Why write about action research?

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Abstract

The conduct of action research, unlike other models of research, is more to do with achieving principled change than in producing and publishing knowledge, as Kurt Lewin said in support of action research "research that produces nothing but books will not suffice" (Lewin, 1946: 35). However whilst writing and publication might be a subordinate aim to action in action research there is still, it is suggested in this article, a strong case to be made for writing and publishing from action research. In particular, following a brief exploration of the principles behind writing from research, three main advantages to writing from action research in particular are explored. The first of these refers to some of the benefit of writing to the writer themselves, with writing being described as a reflective and reflexive process, indeed a form of inquiry in its own right. Building upon these personal benefits a case is made for the collaborative benefits of writing. These are related to the collaborative principles of action research and to notions of narratives. This article then conducts a broader exploration of the potential for writing to play a part in developing a broader community of action researchers. This, it is suggested, is a consequence of developing extended dialogue through publishing from action research which can result in the formation and maintenance of extended communities, or networks, of action researchers. Finally this article concludes with a brief commentary on the nature of writing from action research, as opposed to other forms of research, and speculates that this could be considered one means of enacting the reflexive principles of the discipline of action research and of the participatory inclinations of action researchers.

1. Introduction: writing and research.

The intention of this article, in this the inaugural edition of Action Research in Education, is to explore some of the ways in which the process and outcomes of writing might relate to action research. Whilst writing is a taken for granted outcome of most research approaches this is more complicated for a movement like action research whose aspirations and foundations are to change the actions associated with practice and the contexts in which such practice is conducted. The aspiration, therefore, of action research is not to produce writing, but to change actions, as Kurt Lewin, probably the most frequently cited pioneers of action research (Adleman, 1993) put it: "research that produces nothing but books will not suffice" (Lewin, 1946: 35). However whilst the ultimate aspiration of action research might be to change actions, and not to produce writing, there is a place for writing from action research. It might be a subordinate aim to the aims to understand and change actions but the intention of this article is to make the case for writing, and in doing so for a journal like this one.

Writing from research, or academic writing is, appropriately enough, also an area of academic study in its own right (see for example: Thomson & Kamler, 2010). The basis of this interest in writing from research, in one respect, stems from aspirations to build on the work of others and sharing one's own work in a process of a continually developing knowledge base. The model of writing from research building on the work of others, could be seen as having a positivistic basis as it suggests that there is an objective reality which can be steadily measured and understood, with one study building on the certainty of previous studies in a steady accumulation of knowledge (Pring, 2000). This is problematic in areas of study where the certainty of the measurable objectives is less dependable or regular and where any knowledge is (socially) situated within particular contexts. In other words the knowledge resulting from a particular context cannot be assumed to be relevant to other contexts, even though they may be similar, and any knowledge resulting from a study of a particular context of study at a particular time would

similarly lose relevance as a consequence of any changes to that context. This also challenges the positivist basis of some forms and style of writing (Emig, 1982).

However there is also an argument to other, more humanistic, forms of technical writing (Miller, 1979). The particular challenge of trying to identify conclusions or outcomes, along the lines espoused in other forms of writing noted above, from studies located in social contexts is that the relationships and perceptions of actors in those social settings are fluid are prone to rapid change and, because of their uniqueness and complexity, are unlikely to be exactly repeatable. As a result the understanding associated with one particular study may only be relevant for a very specific set of circumstances, i.e. the ones associated with that study. But while this challenges the idea of an accumulation of knowledge it does not render the reporting of such time, and context dependent research invalid. Instead what it does is to emphasise the lack of a universality of the results of research and provides a differing emphasis on the importance of reporting research. Rather than suggesting that knowledge accumulates in a steadily progressive manner, with reports building on each other thus steadily building the 'quantity' of knowledge, this contextual perspective on reporting on research emphasises the importance of writing to others who might be interested in hearing about the contexts of and outcomes from research so that they might ask questions of their own work and contexts.

This actually emphasises a second principle of publishing academic work: that it allows others to appreciate the approach used to understand particular issues and enables them to test any subsequent knowledge claims in their own work. So in order for readers to understand the relevance of particular studies to their own work they would need to appreciate something of the context of that study, as well as the outcomes as presented by the author. What is being suggested here is that the writing of research allows readers to understand the particular approaches of the writer and to then make decisions about the extent to which the outcomes of research could be transferred to their own context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This might then provide a basis on which they can then build upon that work with their own studies but not in the linear accumulative sense suggested above. Instead subsequent studies would be associated with others and build upon them in the principals and the practices that they espouse, endeavouring, as they do, to test and understand the precepts drawn from that study in their own contexts. In other words writing for research of this nature is informative rather than constructive.

There are elements of the arguments above which are, of course, a somewhat naive representation of scientific research conducted on the conditions of the natural world. But what these arguments are intending to illustrate is not the limitations of particular epistemological perspectives but that there is a purpose to publishing the conduct and outcomes of contextualised research, which differs from the notion of an accumulation of knowledge, a perspective which seems ill suited to contextual specificity. In action research where there is a further debate about the relevance of evidence or data and the status of action, there are additional challenges, but there are also additional benefits to writing as well. In the remainder of this article three such potential benefits of writing about action research are highlighted, the first of which refers to writing as a part of the process of research and not just as an outcome.

2. Learning through writing, the reflective and reflexive benefits of writing.

The foundation of action research is based on a merged process of action and research with the aspiration to result in change. Descriptions of how this could be achieved have emphasised the role of reflection in this process (Lewin, 1946), that being one of a four stage process of plan act observe and reflect. This outline cycle has subsequently been built upon by other authors, each adding their own thoughts on the process and developing further complexity around this outline process (perhaps the two most cited examples are: Elliott, 1991; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). This serves to illustrate the importance of reflection to the individual action researcher, which is

the point of the cycle at which the action researcher thinks back upon their actions and reviews how they compared with their initial aspirations.

The first of these arguments around the place that writing can have in action research concerns the benefits to the individual about writing about their work. This has an inherently reflective quality to it. Holly has made the argument for writing about practice in general as being a process of reflective inquiry in of itself, in the argument she makes the process of writing is helpful because: "writing taps tacit knowledge; it brings into awareness that which we sensed but could not explain" (Holly, 1989: 75). Writing can be, therefore, inherently reflective, and so if the action researcher decides to write about their action research at the conclusion of a cycle this can then test their preconceptions and can interrogate their perspectives of what they think they have changed or understood from their work. This form of writing seems highly appropriate for a cyclical process, in which the writing can stimulate a reconsideration of how to achieve the aims of action research. Thus concluding a period of action research with writing about that experience is itself a process of inquiry. In explaining this process Holly (1989: 75-76) goes on to quote Ferrucci (1982) who explained this process as follows:

> Writing... can be much more powerful than we may think at first. If we start by freely writing about the issue that concerns us, we will find ourselves expressing things not previously thought of. We have to formulate explicitly that which we feel implicitly, thereby clarifying to ourselves what may have been a confused morass. In this process we may also come to new conclusions and ideas about courses of action to take . . . We should not be surprised that unconscious material surfaces so readily in our writing... Writing stimulates this interchange and allows us to observe, direct, and understand it. (Ferrucci, 1982: 41)

This argument, then, is that writing is an intensive and helpful process for an action researcher. Through the process of writing the writer pauses (in itself an increasingly unusual event in the life of busy education practitioners), to think back over their work and to interrogate that work with fresh eyes and ask both: what did I learn from this? and: in what ways did the changes I achieved relate to the change to which I aspired?

However whilst this might imply that it is useful for action researchers to write at the end of a period of action research it is worth reconsidering the reflective cycles which are the espoused basis of this approach. Applying a cycle which suggests that a process of action research might conclude with a period of reflection suggests that this is a reflection on the purpose of that action research and a reconsideration of the outcomes achieved against the outcomes aspired. However this would be a misrepresentation of the cyclical nature of action research and, in the eyes of Dewey (1920) a misrepresentation of processes (means) and outcomes (ends), as explained in the following quote:

> In contrast with fulfilling some process in order that activity may go on, stands the static character of an end which is imposed from without the activity. It is always conceived of as fixed; it is something to be obtained and possessed. When one has such a notion, activity is a mere unavoidable means to something else; it is not significant or important on its own account. As compared with the end it is but a necessary evil; something which must be gone through before one can reach the object which is alone worth while. In other words, the external idea of the aim leads to a separation of means from end, while an end which grows up within an activity as plan for its direction is always both ends and means, the distinction being only one of convenience. Every means is a temporary end until we have attained it. Every end becomes a means of carrying activity further as soon as it is achieved. We call it end when it marks off the future direction of the activity in which we are engaged; means when it marks off the present direction. Every divorce of end from means diminishes by that much the significance of the activity and tends to reduce it to a drudgery from which one would escape if he could. (Dewey, 1920: 105-106)

The suggestion of this is that the ends that the action researcher has in mind are actually a way to focus their intentions and they do not actually represent the conclusion of their work. Similarly the means to achieve the aspired outcomes are themselves aspired ends until they have been implemented. So writing should not be considered only a conclusion to action research, an 'end' of the process, but as it is itself an activity of inquiry (Thomson & Kamler, 2010) it is a part of the process of action research. In other words writing is not only an outcome of inquiry but a means of inquiry as well. To that end Holly proposes that writing be made a part of the process of inquiry and not only an outcome, specifically through adopting reflective diaries as one form of reflective inquiry (Holly, 1989).

This process of reconsidering ones aspirations and beliefs and their relationship to the actions and research (which are sometimes synonymous) associated with a process of action research can also be seen, not only as a reflective process, but also as a reflexive one. That is that through this intensive period of examination and consideration the main object of the reflective writer is to better understand and critique their own perspectives, beliefs, aspirations and their associated actions. If a diary of this nature is kept during the process of a study, as proposed, for example, by both Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Holly (1989) then this also acts as a recording of the progress of the study and the associated perceptions of the action researcher over time. As a result the writing of a diary over a period of study would act as a record of the observations and reflections of the writer over that period. It would provide the opportunity for the writer to re-visit those thoughts and observations and so could be considered a form of data reflecting the change and evaluation of those perspectives over time.

A period of writing in which one reconsiders beliefs and perceptions about change would similarly challenge and seek to understand the views of the writer and it is this quality of the process of writing which gives it its reflexive qualities (see for example: Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 2000; Payne & Payne, 2004). Writing is, therefore, an informative process of reconsideration and re-examination which can contribute to an ongoing process of action research. However if the above is purely focussed on the individual then that would satisfy neither the participatory and collaborative features of action research nor the social components of reflexivity and so writing should be associated with relationships between people arising through and from action research, as explored in the following section.

3. Sharing learning and change, allowing others to benefit from ones work.

The intention of the first section above was to explore some of the benefits to individual action researchers of the process of writing. It should be noted that the reflexive journal proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) was not intended to be shared with others but was instead meant to provide a means by which the researcher could keep a record of and so come to understand their influence on their research. It was, therefore, inherently personal and benefitted from being so.

However the critically reflective, arguably reflexive, process of writing can have other benefits than being a personal record for the researcher themselves. A second perspective on the benefits of writing concerns sharing the consequences of action research with interested others. In one respects this is seen as an obligation of being a 'researcher'. In the UK the early development of action research is not only attributed to the work of Kurt Lewin (1946) but also to the Humanities Curriculum Project, a project in which Stenhouse advocated the role of teacher as researcher (Stenhouse, 1975). As a part of his argument for this approach Stenhouse defined the process of research as being "systematic inquiry made public" (1980: 1). This emphasises the obligation of the action researcher to share their work, i.e. in order to be considered research the researcher is obliged to share what they have learnt so that others can, in turn, learn from it. This definition might not provide a complete definition of the forms of research associated with action research as it lacks the centrality of actions to that approach (McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 1996) but it does emphasise the importance of sharing the outcomes of research.

Action research as a process is not only about individual learning and change, it is intended to involve groups of individuals working together, in other words it is intended to be collaborative (Bray, Lee, Smith, & Yorks, 2000; Stringer, 1999). In this regards the intention is that action research is not simply limited to the aspirations and interests of individuals but that an explicit expectation of action researchers is that they consider and explicitly address how it would affect others in their context. Whilst one interpretation of this is for practitioner to collaborate with researcher through a processes of research focussed on practice, one sharing their expertise for research, the other practice, a more common interpretation is for practitioners and other actors in their contexts to work together through a process of change. This has led or been associated with developments intending to give students (pupils) a greater say in their schooling and to changes in it through the establishment of pupils as researchers projects (Fielding, 2001; Thomson & Gunter, 2006). To this end the work of Lewin was not limited to personal cycles of action research and he also outlined how groups were able to work together through repeating cycles of actions and reflection (Lewin, 1947). The purpose of this was to demonstrate that action research was intended to be a social and collective process and emphasise that the decisions about the progress of the inquiry and associated actions should be collective.

This also raises implications for the conduct of collaborative action research. It is not at all uncommon for action researchers to work together through the process, but the aspirations interests and perspectives of each member of that collaborative group will differ slightly. Similarly in the broad collectives through which action research is commonly administered the action researchers in those contexts can learn from each other through writing arising from that work and indeed this also has the potential to share the outcomes of action to a wider group who can themselves learn from those experiences (for an example of practitioner action researchers writing about their work see: Harrington, Gillam, Andrews, & Day, 2006). As noted above the claim from this is not that the learning or change associated with action research can or should be generalised to all contexts. Instead the principal, as noted in the introduction, is one of transferability (Rolfe, 2004), in other words the outcomes of action research cannot be applied generally automatically, but there might be implications for individuals working in similar contexts from action research conducted by others. The judgment of what can be learnt from action research and transferred from one context to another is made by the reader. Writing accounts of action research, therefore, enables transfer of practices and perspectives and can encourage collaboration.

There is perhaps a lesson to be learnt here about the style of writing appropriate for action research. The important consideration is that the reader should be able to ascertain the context process and outcomes of the research. As this is located in the diverse and complex contexts of the individual action researcher this runs the risk of encouraging a very detailed contextual examination to the detriment of the specific information of the process of inquiry and associated changes. One potentially informative aspect on relating experiences concerns the ideas of narratives. A reference to narrative can be to narrative as a method, in the ways described above in the reflective writing discussion, but it is also an observation of a phenomenon, namely that the way people relate their experiences and share those with others is through story-telling, i.e. through relating narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995). A potentially useful approach to writing to consider is, therefore, to share the stories of experiences of conducting action research. Through the story telling the writer re-examines and interrogates their work, thus being both reflective and reflexive (Chambers, 2003; Colombo, 2003), whilst the narrative also provides a contextual basis for the claims of knowledge (Craig, 1999) from which the reader can judge the relevance of the work described to their own context. This approach is not without its challenges (Walker, 2007) and there are considerations to be made about the purpose and forms of reflective narratives (Conle, 1999) but narratives can actually provide a means for collaborating through and following action research (Bolton, 2006), indeed there are narratives of attempts to collaborate through action research which readers may well find informative for their own attempts at collaboration (Dallmer, 2004)

4. Developing a community of action researchers.

The collaborative aspirations of action research, noted in the previous section, has been extended to developing communities of like minded individuals with an interest in and passion for action research. One obvious example of this, which was initiated following a series of action research projects in the UK, is the Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN). CARN has developed over the years since its inception such that it now has members from countries across the world and from a wide range of disciplines. It has also stimulated the development of a number of associate networks including those based in particular countries, New Zealand for example, or with other shared features, such as the Spanish speaking network. It has also spawned two regular publications, the CARN Bulletin (see for example: Mockler, 2006; Townsend, 2007) and the journal Educational Action Research (for a history of CARN and its work see the following article published in this journal: Somekh, 2010) and there have been considerable numbers of books written by founding, current and ex-members.

But there is a more principled point this process of writing as well. As noted above writing from and as a part of research can itself be a form of inquiry. This has the benefit of adding a reflexive aspect to the process of action research in which the researcher interrogates their own interpretation of their work and the effect that their preconceptions might have had on their actions and on the ways in which they have interpreted those actions. This, as explored in the previous section of this article, has a collaborative link as sharing writing from action research with others can serve to elicit the views of fellow action researchers which can challenge those perspectives and preconceptions, thus further enhancing the reflexive benefits of writing. However reflexivity is not just about personal interrogation, a reflexive approach, such as the one through writing outlined above, can contribute to a broader, collectively reflexive approach, in which the core beliefs and presuppositions of communities of research can be examined, understood and critiqued (Johnson & Duberley, 2003). This is achieved through developing networks of like minded individuals who share common commitments and whose views can be collectively developed, and challenged, through a common reflexive approach (Hardy, Phillips, & Clegg, 2001), one associated with sharing, through writing, the work conducted around their common interests.

The final benefit of writing from action research is, therefore, that it can contribute to the development of a community of like minded individuals. Through this writing individuals can share in and learn from the perspectives and experiences of others, informing their own perspectives on the topics and processes of change through action research but also developing complex social networks of like minded individuals. This has been exemplified is the work of CARN, but also through the publications spawned by CARN, but it is also the ultimate potential and aspiration of a journal such as this one.

5. Conclusion: participative, collective inquiry and the reflexive potential of writing.

Writing from action research seems, therefore, to have a multiplicity of benefits. It allows a reconsideration of the authors of their work and the claims associated with it, it allows groups of people to share, critique and hence learn from, each others experiences and through establishing broad collective means for sharing writing it can contribute to the development of communities and networks of like minded individuals which spread beyond the more immediate contacts of collaborative partnerships. This, throughout, has been linked to reflexivity, a concept which seems to resonate with action researchers. This is also believed to be a fundamental quality of participatory approaches, of which action research is one. Indeed in the eyes of some action research and participatory research can be seen as being synonymous (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). A commitment to writing and its reflexive qualities is, therefore, not only of benefit to individuals, collaborative groups and collectives, it is also a consequence of the fundamental perspectives of a participatory approach like action research. Heron and Reason have made this

argument in explaining the differing perspectives of participatory, as opposed to positivistic, perspective on research as follows:

> We argue that a fundamental quality of the participative worldview, which it shares with Guba and Lincoln's constructivism, is that it is self-reflexive. The participative mind… articulates reality within a paradigm, articulates the paradigm itself, and can in principle reach out to the wider context of that paradigm to reframe it. A basic problem of positivist mind is that it cannot acknowledge the framing paradigm it has created. (Heron & Reason, 1997: 274)

A participatory view of publishing is not of the accumulation of knowledge and testing of methods type referred to in the introduction. This would be more associated with a positivistic mind set which, as already established, does not fit well with the notions of contextual participatory inquiry which characterises action research. Instead whilst acknowledging the subordinate role of writing in action research pointed out by Lewin, the writing of action research can, through several levels and with a range of purposes, support the reflexivity of a discipline which is one of its distinguishing characteristics and be the consequence of what is potentially a shared fundamental quality of its protagonists, namely that they are themselves reflexive.

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