

# **ACTION RESEARCH, UNIVERSITIES, AND 'THEORY'**

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## **Introduction**

What I am concerned about here, is the old question of the relationship between theory and practice. I've been interested in this question for years. Perhaps because I used to be, officially, and still like to think of myself as, a sociologist. And we all know the definition of a sociologist as someone who needs a £400,000 government grant and two research assistants to find his way to the nearest supermarket! (I think I can safely use the male pronoun here: the separation of theory from the practical world has often been noted by feminists as a feature of a male dominated academy.) Other disciplines are not exempt, of course: two behavioral psychologists out for an early morning stroll meet one another on a street corner; one says to the other, 'How are things?' The other replies, 'You're very well indeed, thanks, how am I?'

So: where does 'theory' come from in an action research inquiry?

I want to start with a definition of 'theory' and to observe that, to my understanding, the term 'theory' has two 'opposites'. First, theory is contrasted with the description of concrete events. In this sense theory is equivalent to 'generalisation'. The particular is supposed to be 'explained' by bringing it within a general scheme. This form of theory tends to produce 'prescriptive' explanations of events, making it seem as though they are determined from above, as it were. Second, and in marked contrast, 'theory' is contrasted with certainty. We say that that we have a theory about why something might have occurred but that we are not absolutely certain. Theory in this sense is a sort of speculation, a form of playing with possibilities, of recognising and working with uncertainty.

Next, I want to consider whose question this is. Who is interested in the question of where and how theory enters action research? To begin with it is a question that arises from my own work situation. I work in a university, teaching action research courses, mainly to social workers, nurses and university teachers, and also facilitating action research projects with the staff of a social services department. At this level, the question arises for me, because the university emphasises the importance of 'theory' in its course requirements, assessment criteria, etc., and because as a facilitator I am often called upon to provide a theoretical 'basis' for practical developmental work.

But my personal, practical question is also a political, institutional, cultural question. Workplaces are currently so highly pressured that there is not space or time for speculation about possible interpretations of events. There is a half hearted attempt to draw on a management model of theory in which theory is taken to be an authoritative basis for prescribing what must be done by staff, but this is contradictory since everyone agrees that staff need to draw on their own personal knowledge in interpreting the situations for which they are responsible. So managers recognise that workplaces need space for reflection even though everyone knows they don't provide it

Hence there seems to be a role for the university as a place for the facilitation of action research. The problem is that universities have, as it were, a vested interest in a certain model of theory, namely the 'spectator' model. The university draws a particular form of cultural authority from its institutional *separation* from the motives of practical life. It sees itself as specifically standing for the value of knowledge pursued for purposes other than practical effectiveness as representing, therefore, a *critical* rationality or, as Edward Said put it: 'a Utopian space' - a refuge of political safety where, based on a commitment to ideas and values, one may freely 'speak truth to power' (Said, 1994a, p. xxix; Said, 1994b, p. xiv). So the conflict I find myself in, in my professional work, teaching action research courses under the aegis of a university, is the conflict between the university model of theory and the practice-based definition of knowledge espoused by action research. This, in turn means that the link with the university threatens to distort action research work even as it tries to provide 'support'.

Hence, the question of models of theory becomes a question of institutional relationships between the university and the workplace. What I wish to do, therefore is to present a model of theory which is acceptable both to universities *and* to action research. My argument is in four stages.

## **1 Theory in action research is a form of improvisatory self-realisation.**

Since action research shifts its focus as the inquiry develops, theoretical angles emerge during the process. The theoretical basis for the work cannot be determined in advance. Action research therefore cannot realistically aim to make an initial 'comprehensive' review of previous relevant knowledge; rather it must aim instead at being *flexible and creative* as it *improvises* the relevance of different types of theory at different stages in the work. So, my first direct answer to the question 'Where does "Theory" come from in action research?' is: *not* mainly from an initial review of 'The Literature', but from a process of improvisation as we draw on different aspects of our prior professional and general knowledge in the course of the inquiry. This theoretical dimension of an action research inquiry may be thought of as a sort of journey of self-discovery.

Some examples of this:

Alice Otto *ends* her account of her work teaching student anesthetists with what she calls a '*re*-examination' of relevance of the work of John Dewey (Otto, 1993, pp. 38-40).

Val Childs observes that the unanticipated problems she encountered in her work with a children's support group led her to recognise, quite late in her inquiry, the relevance of systems theory. (Childs, 1997, p. 17).

My first point, then, is that theory in action research is a form of improvisatory self-realisation, where theoretical resources are not predefined in advance, but are drawn in by the process of the inquiry.

## **2 Theory in action research is inherently both reflexive and multidisciplinary.**

Action research is necessarily just as much to do with the process of the inquiry as with the substantive topic. Nothing contributes more to what we ultimately learn from an action research inquiry than the series of negotiations through which we involve participants, resolve ethical and political issues, establish and develop the focus of the work, and construct strategies for agreeing interpretations of events. This 'process learning' could be placed generally under the heading of action research 'methodology', but, more specifically, it draws on a whole variety of *different types* of theory: theories of language, of learning, of group dynamics, of motivation, of ethics, of organisational structures and management cultures, of change processes, and of political / economic forces which determine the macro-contextual influences at work.

In view of this, it is not surprising that the articles in *Educational Action Research* focus so much on the processes and methods of the inquiry and their general implications. I don't think this is because action research is *still* at a preliminary stage of refining its methods *before* going on to the 'real business' of reporting concrete developments in specific contexts. I think it is because action research raises key questions about the actual experience of taking responsibility for attempting to initiate change. It is about the possibilities and limits for responsibility and creativity within the lived experience of highly problematic organisational and political conditions.

## **3. Action research requires theory in the sense of speculation on the hypothetical meanings of the immediately observable.**

Theory in this sense is absolutely central to action research: it involves questioning the meaning of data so that participants can go beyond the already 'expert' understandings which defined their starting points for the inquiry. It is essential to the *reflective* process, the search for the contradictions and discrepancies which bring alternatives into view; it is part of the *dialogue* between participants engaged in the work in differing roles and thus with differing standpoints and practical interests; it is part of the *pluralism* of action research, the collaborative, negotiating process, and thus also part of the search for change - both in practice and in understanding. Action research is inherently theoretical in this sense because of its aim to *challenge*

existing interpretations, to make distinctions within what had been seen as a single phenomenon and to make links between what had been seen as separate.

This, then, is theory as a dialectical exploration - the negotiation of alternative conceptions, based in metaphor, multidisciplinary and critique. It is this aspect of theory in particular which I had in mind when I referred earlier to theory as speculative *play*. It refers directly back to the university's definition of its cultural role, and my suggestion of its inherent significance within the action research process completes my argument that, in principle, a university *ought* to be able to play a part in supporting action research in the workplace.

#### **4 Action research involves above all the INTEGRATION of a variety of theoretical perspectives .**

I have argued that engaging in action research necessarily brings us up against a *varied* set of theoretical perspectives. But action research is above all about deciding on courses of action. In order to act we need to make choices and this means that we have to establish an *effective relationship* between these different theoretical perspectives: 'on the one hand Theory X suggests one thing but on the other hand Theory P suggests another' is fine as the conclusion of an academic essay, but in an action research inquiry it must be the prelude to a decision. So action research entails the *integration* of theory - in and for action. Because we must *decide how best to intervene here and now*, with these various individuals as co-participants, beset by specific and complex feelings, addressing our commitments to specific social and professional values, amidst the complex pressures of this organisational and political context. Stella Clark seems to me to suggest this line of argument in her article 'Finding Theory in Practice', (1996): "To conceive of other worlds and other intentions is actually theoretical". I interpret this as meaning: it is when we see a set of alternatives as integrated aspects of an alternative world that we have grasped their theoretical significance.

We must beware of simplifying this unity, this integration, this coherence. As concepts, they also need to be treated critically. Action research cannot be free of contradictions and ambiguities. To claim 'integration' and 'coherence' is to risk losing dialectical pluralism and openness, and descending into prescriptive authority. Nevertheless, I would like to insist on the argument that what distinguishes action research from 'spectator research' is that its action focus necessarily means that it must seek to integrate the various theories it draws upon. And that in the end the action focus means that the theoretical work of action research has, in some sense a *political* purpose, even if it is only concerned with negotiating a shift in organisational policy or resource allocation. This is an important point, because it implies that action research involves us in understanding of the ways in which although human action is massively constrained by massive political, economic and cultural forces beyond our direct control nevertheless there always remains a specific scope for creative innovation

This, finally, introduces what for me is a key idea: the link between 'theory' and citizenship. In a democracy, citizenship implies not only possessing rights but

exercising real responsibilities (Roche, 1992). Both concepts entail a degree of personal autonomy. Part of my argument has been that the processes of action research provide a strategy for embodying autonomy and responsibility in professional work in employment contexts where both autonomy and the exercise of real professional responsibility are otherwise continuously threatened. A second aspect of my argument has been that the university can be a source of support in resisting such threats, although this will entail responding sensitively to an ambiguous power relationship. And the final component of my argument has been that this 'support' need not be simply a matter of setting action research within the requirements of conventional academic courses which entail their own threat of reinforcing yet again the gap between theory and practice. Rather, I have argued, the process of action research generates its own form of theory. This is a form of theory which is integrative, critical and political; it is both personal and collective, a synthesis of values and understandings, and a response to the many methodological dimensions of practical action in complex organisations profoundly influenced by external political forces. It is a form of theory which is required for the full exercise of a citizen's responsibilities in the workplace, and it is also a form of theory that the university must embrace and sponsor if it is to retain its aspiration to be a place of critical reason in a social and political order which threatens the independence of the university through the very same political and economic forces which threaten the humanity of other workplaces.

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