

Action research pedagogy in educational institutions: Emancipatory, relational, critical and contextual

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ABSTRACT (200 words)

As the need to pursue transformations towards sustainability becomes ever clearer, the contribution that institutions of all kinds can make towards transformation becomes a key focus. Transformative action will leave no sector of society untouched; governments, businesses, civil society, legal institutions, and academia will all play a role. In this Special Themed Issue, we turn our attention to the role that action research in formal educational institutions can play in transformations towards a better world. Like most institutions, educational institutions have been infiltrated by neoliberal ideals of efficiency and productivity which can make experimentation with alternative pedagogies challenging. Nevertheless, experiments with action research are happening.

We have curated examples of action research pedagogy in educational settings that we hope can inspire new generations of action researchers to challenge inherited approaches to teaching and learning and promote multiple ways of knowing. These may help others to experiment with how research is taught and revolutionize why it is done. The six articles illustrate different scales and stages of learning, most in schools, universities and their supporting communities. They show the potential to transform pedagogy through action research. Our reflections draw out four themes that we identify as key for ART pedagogy.

MAIN BODY

In their call to action research for transformations (ART), Bradbury et al. (2019, p. 3) note that 'our mainstream approach to learning, education, and research is actively co-producing the very opposite of what we need at this time of unsustainability'. A neoliberal agenda has gradually eroded democracy and care in our educational institutions and replaced them with competitive markets, a managerial mindset and an emphasis on performativity and compliance that cares little for the needs of the individual learner (Ball, 2016), or for the transformative challenges of our time. Bradbury et al. (2019, p. 4) imagine a different world where 'relational, collaborative learning processes with experiments to provoke future learning' are commonplace. Despite the onslaught of neoliberalism, dedicated teachers within mainstream educational institutions have been keeping the dream of such a world alive through experiments with action research pedagogy.

In our experience working in educational institutions, action research offers much potential as a methodology and pedagogical practice that prepares and supports learners to pursue transformative work. It is a powerful tool that can be cultivated, coached, and continually developed in diverse traditional and non-traditional, informal educational arenas. But it is by no means an easy practice to learn or teach or facilitate. We are deeply conscious of the exhaustive demands of the human work it takes to transform the world through intentional, influential research. In addition to teaching the practice of collaborative, stakeholder-driven action research, educational programs that employ action

research need to provide more than the usual level of support for learners as they work to challenge historical norms and give voice to those who are rarely heard. Faced with these challenges, teachers, leaders, and scholars continue to labor in search of new and innovative approaches to curriculum and research that engages local and global communities.

In what follows, we present four themes that we see as key in the kinds of action research pedagogy that supports students.

1. Emancipating through action researching pedagogy

While participatory approaches to research and ART have been extensively practiced and studied, most mainstream educational settings at all levels remain entrenched in conventional, often Eurocentric, approaches to teaching and learning. Though there are examples of transformation and innovation in educational spaces (Stéphan, Joaquin, Soumyajit, & Gwénaël, 2019), these remain the exception. In particular, in marginalized schools and communities across the globe, inequity and oppression continue to prevail (Chancel, Piketty, & Saez, 2022). Economic, social, and civil unrest persist. Like most areas of human endeavor, educational systems have been colonized by neoliberal capitalist narratives that prioritize the future economic productivity of individuals over the unfolding of their individual and social potential. What role can action research play in addressing these challenges through educational settings?

A recent bibliometric analysis (Delgado-Baena et al., 2022) noted that not all action research is squarely focused on the challenges of emancipation. There is a tension between the decolonial origins of participatory action research and a methodological discourse that is more interested in participatory knowledge production than emancipation. However, for the authors in this issue, the emancipatory role of action research in learning comes to the fore. Whether it is empowering bilingual middle school youth to champion bilingualism as a strength (Alonso & Le), encouraging student activists from the marginalized HMoob ethnic group to critique exploitative methods and critically reflect using autoethnographic writing (Wolfgram et al), developing child-friendly action research methods (Henderson-Dekort, et al.), supporting novice teachers (Gilbertson & Nicolaidis), or working with disadvantaged parents to address their emotional hurts so that they can better support their children (Wood & McAteer), the authors seek to free participants from sociocultural structures and assumptions that inhibit learning. At first glance, Alpert et al's account of the development of an action research education doctorate program seems to occupy the other side of this tension, with its strong methodological focus. However, even here, a social justice orientation is evident in the program goals and the titles of the student dissertations.

Whether occurring within a formal curriculum or among stakeholders in a research project, the examples here peel back the layers of the research process to show the complexities of teaching and enacting projects that work to decolonize and emancipate. They show us that successfully engaging in ART requires more than lofty academic language and Western research approaches. Emancipatory ART is arduous work that requires skill, commitment, passion, sensitivity, and perseverance. There is a critical need for better pedagogies for disrupting power imbalances (Bradbury, 2022) and cultivating learners as researcher-activists.

The emancipatory move illustrated in this issue is crucial for ART and has been a frequent topic in this journal (e.g. Carl & Ravitch, 2018; Gonell et al., 2020). Transformations for a better world will need the unleashed creativity of many who currently feel unable to contribute and unable to grow towards their

own potential. While some of the pedagogical innovations in this issue existed only for a moment in time, one can feel the sense of potential sparking off them – the sense that those involved will continue to learn, grow and transform both themselves and their world. The pedagogical power of learning to be an action researcher and of having your voice heard is striking.

2. Broadening epistemology: Multiple approaches to how we learn

Apparent in the six articles we've selected is the role that ART can play in broadening how we invite learning and expanding our notions of epistemology of learning and of research practice. In our decades of teaching experience, we have seen how deeply entrenched conventional materialist-positivist research remains in formal education. The associated research methods are detached from the realities of practice and context, insensitive to the demands of human flourishing and rendered superficial by excessive quantification (DeTardo-Bora, 2004; Syed & Mingers, 2018). It is critically now necessary to envision and enact transformation in curricular practices and pedagogy in order to allow student research to truly contribute to making a better world (Sharma et al., 2022).

ART is particularly suitable for achieving relevance and rigor because of its sophisticated philosophical and scientific frameworks, developed over decades, for engaging systems and achieving generative learning and change (Bradbury et al., 2019). Given our various worsening “wicked” problems in the world today, such as social divisions, growing inequality, environmental degradation, technology-induced health issues, among others, teaching action research brings the possibility of developing the next generation of practitioners who will turn their deep concerns and commitments into positively impactful initiatives for people, workplaces and communities (Ballard, 2005; Teehanke, 2020).

Graduate programs are the main socializing influence on the methodological practice of future researchers. Reforming the teaching of research towards greater relevance and impact for transformative change needs to begin with rethinking such programs. Alpert et al.'s “Preparing Educational Leaders through Action Research” is one example, describing the innovative process used to introduce an action research sequence into an education doctorate program in order to prepare students to conduct research that promotes “change agency, inclusivity, and social justice.”

More broadly, the experiments with action research pedagogy collected here do a wonderful job of undermining the tired epistemological assumption that learning is unidirectional. In the contributions in the issue, learning is framed as multi-directional and relational – all involved are touched by the process and all have an opportunity to transform. There is much to learn here from indigenous worldviews and research approaches that are relational and healing (Brayboy et al., 2012).

To create space for this relationality, it is necessary for those with more formal power to let go of that power and any instrumental goals they might have. Instead, the starting point is simply getting to know one another and empathically trying to see the world from the perspective of another. It is only once trust has been built in this way that space for transformative learning opens in the sometimes-stifling environment of formal educational institutions. The importance of building trust was a particular focus for Gilbertson & Nicolaides in their construction of a learning community to support new teachers.

3. Critical, Developmental reflexivity

Critical thinking, which at ARJ we refer to as developmental reflexivity, plays a key role in learning associated with ART. Without it ARTists can unconsciously replicate the very structures they seek to transform. Therefore, the support of transformations towards sustainability is also a learning process by those individuals leading and involving others in transformative learning. All of the articles highlight the role of critical reflection in transformative learning. For Alpert et al., critical reflection marks the transition between action research cycles, for Gilbertson & Nicolaidis, personal and group reflection was embedded in the action research process, and for Henderson-Dekort, et al., reflexivity was crucial to break down stereotypes about the capabilities of children. For Alonso & Le, Wood & McAteer and Wolfram et al., Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy and focus on conscientization is a specific inspiration. Wolfram et al. explores auto-ethnographic journaling as a specific pedagogical technique to promote critical self-reflection and development of critical consciousness towards personal transformation. To pursue transformation, the learner needs to develop the capacity to step back and problematize the way things currently are, with deep empathy for marginalized actors.

Learning to critically reflect can be a deeply personal, challenging and painful process. It requires learners not only to confront external power structures but also to reflect on the ways in which we are personally complicit in oppression and injustice. Designers of learning experiences need to find a delicate balance when promoting critical reflection, creating spaces that are both supportive and challenging. It is often uncomfortable conditions and contexts that prompt critical reflection - yet creating such conditions without support can endanger mental health. Ultimately, when this balance is achieved, the results can be incredibly positive for learners, as beautifully captured in a participant quote from Wolfram et al's article: 'I radiated happiness'. Finding this balance can be easier when there are examples to turn to, such as those gathered in this issue.

4. Tailoring to context and proliferating

Finally, the heterogeneity of formal educational contexts and their participants means that there is no repeatable recipe for ART pedagogy. This is good news in that our local context and the mediating role of sociocultural structures are considered before tailoring a pedagogy to the situation. For example, bilingualism, which in some contexts would be seen as an uncomplicated strength, is revealed in Alonso and Le's analysis as a marker of deficit, influenced by broader racial discourses. As such, bilingual students needed support to unleash their creativity and start to build a more welcoming environment for their bilingualism. The doctoral program discussed by Alpert et al's recognized this pedagogically by building in a first cycle of engagement (Cycle 0) that preceded formal research. For Henderson-Dekert, working outside formal educational settings, the challenge was to find child-friendly methods, such as drawing, narratives and play, that suited that context. Like reflection, context too, is highly personal and at times territorial which requires a level of attention and advocacy beyond the bounds of traditional research.

Concluding thoughts

Amplifying action research and its capacity to make dynamic concrete social impact is core to our roles as educators with a scope of influence. We anticipate that the examples of action research pedagogy presented in this Special Themed Issue will help readers to appreciate that ART is accessible as a learning methodology. Moreover, ART is rigorous, thoughtful, and uncovers new knowledge simultaneous with new commitments for change.

Together the articles exemplify how action research takes shape in diverse educational settings and processes. They draw attention to key pedagogical themes: a commitment to decolonize and emancipate; the need to broaden the epistemology of learning to embrace relationality; the crucial role of critical reflection; and the importance of sensitivity to context.

The articles provide guidance for those wondering how to do action research, how to elevate student voice in research, or how to design progressive pedagogy in formal educational settings. They present work that is approachable in ways we hope reduces “action researcher imposter syndrome” for those with intentions to transform with others. They offer glimpses of a vision for negotiating transformation in educational institutions and they particularly inspire us with their work on youth-informed transformation. Together, they provide evidence of a growing shift to engage with action research in formal educational landscapes by way of intentional pedagogical transformation. These papers remind us that the work of ART is both possible and powerful.

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