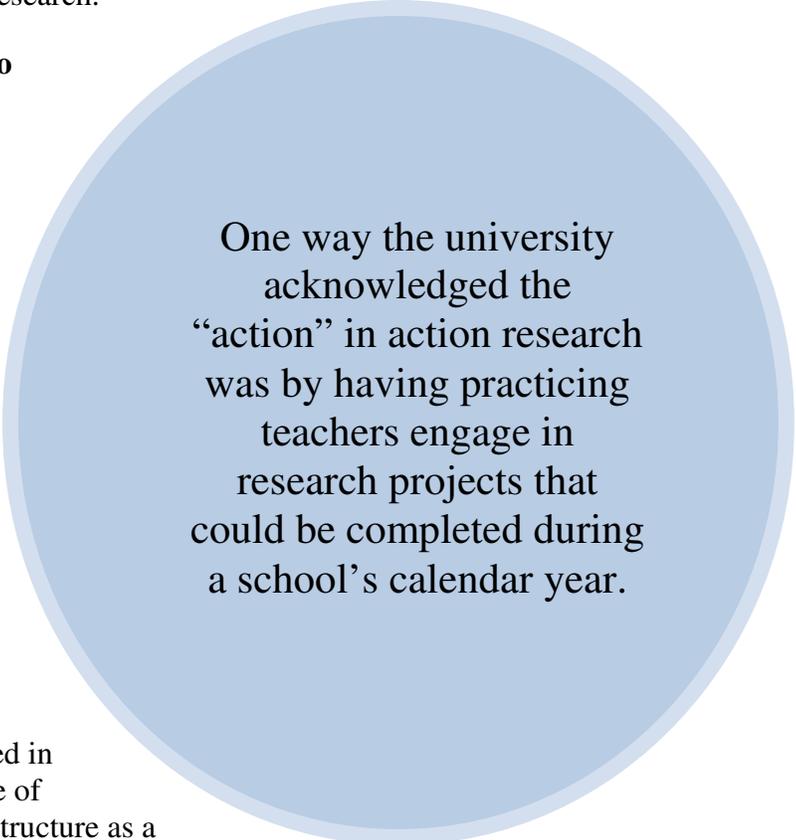
Action research is really a movement or a relatively new approach, that is, research on an activity. So it has practical applications which cannot necessarily be applied to other situations. Whereas with conventional research, you have to select the same group, you have to select all the same circumstances; you have to be exact when describing those circumstances. And still if you want to publish something in a peer-reviewed journal, they for sure take the quantitative research over anything else. You

have to show something, you have to use a situation pretty much as natural scientists use a laboratory situation. It was an additional benefit for me if I saw students go on and do the scientific approach but that was not the purpose of these [action research] courses.

So on one level there was the internal conflict between the developers own philosophical positivist research methods and the understanding and recognition of the philosophy and value of teacher empowerment and emancipatory research.

### **The Merge or The Status Quo**

The creators of the action research classes needed to be creative in how this “new” research paradigm would look and how it would incorporate both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. One way the university acknowledged the “action” in action research was by having practicing teachers engage in research projects that could be completed during a school’s calendar year. Because the K-12 school systems and the university were standards based, the action research projects had to be aligned to the state content standards and/or the state professional teaching standards aligned to K-12 student learning. To honor the academic graduate requirements of the university, practicing teachers who engaged in action research also had to produce a piece of academic writing using the same chapter structure as a traditional quantitative master’s research thesis. With a few caveats the definition of action research by the course originators closely resembled Mills’ (2007) definition of action research.



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Any systematic inquiry conducted by teachers, researchers, principals, school counselors, or other stakeholders in the teaching /learning environment to gather information about the ways that the particular schools operate how they teach and how well students learn. This information is gathered with the goals of gaining insight, developing reflective practice, effecting positive changes in the school environment (and on educational practices in general), and improving student outcomes and the lives of those involved ...Action research is research done by the teachers, for themselves; it is not imposed on them by someone else. (p. 5)

While Lewin (1946) posited the purpose of action research was empowerment through social change, in these classes empowerment was valued but played a different role. In contrast, the practicing teachers' empowerment, though often attained, was more a by-product of the university's requirements for the action research classes. If, by engaging in the action research process, the teacher practitioner left the process feeling empowered, it was considered a benefit for both the teacher researcher and the professor:

One of the things that I find so fascinating about [action research is that] it is like giving students a pair of glasses or turning the lights on. They begin to understand much more clearly the role of the research literature in their own professional practice. But the other thing is that they become very sensitive to whether or not something has a proven track record. I have students who have talked to me about going into a faculty meeting where somebody says, "we're going to develop this program" or "we're going to buy these materials." And our students that have been through this process will say, "Well, what's the research that says that this works?" and of course I love hearing stuff like that. So I think that has been a major benefit. The other thing is that now people have tools to try to figure out whether something really works rather than "I think it worked", "the kids were happy", or "it looked good," or "the parents liked it." Now there's a much more concrete and appropriate way to examine the relative worth of something.

### **Discussion**

By definition, action research is significant if it emancipates and empowers and if positive changes occur to the participants either personally and or within their cultural setting. The participants are co-researchers, so each plays a dual role of both participant and researcher. The rigor of the methodology is what should make this type of research recognizable in higher education. In addition to the methodology, the sharing of the research through peer reviewed literature and academic conference presentation should also add to the respectability of action research in the academy. Khanlou & Peter (2005) described action research as being influenced by industrialized countries, and participatory research being influenced by poor, third world or developing countries. When action research is defined and associated with education and the methodologies used are for empowerment and to investigate problems or issues within the educational community or their professional settings then the tenets associated with empirical research just do not apply to action research.

This paper began by focusing on the rationale and development of the graduate action research classes in one university. The developers of the action research classes in this university described a graduate research process that is systematic, scholarly, and concrete. They described action research as a tool used by practicing teachers to learn about systematic research processes couched primarily in the positivist tradition.

On the surface, the reader is left with a very general, well-intentioned answer to the research question, what is action research in this university? However, on a subterranean level there is a deeper less pristine analytic academic conversation happening that is wrought with internal conflict, uncertainty, and ambiguity. Susman and Evered (1978) described Lewin's research as "the change experiment on social system in which the practitioners and social scientist collaborate to find ways to bring about needed changes" (p. 587). Stringer (1999) identified a key expectation of action research is that "those who have previously been designated as 'subjects' should participate directly in research processes and that those processes should be applied in ways that benefit all participants directly" (p. 7). The uncertainty and ambiguity rest in the answers to these questions: "Are the practicing teachers equal participants in the identification of research problems with university professors?" or "Through the use of power do university professors, school administrators, state, and/or national mandates such as Standards, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and other government policies unduly influence educational research?"

Creswell (2008) identifies two types of action research, practical action research which is used by teachers and participatory action research reserved for community improvement. To this point the ambiguity around action research as taught in the university also revolves around the professors' pedagogy and the practicing teachers' projects. Where do the K-12 students enter the research conversation? At what point do K-12 students move from recipients of knowledge, the ones who receive the lessons, to active participants in the design and implementation of the research projects? Where is the true collaboration between university professors, teachers, and K-12 students? Are university action research classes truly democratic and empowering for professors, practicing teachers and K-12 students? Is the action research process, as it is being taught and practiced, democratic and empowering?

In addition to struggling with questions of empowerment and emancipation, education from a broader perspective struggles to define itself as a legitimate profession in two venues: the academic community and the general society. Legitimacy in the academy is often linked to traditional research standards. "In order to achieve scientific rigor, additional structure is usually imposed on action research" (Baskerville & Wood-Harper, 1996, p. 237). While action research labors to define, redefine, and legitimize itself, education as a whole toils with an image problem in the wider society.

The media is a powerful voice on educational issues. The media tends to cover educational stereotypes and personalities in education such as problems in schools and athletics rather than what is truly happening in schools and why. This type of coverage helps mold the public perception that there is no real need to put money into education, because it is a wasted effort (Anderson, 2008). During the early 1990s, federal funds supported education and research related educational projects were available. However, in the latter part of the decade, there were counter movements to educational reform (Imig & Imig, 2009). As education endeavors to

define itself to university institution review boards and to the public, action research might be a legitimizing vehicle to define education and assuage some of the tensions that exist.

### **Implications for Continued Use of Action Research Projects**

Today, most university schools of education offer some type of instruction in action research which is amorphous by nature. The focal point of action research seems to be affected by the

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political climate, whether the emphasis is on English language learners, students with autism, children with special needs, etc. It is quite possible that the definition of action research will never be stable but continually change according to what is happening politically in education. The literature suggested that when teachers engage in action research projects it validates the reflective process and stresses the importance of life-long professional development through the recognition of educational issues, data gathering, learning and teaching strategies, and implementation (Creswell, 2008; Mills, 2007; Stringer, 1999). As state and federal laws concerning education became more and more demanding and schools transitioned

to more concentrated student-focused curricula, there is a greater need to combine pragmatic and theoretical philosophies into university education programs. In both K-12 classroom settings and university teacher preparation programs the ultimate goal is “to have a positive impact on students’ learning” (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2001). Action research is a way to address learner-centered standards based curriculum without being pejorative. Action research is also a way to measure student learning, evaluate programs, curriculum, and pedagogy while providing data useful for school accountability and accreditation review.

Action research has many uses. It can serve as professional development and be used to adjust and modify classroom pedagogy, influence student behavior, inform professional practice and program development. Much of action research is focused on change in self, students, the classroom environment, teaching strategies or materials (Valli, Van Zee, & Rennert-Ariev, 2006). Research can be complex, yet may only inform or conform, confined by “the notions of ‘research-as-planned’ and ‘research-as-lived’ within the frames of the ‘curriculum-as-planned’ and the ‘curriculum-as-lived’” (Hasebe-Ludt, 1999, p. 44). Research questions may be focused on technical or practical questions constrained to the current classroom situation; however, research may further focus on emancipatory interests that challenge “the social assumptions on which technical and practical assumptions are based”(Tripp, 1990, p. 160). Action research can help form a clearer picture of what an innovation will be like when it is implemented, be used as a tool to generate support for beliefs, and provide information that assists schools in decision-making (Allen & Calhoun, 1998). When teachers conduct action research, they may inquire into their own practice and “become, articulate about learning, teaching, and modeling lifelong

learning” (Lieberman & Miller, 2005, p. 161). Action research is a powerful process that can be employed to strengthen programs, empower individuals, and include voices that are often silenced and marginalized in education. Action research is all about social change, about making positive differences in the lives of individuals. It is about communication, responsibility, and empowerment. “We are facing here a question which is of prime importance for any social change, namely the problem of its permanence”(Lewin, 1946, p. 40). As one of the originators of the action research classes stated,

[Action research] has completely revolutionized the way that [professors] look [at] research for [teacher researchers]. ...Ultimately this is [the] power of action research.

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