

From rhetoric to reality: the role of Living Theory Action Research in transforming education

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Abstract

Transformation, based on the values of social justice, inclusion and respect for human dignity, is currently a repeated refrain in the corridors of Higher Education and Training Institutions (HETIs) in South Africa. The Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University is no exception and espouses transformation as a core value. However, there is a danger that transformation and its accompanying values will remain empty rhetoric unless they are incorporated into everyday practice at micro-levels. In this article, we pose the question, "How can we ensure that our institutional values (that promote transformation) are incorporated into our teaching practices?" We contend that action research provides an ideal opportunity to realise these values, thereby ensuring that transformation does take place at ground level. We make a case that self-study practitioner enquiry has a vital role to play in the development of new theories of practice which will contribute to the transformation of the epistemology of educational enquiry in the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University.

Key words: action research; higher education transformation; values based practice.

Introduction and educational concerns

In the current South African context, the concept of transformation is high on the agenda of Higher Education and Training Institutions (HETIs). As early as 2000, the Council on Higher Education report recommended that universities transform by adopting core principles and values, such as equity and redress, democracy and social justice (Council on Higher Education, 2000). In response to this, the interim mission statement of the newly merged Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) is based on values that reflect equality and democracy (transformation for equity and fairness, respect for diversity, people-centredness, engagement, and the principle of providing an “accessible and affirming” environment for students), as well as quality (excellence, innovation, integrity) (NMMU, 2005). There is no doubt that the values are laudable and very necessary in order to actively respond to past inequities, but the real challenge will be to integrate these values in all aspects of the functioning of the institution, particularly in the culture of teaching and learning.

Engaging an institution in a transformation process requires a very serious commitment from all the role players. Transformation necessitates the restructuring of values and ‘old’ ways of thinking and being, in order to find ways that uphold more progressive values. It is human nature to want to preserve the very values that afforded some individuals privileges over others. There is, therefore, a very real danger that the values underpinning transformation - social justice, inclusion, democracy and respect for diversity and human dignity - may remain empty rhetoric unless management, academics, administrative staff and students not only accept, but also live out these values in their daily activities.

We are particularly concerned with how we as academics can begin to change our teaching and learning practices to make them more representative of transformative values and principles. We believe that teaching must be a transformative process and practice, in keeping with the notion of *quality as transformation*, as required by the Higher Education Quality Committee of the Council on HE (2003). This approach is based on the assumption that “if Higher Education Institutions provide transformative learning experiences for students, graduates will in turn become change agents in society” (Council on Higher Education, 2003:4).

We contend that sustainable transformation can only take place at the micro level. In order to provide a transformative teaching and learning experience for students, we academics need to interrogate our own practices to ensure that they are representative of the values espoused by the university. If we accept that teaching is an historically and socially constructed practice (McLaren, 1988:xix), then we need to explore and question what we do in this light in order for transformation to take place. Action research also provides the ideal platform to realize transformative values, while simultaneously increasing research output. Education, and educators, can thus be transformed through research.

Action research as basis for transformation

Values-based practitioner self-study

Action research is hardly a new concept. Its origins have been traced back to the work of Collier in the 1940s (McNiff & Whitehead, 2003:40). According to McNiff and Whitehead (2005:1), action research has increased in popularity worldwide. As it has evolved, several different trends have

become discernable, trends that are based on various philosophies, ideologies and methodologies. We contend that the kind of action research that embraces self-study practitioner enquiry, as espoused by McNiff and Whitehead (2003), is necessary if transformation is to take place in institutions where democracy is valued. We conceptualise action research as a means of enquiry whereby academics investigate, interrogate and evaluate their everyday practice in a quest to improve their own work and influence the learning of others.

Action research is distinctive from the more traditional forms of research, in that it not only asks questions about external social issues or situations, but also focuses on personal experiences. All research questions stem from an 'insider' view. For example, one of the researchers was concerned about the fact that very few students actually prepared for class, despite being repeatedly reminded of how important pre-reading and preparation was. Instead of formulating the research problem along the lines of *'Why do students not prepare for class?'* she asked herself *'How can I adapt my teaching to encourage students to prepare for class?'* Action research therefore involves taking personal initiative in the testing out in practice of ideas for improvement, and as such is an ideal way to contribute to improvement and change in education. By changing and improving our own teaching and learning practices, we are contributing to the process of transformation in our immediate environment.

Questions that we individually and collectively ask ourselves as we engage in the process of transformation include:

- Do I treat every student with the same respect and dignity?
- Do I treat colleagues with respect and dignity?
- Are my classrooms emancipatory?
- What do I do in my teaching to contribute to the myth of student powerlessness?
- How do my values/cultural background benefit/disadvantage my students?
- Do I acknowledge and encourage diverse opinions?
- Do I provide for educational self-determination?
- Do I take into account student diversity and individual differences?
- Am I providing a quality education?

Such questions enable us to interrogate our everyday practices and take action to ensure affirmative responses will uphold the NMMU's transformative values and principles. Action research also keeps the focus on improving the relevance and quality of education in keeping with a specific context. This is important in times of mergers and government pressure for universities to increase throughput and be cost-effective, when there is a real danger of the 'business' discourse taking precedence over education and learning. We have personally experienced that merger issues currently tend to dominate our thinking and activities, at the expense of our teaching and learning. The questions we pose ourselves in our action research help to keep us in a process of continual reflection and ensure our teaching is supportive of the values on which the university is basing its transformation.

The point of departure for action research is therefore a concern, or a 'problem' that the practitioner experiences. Unlike traditional research, however, the research problem is not externalized, but is fully owned by the researcher and therefore regarded as something that can be improved by a change in practice, approach or attitude. This necessitates a shift from using research to impose

changes from without, towards improving the environment and human practices from within. Transformation takes place when our usual “assumptions, strategies and habits are challenged” (Reason & Torbert, 2001:1).

Because action research stems from an ‘insider’ view, it has a strong *value* base. The concern that becomes the ‘research question’ usually arises when the educator experiences cognitive dissonance due to one or more educational values being denied. This denial can lead to the educator experiencing him/herself as a living contradiction (Whitehead, 1989) and is the basis for the interrogation of his/her own practice in a quest to bring practice more into line with educational values. For example, the educational values of democracy, inclusion and social justice are negated if the majority of students in the class are second or third language English speakers, and the teaching practices are not altered to make allowance for this. Because of their language problems, these students may not be afforded the same opportunity to understand and communicate that understanding as first language English speakers.

We have a considerable number of Chinese students studying at the NMMU, and this poses challenges for teaching, in terms of language, since the majority struggle to understand and be understood in the classroom. As action researchers we accept that we need to adapt our teaching to ensure that these students have equal opportunity to learn and perform academically. This has led to the introduction of strategies such as pairing a Chinese student with another student, who acts as a “mentor” and assists in explaining tasks; letting Chinese students group together to discuss the work in their own language and then assisting them in translating their ideas; and introducing glossaries into the study guide. Transformation for equality and fairness must obviously start with the teaching and learning practices of each individual.

Ontological commitment

Action research involves the practitioner making an ontological commitment to improving their practice. Presumably, people teach because they believe in certain educational values, which their teaching should reflect, otherwise they will experience themselves as a “living contradiction” (Whitehead, 1989:2). In South African educational institutions today, such values (e.g. fairness and equality) are often negated due to the under-resourced nature of many institutions and the inequities that still prevail.

How we understand ourselves in relation to one another and to our environment (our ontology) determines how we interact with others. The ontological value underlying action research is that, although we see ourselves as individuals, we recognize that we live with others in a shared environment. However, rather than trying to change or improve others, action research focuses on self-transformation in an attempt to work together for sustained development, on both a personal and collective level. This implies accountability and acceptance of personal responsibility for all we do.

In order to transform social constructs, people need to do more than just acknowledge diverse perspectives and multiple voices – they also need to commit to working with them to create a mutually acceptable reality which is suitable for the specific context in that specific time (Reason & Torbert, 2001:6). The enquiry process does not remain an impersonal reflection – it becomes an emotional and intellectual process carried out in the midst of everyday practice. Values have a

strong emotive component and this emotion contributes to the passion which the actors have to experience in order to be effective action researchers. The commitment to self-transformation becomes the driving force behind everyday practice, and in this way organisational transformation is attained from within.

We therefore transform ourselves by trying to live out our values in our everyday interaction with colleagues, students and management. Action research has universal human well-being as its base value and communicative action (Habermas, 1975) as a method of realizing it (McNiff, 2005b:1). However, action research is not carried out merely for the purpose of personal and collective transformation. It also aims to generate theory. As Marshall and Reason (1994, p.118) wrote:

All good research is *for me, for us, and for them*; it speaks to three audiences ... It is *for them* to the extent that it produces some kind of generalizable ideas and outcomes ... It is *for us* to the extent that it responds to concerns for our praxis, is relevant and timely ... for those who are struggling with problems in their field of action. It is *for me* to the extent that the processes and outcomes respond directly to the individual researcher's being-in-the-world.

Theory generation

Whitehead (1989:42) explains the difference between traditional research and action research in terms of theory generation. Traditional research generates theory by means of propositions which determine relationships between variables. For example, an increase in student motivation is positively related to student performance. Such theory is necessary in order to understand what affects student performance, but it does not contribute in itself to a higher pass rate. What is missing is the *action* component – ‘*What can I do to increase student motivation in the class in order to improve their learning?*’

Whitehead (1989:42) argues that educationalists should take responsibility for the generation of a “living educational theory”, created from descriptions and explanations of their own practices. He states:

I am arguing that the propositional form is masking the living form and content of an educational theory which can generate valid descriptions and explanations for the educational development of individuals. This is not to deny the importance of propositional forms of understanding. I am arguing for a reconstruction of educational theory into a living form of question and answer which includes propositional contributions from the traditional disciplines of education.

The research process followed in action research is similar to Schön's (1996) notion of the reflective practitioner. The researcher follows a repetitive cycle of observe – analyse – act to change – evaluate. In times of relative stability, Schön (1996) claimed that knowledge is static and problems can be solved using previous experience and proven solutions. In times of change, such as those Higher Education is currently experiencing in the merger context, past experience cannot be relied on to provide solutions, and there is a much greater need for critical and creative thinking in order to provide solutions to dilemmas. There is also a need for people to change their frames of reference and be open to diverse opinions and differing forms of knowledge. Real reflection on this level therefore involves analyses not only of practice, but also of frames of reference and hitherto accepted philosophies. It necessitates collaborating with others within our social context, discussing and

sharing our insights and mutually influencing each other in order to arrive at transformed practices which are mutually beneficial to all.

In the NMMU context, the change in campus sites for specific programmes has caused much upset among students and staff alike. Many of us feel that the process of site allocation has transgressed the transformational values of democracy and transparency. The feelings and opinions of the people concerned have been discounted. It has been assumed that students who live in the townships of Port Elizabeth will prefer to go to the Vista campus, which is situated in such a township, adjoining a squatter camp. However, the majority of black students and staff have not been happy with this assumption. An action research project has been initiated around this issue to determine how the situation and concerns about the negation of transformational values can best be handled, so that all parties can come to an acceptable agreement. By writing up this project, the researchers involved will generate theory on introducing change in institutions, which may help those involved in similar situations in the future.

Exerting an educative influence

Action research also requires the practitioner to disseminate accounts of this reflective cycle in order to influence the learning of others. This 'educative influence' (Whitehead, 1989:1) can have positive effects on the entire academic system – changes that the academic makes in teaching and learning practices will influence not only students, but also colleagues and the academy in general. The Action Research for Education group at the NMMU has attracted the interest of at least twenty academics, who are now actively interrogating their own practice and their educative values. We have established links with groups in London, Ireland and Bath in the UK and are busy setting up links with academics at Oldenburg in Germany. We are all linked via e-mail and regularly share our work and ideas with each other.

As practitioners interrogate their practice, they also interrogate the assumptions behind their actions and this can result in the emergence of new assumptions and practices. One of our team assumed her practices were student-centred, because that was one of the basic principles on which her programme was based. However, when she interrogated the concept of 'student-centred', she realized that the teaching and learning practices hitherto accepted by all as such, were lacking in some of the basic criteria. She initiated discussion on this with her colleagues and this resulted in changes being made to how the modules were taught. As action researchers, we critique not only our own practices, but by sharing this critique initiate debate on institutional practices and assumptions, thus opening the door for transformation.

Democratising research

Action research can also encourage research by those who do not normally perceive themselves to be "researchers". Anyone who teaches can become a researcher through regular and systematic reflection on, and generating and testing evidence about, his/her work. Action research abolishes the traditional power relationships between researcher and those being researched, and replaces them with a more equal partnership where both parties challenge and support each other in a mutual quest to improve their work (McNiff & Whitehead, 2005:22). It allows educators to be "transformative intellectuals" (Giroux, 1988:1), who critique their own practice and try to create theories which are more in tune with accepted transformative values. Our action research group

at the NMMU is evidence of this, since the participants range from fairly newly appointed lecturers to full professors and the Dean of the faculty.

In terms of the issue of transformation and equity among the academic staff in HETIs, action research shifts the power from the few well-established academics to the broader base of all involved in the research. It allows educators to become “theorists in their own right”, rather than “implementers of external researchers’ theories” (McNiff & Collins, 1994). This may threaten traditional ideas and existing power bases, but the political component of action research as an approach is what makes it so suitable to contributing to the transformation of education. This participation in the research process is, according to Reason and Torbert (2001:6), “... a political as well as an epistemological imperative which affirms the basic human right of persons to contribute to decisions which affect them and to knowledge which concerns them and purports to be about them”.

The language used in our narrative sense of action research strives to communicate theory in everyday language and helps to dispel the exclusionary discourses of academia: it opens up research to anyone willing to subject their everyday practice to critical enquiry and to make that enquiry explicit. Although action research is developing its own discourse, this discourse is being told by practitioners and not a few select academics. If knowledge is power and language is the key to knowledge (Foucault, 1980), this more accessible discourse grants a certain authority to the practitioner who feels able to share his/her reflections in a language understandable by all.

This form of research conforms to the value of democracy, since inquiries must of necessity involve those engaged in the teaching process – lecturers, learners and colleagues. The latter two are important in terms of validating the research process and their feedback helps to create a ‘living educational theory’ (Whitehead (1989:41). Inclusivity and people-centredness are the values which underline this form of theory-generation. Self-reflection calls for open-mindedness, respect for diverse ideas and the willingness to collaborate with others in forming new theories of practice.

Sustained development

Research has been conducted into almost every aspect of education. Years of research output have resulted in changes to curricula, methodology, and educational approaches, yet how often are the findings implemented in practice? If one looks at outcomes based education (OBE) and its influence on the National Curriculum Statement (NCS), the principles on which it is based make good educational sense. In theory, OBE is sound educational practice, but how is it being implemented in reality? How many educators at all levels of education practise it as intended by NCS or the HEQC? Elliott (2004:4) claims that ‘external policy discourse’ takes precedence over the ‘practical thinking’ of teachers and thus exercises a form of ‘epistemic sovereignty.’ Teachers therefore focus on meeting outcomes at all costs, at the expense of implementing more learner-centred teaching methods (Whitehead, 2004:4).

We argue that sustained and real change can only take place when people ‘buy into it’, because it stems from a personal theory, created and evaluated by themselves. This is not to say that OBE should be discarded and educators should ‘do their own thing’, rather that if they were to actively research their own practices as they attempt to implement OBE, they would then be able to generate their own theories of how to improve their practice and would therefore be more likely to implement

the principles and practices of OBE in a way that could be sustained under their unique circumstances. By sharing the findings generated by their inquiries, a professional body of knowledge can be created, forming what Schön (1995) termed a “new epistemology” for the “new scholarship”.

For example, one of the researchers found that there is a mismatch in some rural teachers' thinking in terms of their teaching practice. These rural teachers, while they believe they have ‘bought into’ OBE, are still using traditional teaching approaches, where their learners sit in small groups in their classes with little or no interaction between them. Whilst he has previously conducted research *on* teachers and interpreted what is happening in their classes *through his perspective*, engaging these rural teachers in action research empowers them to generate their own theory and in this way contribute to the new scholarship (Schön, 1995).

Instead of resenting the powers that be who dictate to them what they should be doing, educators at higher education level, through action research, can negotiate more democratic ways of working and abolish existing and traditional power relationships (McNiff & Whitehead, 2005:5). They no longer need to take directions from the ‘experts’, but can become experts themselves, as they create ways to improve their teaching and learning practices. Such critical engagement involves debate about the “uses of theory for social control or emancipation”. (McNiff, 2005:1). This type of approach will have a ripple effect on the whole institution as people find ways to interact, so as to create and sustain an acceptable and effective learning environment.

Action research underpins change

Action research is grounded in critical theory in that it encourages critique of the status quo and suggests how to make improvements, but it goes further than critical theory. It also suggests ways to implement the improvements on a practical level and generate and test theory in terms of the learning of the participants. McNiff (2003:34) explains:

While critical theorists say what ought to be done to right wrongs, they do not show how it can be done or what needs to be done to realize the potentialities of their theories to turn them into living realities. Further, they believe that it is sufficient to critique other people but they seldom critique themselves...

Reason and Torbert (2001:2) also argue that action research requires “an action turn” toward self-study *in action* in relation to others. According to these authors there are certain key features of action research – the importance of practical knowing, participative relationships, experiential grounding and normative theory (*ibid.*, 2).

The purpose of action research is not to make abstract knowledge available to a select few (academia), but to encourage practical knowing embodied in everyday action. This practical knowing is participative, since it is gleaned from interaction with others and by sharing in the experiential presence of others in their worlds. The whole process is based on a normative theory of what constitutes appropriate action in the current context.

Susman and Evered (1978:583) claim that action research must be future-oriented, collaborative, contribute towards the development of the whole system, generate theory from practice and be contextualised to specific situations. In education we are dealing with social practices which are played out in certain contexts by actors with diverse needs and perspectives – there can therefore

be no one reality as proposed by positivistic methods of enquiry. Action research bears similarities to the constructivist / interpretivist approach, in that they are both reflective, but action research requires an action to follow the reflection. As Reason and Torbert (2001:5) state:

since all human persons are participating actors in their world, the purpose of inquiry is not simply or even primarily to contribute to the fund of knowledge in a field, to deconstruct taken-for-granted realities, or even to develop emancipatory theory, but rather to forge a more direct link between intellectual knowledge and moment-to moment personal and social action, so that inquiry contributes *directly* to the flourishing of human persons, their communities, and the ecosystems of which they are part.

Empirical research aims at validating data to create testable truths; action research aims at “timely, voluntary, mutual, validity-testing, transformative action at all moments of living” (Reason & Torbert, 2001:5). It is a move from thinking about action to critical inquiry in action – *how am I acting in the here and now with others and how can I improve my interaction in order to more fully live out my educational values?* Transformation occurs as we examine our own practices in light of our values and engage in dialogue with others to reach a shared consensus of how we should interact for the common good.

In their particular type of action research, McNiff and Whitehead attempt to show how wrongs can be put right through critiquing one’s own values and practice, and taking action to improve learning and future action. The type of action research espoused by McNiff and Whitehead has some points in common with both postmodernism, and its argument that no particular perspective should be privileged above others, and feminist research, which values the researcher’s personal perspective (Lentin 2005:3). Equity, gender issues and the inclusion of indigenous knowledge and African values are high on the list of priorities for transformation in South Africa, and examining these issues therefore provides an ideal basis from which to interrogate our approach to these in our everyday practices:

[The] ‘living I’ should be placed at the center of educational enquiries, not as an abstract personal pronoun but as a real-life human being. As a human being living and working in social contexts, ‘I’ often experience myself as a living contradiction in that I say one thing and do another. For example, I may believe in social democracy but do not always give people sufficient opportunity to state their point of view... The contradiction can be understood in terms of how our values are denied in practice’ (McNiff & Whitehead, 2003:72).

The following narrative of one of the authors outlines how she attempted to adapt her teaching to make it more in line with her values:

When I started teaching social responsibility more explicitly in my English for Academic Purposes classes, in response to government policy, I realized that I was teaching values from an entirely Western point of view. This contradicted my desire to move away from Eurocentrism. As a result, I started giving my students the opportunity to take the lead in introducing concepts associated with social responsibility. I did this by encouraging them to define what ubuntu is through class discussions (the African philosophy of ubuntu includes ideas of social responsibility). After this, I showed them how ubuntu principles can be incorporated into some traditional academic discourses. Specifically, I used role-playing exercises in which students acted out a conflict of

interest scenario. In their role-playing, they had to use both Western argumentation and ubuntu principles in order to resolve the conflict. I continued to hold myself accountable through interrogating my teaching practices and, in doing so, I realized that I was still imposing my methods on the students without giving them an opportunity to speak about what their feelings were in the situation. As I want to be student-centred in my approach, I once again experienced myself as a 'living contradiction.' Through the use of action research, I introduced a more democratic approach, giving the students opportunities to discuss and write about what emotions they had during the role-playing exercises. Through this process, I discovered that – in simply acting out a conflict situation – role-players experience similar emotions to those experienced in real-life conflict, such as anger, sadness and frustration. So this discovery is becoming my living educational theory.

I have realized that the tension between my values and my teaching methods is not always easily resolved, however. In another action research project, I explored using a film that is very popular with students, 'The Matrix Reloaded', to increase student interest and motivation. The film certainly did seem to promote student interest, but the scene that the students watched and enjoyed included a considerable amount of violence – and violence against a woman at that. On the one hand, I want to be a peace educator and a lecturer who is sensitive to gender issues; on the other, my students enjoy watching violent movies and they may be more motivated to come to class if they know that they are going to watch action movies. A contradiction such as this will probably require an in-depth study, which could yield more valuable 'living theories' around gender, values and the use of visual pedagogy. In my opinion, what is important is to explore dissonance within ourselves, no matter how uncomfortable doing so may be, in order to produce new knowledge.

Validating living educational theories

Traditional research relies heavily on the concepts of validity and reliability to justify it. Action research is closer to the concept of trustworthiness of qualitative research. McNiff (2005a:1) claims that the “validity of their accounts lies in practitioners' capacity for creative critical engagement, as they explain how they transform their practices into processes of critical theorising, using their articulated values as their living epistemological standards”.

How does one transform the ontological values of action researchers into the “living epistemological standards of judgement” used to validate their claims to educational knowledge? (Whitehead & McNiff, 2005). Schön (1995) called for “a new epistemology for a new scholarship”, and this requires a move away from traditional means of validation. The steps used to validate theory in more traditional forms of research are not applicable to action research since they are used to test an objective view of knowledge. Action research sees knowledge as subjective and relative, and knowledge construction as a “self-formative process” (Giroux, 1988:14), where personal meanings are generated, while Freire (1988:xxviii) argues that “subjectivity has to play an important role in transformation”. We need firstly to understand ourselves in our historical, social and political contexts, before we can realise our transformative potentials. Once we are aware of what historical/political forces have contributed to the prevalence of certain ideologies, we will be in a position to critique these and develop ideologies which are more suited to our current context. Educational research therefore needs its own epistemology and discourse, rather than trying to adhere to methods which were designed for the positivistic perspective of the natural and social sciences.

We recognise that there are multiple ways of knowing and multiple landscapes from which knowledge can be gathered, and any claims to knowledge/theory generation can be made by critically reflecting on and “seeking synchrony” among these manifold perspectives (Reason & Torbert, 2001:7). In other words, can other practitioners relate to and learn from our accounts? Traditional forms of research are subject to ‘rules’ of the discipline and objectivity is seen to validate the ‘truth’ of the results. Action research calls for freedom from such rigid rules. Values have to be made explicit and the subjective involvement engenders a passion which is the motivating force behind the research. We research because we are passionate about improving our teaching and learning and helping others to do the same. However, this does not mean that we just rely on our own opinions. As with empirical research, data can be gathered and evidence generated to justify the claims that we make. Such data may be quantitative evidence of practical outcomes, such as higher marks or increased participation; qualitative data gleaned from journals, interviews, observations; or it may be reflections on the mismatch between propositional theory found in literature and the everyday realities and experience of practice.

The underlying purpose of action research is to facilitate learning and improvement, not to control or predict outcomes. McNiff (2005:4) explains it as follows:

It [AR] is about how we can problematise practice so that practice does not become a process of implementing rules in order to fit action into a predetermined model. It is about asking interesting questions about whether we are exercising our influence in a way that we hope is educational.

Action research is open-ended, and does not arrive at a conclusive ‘truth’. Rather it is a process of continued learning. As such, validation should be more about ensuring quality than ensuring the ‘correct’ methods were used in arriving at conclusions and that such conclusions are ‘right’. Action researchers are not bound to follow criteria set out by ‘experts’, but can negotiate their own criteria. One example of this is the thesis of Hartog (2004), who was granted a doctoral degree by the University of Bath. She negotiated quality criteria with the examiners and asked them to judge the value of her thesis by asking questions such as, “*Are the values of my practice clearly articulated and is there evidence of a commitment toward living them in practice?*”, “*Does my inquiry account lead you to recognise how my understanding and practice have changed over time?*”, “*Does this thesis show originality of mind and critical thinking?*”. She also invited the examiners to apply the social standards of Habermas’s (1975) truth claims by asking if the account was comprehensible, truthful and sincere, and whether it had been crafted with due professional and ethical consideration.

However, in order for these criteria to be accepted by others, it is advisable to make sure the research is *normative* (accepted by the different role-players as being in keeping with their values); *appropriate* for the specific time and place; and, perhaps most importantly, can be *implemented* in such a way that it contributes to the improvement of practice (Reason & Torbert, 2001:8).

As long ago as 1983, Hirst (1983:24) indicated that we should be generating theory from “operationally effective practical discourse”. Research can only be transformative if it is seen to generate theory which actually can be put into practice and be seen to make a positive difference to any given situation. The bottom line in action research is “*Will it improve my practice?*”, but it is not a recipe for the correct steps to do things. It is a sharing of what worked for a particular researcher working in a particular context. This removes the concepts of generalizability and validity from the equation.

Those to whom the research is disseminated can take from it what may apply to them, try to incorporate it into their own situation and, through a cycle of reflective action, create their own living theories. Educators are thus given the freedom “to make judgements that are right for them in relation to the values they espouse” (McNiff, 2005a:6). If you give people the freedom to live and work according to their values, they usually assume the responsibility to do so and are morally bound by the choices they make.

Action research is in a constantly developmental state, therefore action researchers “should stress the importance of developing new forms of explanation rather than permitting their research to be dominated by method or by traditional forms of theoretical, conceptual frameworks” (Whitehead, 1989). The main questions that should be posed by all action researchers to ‘validate’ their work are: “*Do I accept and live out my values as fully as I can?*” and “*Are these values acceptable and useful for others in promoting transformation in educational practice?*” (McNiff, 2005b:24).

Conclusion

Action research is an approach which is eminently suited to contribute to the transformation of the university in line with its stated values. Its main purpose, in an educational context, is to enhance the learning of all and enable them more fully to understand the situations in which they find themselves, so that they may act more effectively. To do this, it collects data from a “whole range of information based on the experience of those involved” (Reason & Torbert, 2001:9) – inquiry into values and purposes, perceptions and ontology and practical enquiry into our teaching and learning practices. We critically interrogate our purpose, values and behaviour to create our own living theories to improve the quality of our practices. We share this with other actors in the institution in order to develop mutual understandings and better ways of interaction. It is a never-ending process in which we welcome feedback and input from all stakeholders, at which point the reflective cycle starts again. By making our living theories explicit and disseminating them, we can influence the education of other social formations and impact the transformation of education on a much wider scale than our immediate environments. To paraphrase Tolstoy, if you want to change the world, first start with yourself.

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