

UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE

Faculty of Education

ACTION RESEARCH IN THE GRAPHICS CLASSROOM:  
REFLECTIONS OF EDUCATIONAL CHANGE INITIATIVES IN TWO SCHOOLS

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for the Degree of Master of Philosophy

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is an account of my experiences as a Graphics teacher using critical action research to examine my educational practice while working with Standard Nine students in two white high schools in Cape Town. The subject that I taught, since it was predominantly a "practical" one, was primarily for students who were often labelled, not only by teachers but by the students themselves, as academically "weak" or "stupid" as well as "delinquent". While my initial intention was to try to improve my own educational practice and, as a consequence, be better able to help my students, it became apparent that I could not begin to understand the emerging issues in isolation from the context in which the research was undertaken.

Issues, which at first seemed relatively simple, became increasingly complex as the research cycles proceeded. Three particular issues are further discussed:

- i) The problems of qualitative research, particularly those of data collection and narrative language; The value of "thick" description as opposed to the surface representations of positivistic research modes justifies the difficulty of following the qualitative research method.
- ii) The ways in which the curriculum and school organisation can perpetuate social inequalities and injustices which may be further reinforced by student resistance; My experience of my project students strongly suggested that for whatever other reasons they were doing so badly at school, it certainly was not because they were academically "weak" or "stupid".

iii) The value that critical action research has as a form of praxis or critical pedagogy. By closing the gap between theory and practice, it has enabled me to come to understand better the ideological nature of organised education and the consequences thereof.

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## PROLOGUE

Q: What do you think of Ms C as a teacher?

A: ... (pause) ... do you mean as a person or a teacher?

I have never regarded myself as a "mainstream" teacher but over the last two years or so I have come to realise that actually I was not very different to my colleagues when it came to knowing and understanding what, apart from classroom experience, informed my practice.

My reasons for thinking that I taught differently were based on my broad experience in several other professions which had enabled me to work closely with people, travel extensively in various parts of the world and generally gain insight into and enjoyment of cultures and lifestyles sometimes vastly different from my own.

I thought that what I offered to my students was a lot more than traditional "transmission" teaching, or "chalk and talk" as it is often called. Certainly the subject that I taught, Art, was usually regarded as "different" and I found that, in general, Art teachers had more freedom in their Art Room activities than the average subject teacher. Despite this, I still felt that I could offer my students something extra and more enjoyable than the daily routine and constraints of school, precisely because I, too, was "different".

Looking back, I would still say that I was never "mainstream" but now I have a sense of what I might call liberation from the past. There was so much of myself that was unknown to me and I had very little idea of what

I was bringing into my Art Room along with my conscious experience. I was unaware that so much of my past history had shaped not only my values, but also my knowledge and my actions as a teacher. Although I thought I taught well and the results "proved" this, I was always looking for ways of "improving". I was hazy about how I could improve but assumed that a further degree in my subject would provide me with more knowledge which would enhance my teaching. I am embarrassed now to think that I had so little insight into my practice and so little understanding of the concept of "knowledge".

In my concern to become a better teacher, I started looking around for something in education that would stimulate my interest and extend my teaching. I had considered various post-graduate options but there was nothing that directly linked my teaching subject, Art, with a research component. I was left feeling somewhat frustrated and I think my enthusiasm had started to flag. Another factor that contributed to my unfocussed state was the daily frustration and anger of living and working in an unjust and authoritarian society. As a teacher, I felt increasingly that I had a responsibility to involve myself in some of the efforts being made to challenge apartheid. It was during this period that I finally registered for a Masters' Degree in Action Research and School Improvement at the University of the Western Cape, a university which had a particular attraction for me because of its fundamental commitment to the "creation of a non-racial, unitary and democratic South Africa."



This thesis is about a research process, part of which concerned two research projects, conducted in two different secondary school Art Rooms, which set out to examine the problems and effects of attempting to introduce significant change in an educational context. In trying to make sense of what happened, it became a documentation, as well, of my personal journey towards change. It is, then, at the same time a record of the way in which the research method, critical action research, became an agent of that change.

Critical action research is a systematic investigation in which the participants conduct a careful and critical self-reflective enquiry into their educational practice in a democratic attempt to help create a more meaningful and just educational situation. Through this process, I was able to come to know the theoretical basis which informed my practical teacher-knowledge to the point at which I was able to critique its ideological basis. It enabled me to begin working in a transformative way and for me that was the start of meaningful improvement. Not only has it altered the way in which I teach Art but it has made me more aware of educational practice in general.

Two years ago, I was a long way short of beginning to understand the dynamics of my Art Room, which prevented me from having any reflective insights which would have been a catalyst for real change both in myself and in my teaching practice. I am not the same teacher as I was two years ago because in many ways I am not the same person. That, I think, is at the core of this thesis.

## CHAPTER ONE

### ACTION RESEARCH THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways ...  
the point is to change it. (Karl Marx)

Since this thesis concerns the use of critical action research as an agent for transformative change, it would be appropriate at this point to take a brief look at its more recent history and a closer look at what it is and at why and how it should be used.

### ACTION RESEARCH: HISTORY AND THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

The beginning of a serious attempt to use action research in education was given momentum in England when Lawrence Stenhouse (1975) encouraged teachers to view themselves as researchers. This was an idea developed in opposition to the dominant positivist paradigm in educational research (as in the social sciences) and typified by the preference for psycho-statistical methodology. Designed and supervised by experts who are primarily concerned with control and measurable learning outcomes, the theories that are generated are prescriptive and deny the teacher's own judgement and autonomy. Students are not seen as individuals with their own classroom life but as occupants in a laboratory situation where they are "researched on" while their teachers are technicians whose job it is to implement certain instructions from the educational "experts".

Stenhouse challenged the power relations inherent in positivist research by rejecting its traditional top-down approach. This gave the action research movement its impetus by extending the traditional boundaries of educational research and placing it in the hands of classroom teachers. Stenhouse (1984:69) wrote, " ... it is the task of all educationalists outside the classroom to serve the teachers; for only teachers are in a position to create good teaching."

Hopkins (1985:24) makes the point that Stenhouse's ideas were emancipatory in the sense that he encouraged teachers to link research to the art of teaching in a process which liberated them "from a system of education that denies individual dignity by returning to them some degree of self-worth through the exercise of professional self-judgement".

However, one of the problems for critical action researchers has been that Stenhouse, working from an interpretive paradigm, proposed as his theoretical framework Popper's model of scientific rationality which leaned heavily on the term "experimentation". Although Stenhouse used the term "dialectic" to define the unified logic of action and research, seeing research and action as belonging to the teacher, there was a weakness relating to the dualism in Popper's approach, where action and research are seen as separate. In addition, as Winter (1987:33) points out, whereas the notion of contradiction inherent in dialectic relationships was seen by Popper as a " ... symptom (indeed the symptom) of error; for dialectics it is a condition of understanding ... "

Since critical action research challenges the dominance of positivism through its dialectical view of rationality it can be seen that Stenhouse's use of teacher-based research fell short of the sort of action research to which this thesis refers. Nevertheless, Stenhouse's critique of the traditional approach to educational research generated further interest in the idea of the teacher as researcher, and a movement developed in education that was linked to contemporary research in the social sciences. It was called action research. Teachers who used it as an alternative research method were able to derive first-hand knowledge of their practice from their own experience of the classroom situation in which they worked. Theory, instead of being regarded as irrelevant and separate from the practice of teaching, became an integral part of that practice.

What exactly is action research? My own experience is that it is a way of liberating one's own teaching from perpetuating social injustices and inequalities that lie within the curriculum by engaging in action and reflection which attempts to understand the basis for the theories which inform one's practice. This process does not cease to exist the minute one closes the classroom door; rather, it becomes a means by which one critiques one's personal philosophy of life.

Hopkins (1985:32) defines it as

... action disciplined by enquiry, a personal attempt at understanding whilst engaged in a process of improvement and reform.

Action research is a way for teachers to undertake research in their own classrooms with the intention of improving the quality of their practice, and where the word "improvement" is not seen as a "refining" of existing educational practice but as the establishment of a radical pedagogical role for the teacher. It is crucial that words such as "improvement" and "reform" be contextualised within the emancipatory framework of critical action research because these words in any other context are not necessarily linked with liberatory or emancipatory practices.

Elliott (1989:4) considers that the fundamental aim of action research is

... to improve practice rather than to produce knowledge. The production and utilisation of knowledge is subordinate to, and conditioned by, this fundamental aim ... improving practice involves jointly considering the quality of both outcomes and processes. Neither consideration in isolation is sufficient ... Both product and process need to be jointly considered when attempting to improve practice ... This kind of joint reflection about the relationship in particular circumstances between processes and products is a central characteristic of what Schon has called REFLECTIVE PRACTICE and others, including myself, have termed ACTION RESEARCH.

Elliott, in discussing the rejection by action researchers of the positivist paradigm with its interest in technical rationality, makes a crucial point when he warns that there are signs of the term, action research, being "highjacked" by positivist researchers as another means by which to control and shape the practices of teachers. Elliott therefore suggests that the time has come to find another term for action research, and he has started to refer to it as a "moral science". In this thesis I prefer to use the term, critical action research

because it is specifically associated with emancipatory practice and empowerment.

These sorts of issues have occupied the attention of many action researchers particularly in the United Kingdom, Europe, Australia, North America and, more recently, South Africa. While what one could call traditional action research in a specifically first world, anglo-saxon context has continued to focus on teacher "improvement", which is undoubtedly of great educational importance, its assumption about the normality of the socio-political setting in which the research takes place is a naive one. That is to say, the dominant political agenda which determines the structures and values of a particular society is left unquestioned. This agenda is seen as liberal and therefore benign, and takes for granted the assumption that education is neutral in its concern for the common good and welfare of all.

Aronowitz and Giroux (1985:37) comment in this regard, that teachers should take seriously, " ... the need to come to grips with those ideological and material aspects of society that attempt to separate the issues of power and knowledge". Similarly, Freire (1985:10) writes that " ... the structure of official knowledge is also the structure of social authority".

There are many definitions of action research: probably the most well-known and useful one is that of Carr and Kemmis (1986:162), who say that action research is

... a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants

in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which these practices are carried out.

Richard Winter (1987:viii), in a discussion of epistemological issues, suggests that

... action research addresses "head-on" social inquiry's fundamental problems - the relation between theory and practice, between the general and the particular, between common-sense and academic expertise, between mundane action and critical reflection, and hence - ultimately - between ideology and understanding.

Kemmis (1984:78), in discussing emancipatory action research or critical education science, states that action research

... has the aim of transforming education; in this view, educational change provides the essential impulse for educational understanding. Understanding education (as an aim for educational research), is therefore a moment in a transformative process, rather than a sufficient end.

Critical action research is a way of empowering teachers to effect transformatory change in their classrooms by way of becoming more critically aware of the theories that inform their practice. It involves reclaiming "teacher-knowledge" and, in that respect, may be regarded as essentially "activist" and emancipatory, for knowledge has a political agenda and teaching is a political act. For example, if one takes the view that schools are agents of cultural transmission, then their basic organisational structures will reflect those of the societies they serve. In the main, these are industrial and technological which value the positivistic emphasis on control, efficiency, predictability and certainty. As Hopkins (1984:4) puts it, "These values ... result in an

educational system which militates against uniqueness, creativity and individual autonomy."

Implicit within critical action research is the idea of praxis, which is fundamental to Friere's (1972:96) work, and which is seen by him as action-and-reflection. It is a process which recognises that meaning is socially constructed and not absolute, in which "the act of knowing involves a dialectical movement which goes from action to reflection, and from reflection upon action to a new action".

Critical action research, then, is a form of research which seeks a beneficial change in peoples' lives and, by extension, a change in the social system in which they live. For teachers, it is particularly appropriate because it provides a means whereby they can examine, as researchers, their actions and the theories that inform them, in a self-reflective and critical way, with a view to broader transformative change, for education has to be primarily understood in a socio-political context. Hargreaves (1985:21), remarks that

Organised education is a highly political affair. It shapes and channels life opportunities, it opens up and blocks off careers for those who work within it, it draws heavily on scarce resources from the state budget, and it is subject to a range of competitive pressures from all sectors of society.

Many critical action researchers have used the work of Habermas (1972) as a point of departure. His theory of "knowledge-constitutive interests" concerns the idea that all knowledge is founded on human needs and interests. These interests are more fundamental than knowledge and determine a certain view of knowledge within a society. For



Habermas, there are three basic interests, the technical, the practical and the emancipatory.

Educational research which follows the method of the empirical-analytic sciences, for example the psycho-statistical method, incorporates the technical interest and generates a positivistic knowledge which has, as Grundy (1987:12) remarks, a fundamental "... interest in control and the technical exploitability of knowledge". This form of research is hierarchical and maintains a separation between theory and practice, the researcher and the researched, and ultimately the individual and society.

This interest, argues McNiff (1988:xiv) has led to a situation where

teachers are being encouraged, systematically and deliberately, to de-skill themselves. Instead of being encouraged to build up the wisdom to judge their own practice in terms of its educational competence, teachers are expected to implement identified criteria of excellence, to which they and their children are expected to conform ... this view of teachers in their classrooms denies them a self-image of reflective educators, and turns them simply into highly skilled technicians.

The practical interest has as its key concepts, understanding, interaction and consensual interpretation as a way of generating knowledge. It takes into consideration the experiences and perceptions of those involved but without any deliberate attempt to contextualise this within an understanding of power relations within society. Grundy (1987:17) comments that while the practical interest has the potential for freedom, it proves to be inadequate for the promotion of true

emancipation because of the " ... propensity of persons to be deceived, even when understandings are arrived at in open discussion and debate".

The practical interest is radically different from the technical interest in that it recognises that the self-understanding of the participants is crucial to the generation of knowledge and, ultimately, that meaning and action are the bedrock of explanation. However, it is essentially a liberal construction which assumes society to be benign and chooses only to describe social reality, rather than criticise and transform it. One of the limitations of the practical interest is, therefore, that it does not make allowances for the possibility of a false consciousness existing in the participants, i.e. that despite the achievement of consensus through open debate, the real meaning of a situation could be obscured if the participants are unaware of the power relations which may manipulate their understandings.

The emancipatory interest goes further than the practical interest in that it insists on moving beyond self-understanding. While the technical and practical interests claim to be politically neutral, the emancipatory interest acknowledges its political agenda with the express purpose of criticising and changing social reality. It addresses the problem of false consciousness by engaging in a process of ideology-critique as a way of empowering individuals to effect beneficial changes in their lives.

If one takes the view that knowledge arises out of the interest in power and remains as a means of maintaining that power [Gramsci (1971); Bowles

and Gintis (1976); Bourdieu (1973); Giroux (1981) and many others], then education is a means of reproducing that knowledge. Teachers are often passive transmitters or active disseminators who tend, unconsciously or consciously, to maintain the status quo.

It is through the school curriculum that the reproduction of knowledge takes place. The curriculum informed by the technical interest and dominated by positivism, is intended to reinforce control over what is learned and how it is learned through pre-specified objectives. The students are seen as passive receivers of knowledge and the teachers as transmitters.

The curriculum derived from the practical interest, one which Stenhouse advocated, encourages interpretation, the exercise of personal judgement and the reaching of consensus through open debate between the participants, i.e. both students and teacher, but does not attempt to address the deeper ideological debates surrounding the nature of knowledge although the participants are encouraged to become active creators of knowledge.

The emancipatory curriculum which emerges from critical action research, goes beyond teacher and student judgement because it works towards freedom from distortions, which, according to Grundy (1987:19) involves

the participants in the educational encounter, both teacher and pupil, in action which attempts to change the structures within which learning occurs and which constrain freedom in often unrecognised ways. An emancipatory curriculum entails a reciprocal relationship between self-reflection and action.

In looking at the role which the curriculum plays in the reproduction of social inequalities, the importance of the organisational structure of the school within which lies the so-called "hidden curriculum" must not be overlooked. In particular, the work of Jackson (1968), Bowles and Gintis (1976), Willis (1977), and Apple (1979), has examined the ways in which the hidden curriculum reinforces conformity rather than creativity, and inequality and discrimination rather than empowerment.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to deal more deeply with these issues but it is important to stress that the often unquestioning acceptance by teachers, of the curriculum, both overt and hidden, is a situation which critical action research seeks to undermine.

Critical action research set in the authoritarian framework of South African society, in common with similar research in, for example, Europe United Kingdom, North America and Australia, does not make the naive assumption that the context in which it takes place is benign.

For teachers working in English-medium white schools, it is particularly important to recognise that the often "traditional-liberal" English public school models on which they are based, mask injustices and perpetuate the status quo as much as the Afrikaans-medium "Christian National Education" models do.

Since critical action research is not only concerned with the improvement of educational practice, it focuses on transformative change

by contextualising it within the abnormal and grossly unjust situation in which that practice occurs.

The socio-political context of South Africa is currently undergoing major change, and a "Brave New South Africa" is the password of the day, despite the continuing conflict. A critical action researcher would do well to consider, of the changes in education that are being proposed, which ones will indeed be transformatory and emancipatory, for example, "open" schools. Given that education is a means of reproducing the status quo, Giroux (1981:109), believes that

... reproduction is a complex phenomenon that not only serves the interests of domination but also the seeds of conflict and transformation.

Teachers engaged in critical action research, which stresses participation and collegiality, need to pool their knowledge and create a "community of researchers" who are committed to an educational practice which is transformatory rather than focussed on domination or conflict. In other words they need to take cognisance, continually, of the context in which they work, for major change in the socio-political order, and the power struggles that ensue may not necessarily lead to liberatory practices either in the macro-context of society or the micro-context of the classroom.

The idea of a "community" of transformative researchers has implications for the traditional methods of teacher improvement through INSET (in-service training). There is a need to reject INSET courses that are run in a "top-down" and prescriptive manner with teachers being seen as

ever-more efficient implementers of a curriculum devised by external policy-makers. Rather, thinking teachers need to see the potential for liberation in classroom research with themselves as researchers, and need to be able to engage in dialogue with their colleagues in an attempt to resolve problems of practice. McNiff (1988:140), in discussing the potential of the INSET revolution, considers that

... the two sides of the coin are an enhancement of the quality of education in terms of personal and social benefit for the clients, and an improvement in the quality of education in terms of understandings and explanations for the teacher.

Thinking students, too, need the support of similar classroom situations as much as teachers do. INSET which seeks to engage not only teachers but students as participants in critical action research, stands a better chance of attempting to resolve problems of practice through the broader notion of "collegiality" which the idea of "classroom communities" suggests.

At this point, it is necessary to take a closer look at the methodology of critical action research as a way of attempting to resolve problems of practice.

#### **ACTION RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The methods of critical action research are part of the critical ethnographic research paradigm which has as its purpose, qualitative "research with" rather than quantitative "research on" its participants. Without wishing to get unnecessarily involved in the complex debates

that surround ethnographic research, it is important to note that it shares a concern for the realities hidden beneath surface appearances with critical action research, as well as a commitment to the participants in the research process. In addition, reflexivity is a crucial partner to the rich descriptive qualities of both research methodologies. Theory and practice, the researcher and the researched are engaged in a dialectical relationship in which the action and reflective understandings of the participants form a central part of the process towards a hoped-for transformation.

How is critical action research done? The methodology is often quite simply summed up as being an interlocking four-phase process of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. However, in practice, it is much more complex than that and almost defies coherent description because these phases cannot simply be regarded as separate events. The open, flexible nature of action research is one of integrating and interweaving rather than of compartmentalising and it moves back and forth from the micro to the macro-situation. Reflection usually leads on to refinements of the initial plan and a further process can be initiated. This methodology takes cognisance of the fact that the situation or problem being researched will inevitably release a shifting, multi-layered investigation. In fact, the structure of the action research process is often visualised as a spiral with no fixed end-point, and which allows one spiral of research to lead to another or to precipitate further spirals in apparent digressions or excursions. These can be either simultaneous or serial. It is these spirals that provide the means to shift from one layer of understanding to the next.

Ebbutt (1983:14) has questioned the usefulness of the spiral as a metaphor, suggesting that it does not capture the "messiness" of the action research process. He thinks of it as " comprising of a a series of successive cycles, each incorporating the possibility for the feedback of information within and between cycles".

I think there is a basic problem in trying to visualise such a complex process, one that lies within the positivist notion of regarding a diagram as unequivocal. Although the words "spiral" or "cycle" are suggestive of a dynamic process which can be subjected, at any time, to changes of direction, it is difficult to conceive of an effective visual equivalent of the word "messiness" without causing great confusion.

Therefore, without resorting to the use of a diagram, with the double possibility of causing either confusion for the more literal reader or a prescriptive framework for the more technological, I shall now attempt a discussion of the different but interlocking stages. However, before doing so, there are two points that I would like to make about critical action research relating to further issues that Ebbutt has discussed.

In looking at the nature of the dynamics that drive the research process through its successive cycles, Ebbutt (1983:15) talks about having also to consider the "imperative for change" of participants in the research. He cites as an example the motivation experienced by black minority groups in seeking ways to improve their situations. I would develop that idea further by commenting that in any critical action research situation, the participants often do not see the need for any change and