Learning to do Action Research for Social Change

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Introduction[1]

Action research provides an alternative approach to bringing about changes in knowledge, policy, and practice. But to be effective and inclusive, taking into account complex dynamics of power and participation, action research requires capable facilitators with particular skills—such as the ability to give attention to personal and collective processes of reflection and action. This article explores the challenges of learning to do this kind of action research that are faced by practitioners and activists working for social change in diverse contexts around the world. The article reviews these challenges, offering insights and lessons from an innovative new master's degree program called the MA in Participation, Power and Social Change, which uses action research and reflective practice as the basis of its approach to learning.

Conventional views of policymaking usually see "research" as a specialized activity which makes objective data and analysis available to rational decision-makers, with the assumption that good knowledge will lead to better policies, and from there, to improved practices and outcomes. Action research, broadly defined, starts with a very different view of what knowledge is, where it comes from, and how it contributes to change. Most action research approaches involve a range of actors throughout the inquiry process—shaping the questions to be asked, gathering and analyzing different kinds of "data," reflecting on experiences and assumptions, and experimenting with new kinds of action. Knowledge, policy, and practice are co-created through an emergent process of action and learning, often including some form of critical reflection and reappraisal of the norms, values, and assumptions by which we make sense of things, as well as an understanding of how these are shaped by power.

In a world in which the challenges we face are increasingly complex and inter-related, and where universal solutions appear to have reached their limits, action research can lead to more context-sensitive, adaptive, and innovative understandings and responses. Action research provides a way of representing the perspectives and subjectivities of diverse actors (including those leading the research process) in all their complexity. It can highlight differences, commonalities, and underlying assumptions, rather than assuming that there is a singular, "objective" version of things. Those who facilitate action research try to take dynamics of power into account to ensure that the concerns and forms of knowledge held by less powerful people are not excluded—and that these people can mobilize their knowledge to effect change.

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[1] This article is adapted from two previous articles: Taylor and Pettit (2007) and Pettit (2008). The author is indebted to Peter Taylor for his contributions.

There are many traditions of action research, some more rooted in activism and social movements (Freire, 1974; Fals-Borda, 2001), others arising from organizational learning and management, and still others related to qualitative social science methods.[2] Many are focused on the learning and transformation of the participants themselves, as a core principle, but action research methods are also used in more conventional settings to enhance the quality and integrity of findings. What most approaches have in common is the idea that creating knowledge for change is essentially a social and political process, and that how this process is facilitated will shape the outcomes.

Action research, therefore, raises vital questions about the capacities of those who facilitate it to mediate the relationship between power and knowledge. If these approaches have the potential to enable more adaptive, contingent, and power-sensitive ways of knowing and responding to complex problems, taking into account diverse perspectives and knowledges, how can capacities for action research be *learned*?   Traditionally, research has been the province of highly qualified, specialized academics, with the "subjects" of research in a largely passive role. In action research, these roles change. Knowledge is co-created through a shared process, researchers become actors for change, and practitioners become learners and shapers of meaning. A major challenge, then, is to develop capacities for inquiry into practice and experience, including skills of critical reflection, reflexivity, and collaborative learning among practitioners.

This article responds to this challenge through reflections on my experiences as a teacher and facilitator with social change practitioners who are carrying out action research processes in their own organizations and communities. My work is based at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex in the UK—a research, teaching, and consulting institute focused on interdisciplinary, collaborative approaches to issues of global poverty and inequality. With a small group of colleagues, we have created an innovative new masters program that supports those who wish to develop capacities to use action research as an approach to social and organizational change. The article begins with a brief overview of the context and why it matters to develop action research capacities among social change practitioners, and then it turns to reflections and lessons from the MA in Participation, Power and Social Change (MAP).

The Challenge of Facilitating the "Learning of Action Research"

In the world of international "development studies," over the past 20 years, there has been a growing, and at times, controversial, interest in action research and participatory research methods. IDS is known for its long-standing support of participatory methodologies in international development (e.g., Chambers, 1997; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). During the 1990s, we contributed to the innovation and dissemination of approaches such as participatory rural appraisal (PRA), participatory learning and action (PLA), and others. There were many successes, but concerns were also raised about the way participatory methods could be misused as they were mainstreamed by large donor agencies and governments (Brock

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[2] For an excellent compendium of diverse action research sources, traditions, and critical reviews, see Bradbury and Reason (2008).

& McGee, 2002). Challenges were raised against further "scaling up" of participatory approaches, and indeed, about their very promise as vehicles of change (Cooke & Kothari, 2001).

Yet amidst these criticisms, there were also many examples of participatory research approaches which enabled poor and marginalized people to gain greater voice and control over their lives. By the 2000s, methods of participatory planning, budgeting, and accountability were being used widely in the course of decentralized local governance around the world (Gaventa, 2004). Participatory methods continued to evolve in fields such as agriculture, natural resource management, health, reproductive rights, HIV/AIDS, gender analysis and women's empowerment, youth participation, adult literacy, and other sectors (Brock & Pettit, 2006). Growing interest in rights-based development and citizenship led many of these innovations, increasingly, to explore the uses of participatory methods in claiming rights and deepening democracy (Pettit & Wheeler, 2005). Earlier criticism of participation as "the new tyranny" was tempered by renewed interest in its "transformative" potential (Hickey & Mohan, 2004). Finally, there is growing evidence of the ways that action research processes can transform people and institutions—not through linear models of research-policy-practice, but through emergent forms of action-reflection.

At IDS, in the course of these trends and debates, there was much reflection about the role of our training and teaching activities—particularly whether we were contributing as much as we could to the qualities of participatory practice needed by those engaged in ever-more complex processes of change. We were also asking questions about power, having seen how easily it could distort and undermine well-intended processes of "participation" in generating knowledge to influence policy and decision-making. We realized that we needed to examine more carefully how we went about teaching methods to those who practice participation as a process of social change—to help learners bridge the worlds of experience and theory, and to integrate personal reflection with critical analysis of their actions. As a higher education institute, we recognized that we needed to offer a different kind of educational experience and approach to research methods. How can change agents develop the concepts, skills, awareness, and capacities they need to generate knowledge and action with others in participatory ways? How can we help learners integrate experience with theory, personal reflection with critical analysis, and understanding with action, and also become more effective as reflective practitioners and facilitators of learning?

The MA in Participation, Power and Social Change

Out of this reflection on the challenges of learning to facilitate action research came the idea of creating the MA in Participation, Power and Social Change (MAP),[3] an 18-month program in three parts which makes action research central to the learning process. Students begin with an intensive 10-week period of study at the Institute (Part 1), followed by a 12-month period of work-based learning (Part 2), and they end with a 10-week period of study and synthesis back at IDS (Part 3). Students are selected on the basis of having had significant (3–5 years') experience, preferably using participatory approaches in

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[3] The MA in Participation, Power and Social Change (MAP) was developed by Jethro Pettit, Peter Taylor, and John Gaventa, with initial support from Darcy Ashman. Others who have contributed greatly to its development include Andrea Cornwall, Colette Harris, Rosalind Eyben, Joy Moncrieffe, and Mariz Tadros.

the context of social change efforts, anywhere in the world. Their work placements are either with their current employer, or with another project or organization of their own choosing.

The idea behind this approach to action research is that one's work environment can be a place of learning, using everyday activities and experiences as a basis for inquiry. Learners engage in action, reflect in different ways upon their experiences, and make connections to key concepts and theories, all as a basis for learning and further action. In preparation for field work, Part 1 of the program is designed around two major streams. One is focused on concepts and practices of power, participation, and social change, which are explored through case studies and students' own experiences. The other focuses on methods of action research and reflective practice, including practical research skills and techniques. Students develop a learning plan, which is then finalized in dialogue with the people and organizations they will be working with.

MAP is now in its fifth round, each one drawing about 10–15 participants from diverse countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, Europe, and North America. Students come from international and local NGOs, from governments and aid agencies, and from diverse fields, such as politics, activism, management, and technical support. Their inquiries have focused on a wide range of issues, including sustainable agriculture, pastoral people's rights, natural resource management, water and sanitation, education, community development, disability, migration, conflict, governance, HIV/AIDS, sexuality, youth empowerment, citizens' media and communication, organizational learning, and leadership. All five groups to date have formed strong learning communities. They are practitioners using methods of action research to co-create and mobilize knowledge for change.

Learning from the Experience of Teaching Action Research

The MAP program has evolved with our own action research and reflective practice as educators, as well as in response to student feedback and evaluations. Here are a few reflections on our learning thus far.

Learning action research. We found that gaining confidence in using action research methods requires more time and preparation than we had thought. The challenge is not just to teach research methods, but to help practitioners learn and improve their ways of working through the medium of action research. This involves weaving together diverse methodological strands and research traditions, and then combining these with learning about theories and concepts of power, participation, and social change. The emphasis has shifted from "research" as a distinct activity to its being embedded in everyday practice through cycles of action, reflection, and learning.

Deepening reflective practice. We found a need to develop a stronger curriculum on action research, and to integrate more methods of reflective practice. Students experiment with diverse methods for inquiring into their personal values, senses of purpose and motivation, and the sources and inspirations for these that exist in their lives. They also look self-critically at their own positionality and actions. Using methods of creative and exploratory writing, storytelling, and drama, as well as analytical writing, students explore who they are, how their identities and actions may impact upon others, and how

they can engage with others in similar kinds of reflection. This reflexive dimension of action research is vital in recognizing shifting socially embedded norms and internalized habits and patterns of power.

Exploring identities and roles. Many students have found it challenging to juggle their different roles and identities while doing action research. Being an activist and a researcher, a worker and a student, a teacher and a learner—not to mention other identities of gender, race, ethnicity, age, parenthood or partnership—has, at times, been very demanding. Students realized that reflective practice includes developing self-awareness of these different identities and roles, and of how one's position and perception may affect, or be affected by, cultural norms and power relations. Most students inquired into these issues in some form. For example, the director of an African NGO carried out a participatory exercise amongst his staff regarding their perceptions of him as a leader.

Supporting cooperative inquiry. Beyond the need for individual reflexivity, action research involves collaborative processes of dialogue and learning. Several students actively used such approaches in their own contexts as part of their learning processes. For example, one student formed a cooperative inquiry group within her Brazilian organization in order to explore changes that were taking place in the organization, in their relationships, and in their perceptions of partners outside the organization. Such experiences have helped us to discover that dimensions of power can be accessed and understood better by integrating multiple forms of learning and knowing (Pettit, 2006).

Maintaining learning and reflection in practice. Action research is best learned through practice and experience, but making time for this can be challenging for busy practitioners and activists. Carrying out action research and reflective practice requires a structure that will support continuous cycles of learning. Because of the distance and the absence of face-to-face contact, we now emphasize more regular communication between supervisors and students, and we have instituted some changes to make the most of a seminar that takes place half-way through field work. Many find it difficult to make time for learning in the face of their work and family responsibilities. In some cases, employers do not understand the time commitment required; they are now told that students should be allowed 25% of their work time for action research.

Conclusions

Learning to be an effective action researcher is more than a question of the technical learning of tools and methods, and of applying these in the study of "others." The MAP program aims to facilitate the learning of action research as a way of working for change, embedded in practice. Participants develop self-awareness about their own learning, the different forms it can take, and how it is connected to processes of both personal and social change. They also learn to stimulate this kind of learning and reflection at collective levels. In this way, students adopt principles and practices of facilitating learning within their work with communities and organizations. We can relate these ways of working to Peter Reason's (1994) "triad" of integrating learning at the individual, group, and community levels. Students have often applied a range of closely integrated methods that include individual reflective practice, cooperative inquiry, and participatory action research. Most students have used action research with a diverse range of community groups, applying it in work on public education, popular participation in local

government, the reframing of a national constitution, or the identification of local animal health practices, to name only a few. We can see also the practical value of the theoretical perspective of Gaventa and Cornwall (2001), which highlights the importance of interlinking knowledge, action, and consciousness.

As part of this inquiry, and as the faculty, we have felt a need to relate what we are learning about action research to our own practice as educators. If we are to teach, and to facilitate learning, effectively, inclusively, and democratically, then we need to internalize and apply action research approaches as a collective vehicle to bring about personal transformation and social change within ourselves, as much as we do with others. We need, as teachers and trainers, to combine a range of capabilities, including concepts, skills, and approaches from diverse traditions of action research and participatory action research. These include contextual analysis; understanding of social, political, and organizational realities; awareness and analysis of power; and the ability to respond to power dynamics; as well as strategies for organizing and advocacy, strategic management and leadership skills, and a range of reflective practice, inter-personal, and communication capacities.

We have also found a need, as educators, to move beyond narrow methodological or pedagogical approaches. We need to understand and work actively with the multiple dimensions and levels of learning and knowledge involved in transformative action research. Traditions of action research, adult education, and transformative learning use cycles of action and reflection primarily to reveal and challenge embedded assumptions, dominant structures, and monopolistic knowledge. These methods are powerful for analyzing structures "out there," and for examining how we internalize societal power relations, but they do not always deepen awareness of personal and inter-personal power dynamics. Traditions such as human inquiry and cooperative inquiry facilitate more subtle action and reflection into those engrained patterns of thinking and behavior which inhibit change at the individual and group levels. The inquiry process can be deepened if we move beyond conceptual analysis and use "extended epistemologies" of learning and knowing—for example, approaches which are experiential, presentational, conceptual, and practical (Heron, 1999; Heron & Reason, 2001).

In imagining and developing the masters program described in this article, we have engaged in a powerful collective learning experience. Much learning has occurred that continues to inform our own personal approaches to teaching, providing a rich source of experience to share more widely. As we continue to learn through critical reflection on our own practice, our understandings and awareness are raised constantly, to new levels of consciousness regarding our own agency through the act of teaching. We teach because we wish to make a difference, and through our teaching, we become different ourselves. These are the principles and practices of action research that we hope will be learned and applied by others.

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