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DOING EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

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7. PARTICIPATORY ACTIVIST RESEARCH (TEAMS)/ ACTION RESEARCH

“Doing justice” notes Pat Thomson (2002), is forever a daunting task. The very idea seems to require extraordinary tenacity and capabilities, to demand efforts beyond the possible. Yet despite what appear to be insurmountable difficulties and obstacles, Thomson’s conviction that social justice reflects both the means and the outcome for each and every act of learning remains unassailable. Expanding on her concept of social justice, she writes that:

realism should not translate into lowered expectations for individual children and young people. Teachers and schools must act as if every [student] can learn what matters for them to have equal life chances, as well as take up the things that interest them. And while teachers and schools might be disappointed when this does not miraculously occur within the time frame of the annual or three-year plan, they should not be regarded or regard themselves as failing—they are engaged in an ongoing intellectual and emotional struggle against the odds. Nor should realism equate with the abandonment of the imaginary of a just and caring society. It is these dreams that provide us with hope and with ways of being (ontologies) and ways of understanding the world (epistemologies) and how it might be (axiologies): it is with and from this standpoint that we interrogate and make judgments about our everyday practices as well as that of the school system. (p. 182-183)

Participatory Activist Research, most often in collectives or Teams (PART) works ^{values} axiologically with this notion of “doing justice” by and for those oppressed by the practices that need changing. This chapter intends to introduce you to action research (AR) broadly and then PART to take up Pat Thomson’s suggestion of “doing justice.” Firstly we describe two projects (Vignette 1 and 2) where action research informed the methodology so that readers have a context for our subsequent description of action research and PART. Through Pat Thomson’s statement you may have already picked up that this work is fraught with difficulties, as well as rewards, so we also discuss some of the limitations and cautions associated with AR/PART. As you read through the vignettes you may begin to develop a picture for some of these limitations and cautions. To close we will highlight method, theory, limitations and cautions in the vignette examples for you to check for understanding.

VIGNETTE 1: GREG'S EXPERIENCE: DON'T LEAP INTO THIS

In the late 1990s, I was employed as a Formal Training Presenter by a community-based youth agency as part of their Landcare and Environmental Action Plan (LEAP). The LEAP was a nation-wide labour market initiative funded by the former Australian Federal Labour government in response to persistently high rates of youth unemployment. Under these conditions, the LEAPs were deployed to assist unemployed youth (aged 16–21) identified as “at risk” with the skills, education and experience required to either enter the labour market or to pursue further education/training. Each plan or project had an environmental theme and the one in which I was employed was aimed at providing the young people with skills in making recycled paper products. The site of the LEAP was a youth centre located in a working class semi-rural/urban community, a short distance from Perth, the capital city of Western Australia. The project included a Coordinator, Youth Support Worker and 15 young people. My role was to facilitate an accredited Technical and Further Education (TAFE) course called *Work and Personal Effectiveness*, approximately 4 hours a week over a 17-week period. The young people were referred to the LEAP by the former Commonwealth Employment Service (CES), a Federal government agency, responsible for providing free labour market assistance to all Australians registered as unemployed. The CES, and other government and non-government agencies actively sought to recruit volunteers. Contra to these protocols of identification and solicitation (as foregrounded in policy statements and public relation materials), I learned that some of the young people felt they had been pressured to participate. Certainly, under the direction of CES staff, the young people were concerned that a refusal to participate would result in suspension of their unemployment benefits. Given this situation, these “conscripts” were resentful of having to complete the course and expressed their anger and frustration in different forms of “active” and “passive” resistance (McLaren, 1986). In the following I provide a brief account of an action research cycle as I sought to engage the LEAP students as part of a Bachelor of Education action research unit I completed at Murdoch University in Western Australia (Martin, 2000).

Background

Memory has a habit of retouching the past rendering it suspect in the present. For example, sometimes there are gaps in our memory that can evoke an idealised or romanticised past. Although one of the functions of memory is to forget, one memory that I am unable to hit the delete key is when a student stood up in my first class, kicked over a chair and yelled “this is fucked” (Craig, LEAP participant). This was definitely not the way it was meant to be. Despite or perhaps even as a result of my initial shock, I proceeded by ignoring the student’s disruptive behaviour, at which he rather angrily returned to his chair. It was only after the class had formally ended that I asked the student to explain what was wrong. Regarding his outburst, the student told me that he was infuriated about a situation in his personal life and the constraint of the LEAP classroom had only added to his frustration and

despair. Taking seriously into account his views and opinions, I engaged in a number of informal conversations with staff and students. What emerged most clearly, to my disappointment, was that LEAPs were often characterised by acts of what Peter McLaren (1986) terms "active" and "passive" resistance. In this respect, my previous experience working with adult learners in literacy and numeracy did not prepare me for the LEAP classroom. Generally speaking the majority of the students in this teaching/learning environment were enthusiastic learners, who at least superficially appeared to accept my location in the classroom and the objectives of the course.

Having been personally acquainted with the alienation and despair associated with long-term unemployment, my initial recognition of the existence of oppression within the LEAP ignited my desire to understand and change my practice within these "unjust and unsatisfying social relations" (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998, p. 35). Although the intensity of negative feedback from participants animated a commitment to social justice, my initial focus was on developing my "technical" expertise as a way of improving the problematic situation for my students. Less interested in creating the conditions for substantial social change than in establishing a dialogue that would make it possible to improve my teaching practice in a neat and practical way, I was seduced by the need to be an accepted "professional." Whether intended or not, this value stance always threatens to fossilize reform efforts within the "political contested spaces" of the classroom (Kincheloe, 2003, p. 5). Looking at the project in retrospect, it is important to avoid this pitfall as it undercuts critique (which can be painful for everyone involved) and in turn produces narrow and predictable forms of action. Despite my naïve stance, however, the project did not produce such a personal or structural outcome. It is very difficult to get people to critically reflect on their values and practices in relation to their work. What emerged, however, is that the recursive and participatory dimensions of the research process brought the underlying value conflicts evident in current practices to the ugly fore.

Clearing House: Power and Resistance

Despite being told that the LEAP was for their benefit, a recurring complaint amongst the young people was that they did not have any control over the program's activities or content, which formed the official curriculum. It was this contradiction that provided the basis of my action research project. With a focus on professional development, my original intent was to theorize contradictory practices in the programme in ways that provided students with a greater sense of agency. During my reconnaissance in the first week of class, the young people readily informed me that LEAP staff treated them like children by constantly telling them what to do and when to be quiet. As one student stated: "this course is shit, they treat us like kids and like where at school" (Daniel, LEAP participant). While I continued to collect and file critical incidents into my diary to confirm what I suspected was happening in the LEAP, I intensified my analysis by completing an "ideology critique" on a taken-for-granted practice in the program called

Clearing House. What captured my notice about Clearing House is that the students' attitudes and behaviours in my classroom were much worse before and after it. In a chapter that discusses some of the processes of socially reflexive action research and identifies my LEAP project as an example of it, David Tripp (1998) describes "ideology critique" as "an analysis and critical evaluation of assumptions, rationales and actual practices" (p. 43). Here, ideology critique is not merely negative but rather a way of focusing theory and action. With the assistance of my critical friend (David Tripp), I used this research method as outlined in Tripp (1993, p. 59) to help me plan new action in the research cycle.

Clearing House: Ideology Critique

What is meant to happen?

Clearing House was generally accepted to be a part of the LEAP programme valuable for resolving conflict. Clearing House was posited as a structured time/space when students, the Coordinator and the Youth Support Worker gathered on a regular basis to discuss any issues of concern to the group. The LEAP participants sat in a semi-circle with the Coordinator at the front in the centre of the classroom with the Youth Support Worker to her side. The process of Clearing House began with the Coordinator asking the participants if there were any issues or problems they wished to discuss. Students or staff then raised individual or collective concerns about the LEAP and their place within it. The discussion usually centred on and around issues of concern such as the "docking" of wages (reductions in welfare payments made by LEAP staff for infractions such as lateness, absences, misbehaviour and so on), damage to LEAP property including graffiti or other similar complaints from LEAP staff or the young people. It was perceived as a time/space in which everyone could argue, take risks and speak and be heard without fear of intimidation from either staff or students. It was a time for honesty, critique, participation and rethinking the way things were in order to improve the working environment.

What does happen?

First, I think it is important to note that I grounded my observations and reflections in the shared understandings of the young people. I found that this approach enabled me to transcend the individual pathologies fostered by the LEAP staff who knowingly or not used this structured space to enforce their own authority, values, rules and regulations. For example, staff imposed their own authority by silencing students through their own interpretation of events, which did not acknowledge the lived experiences and locations of students. Students were encouraged to share their opinions, but the ultimate authority resided with staff who made final decisions with little consideration (and often in contradiction) to the accepted views of the students. While some students felt that Clearing House was useful for solving conflict, it was still a frustrating experience:

Clearing House is good. It helps to sort any problems between the participants and coordinators. The only problem is that people go defensive and there is a yelling contest. In Clearing House you need to be able to look at a situation from both sides and listen to each other. I think there is probably a lot of participants that are annoyed, but are too scared to say something because they are worried that they are going to get yelled at and the problems gets worse eg the amount of damage done to the centre. Certain participants are not respecting the property. You don't say anything because they don't care or listen and they continue to run the course for the other participants. (Anne, LEAP participant)

On the other hand, a student who felt Clearing House was "a waste of time" responded with the following:

Clearing House is basically rubbish because while we get to say what we think the decision has already been made by the counsellors who very rarely compromise and reverse their decisions even less, no matter how the entire group feels or however good our argument is. (Andrew, LEAP participant)

Put simply by one student:

Its good to get our problems heard, but they always have the last word. (Alan, LEAP participant)

As a result of this, students became frustrated and angry about the way disputes were handled:

If you know you should get paid and you don't you just get hell pissed off and start yelling and then you get paid and go home. If you get docked for 1/2 hour for being 5 minutes late, that fucked, and getting kicked out for a week for 5 minutes, that's absolutely fucked. (Nigel, LEAP participant)

Why the difference?

Clearing House is a practice tied to the maintenance of vested interests and structures of power in capitalist society. In particular, the course is intended to socialise students into the dominant ideology to produce a disciplined and flexible labour force for employers. The successful completion of the course indicates that a certain kind of learning has taken place and relevant competencies achieved, e.g., deference to authority and abuse without complaint (Tripp, 1998). Clearly, while these labour market programs are construed as meeting the needs of job seekers, employers and the state these needs and interests are divergent. On the negative side, these conflicts in interests and contradictions of process in Clearing House produced a brooding atmosphere of "them and us" that inculcated a deep sense of alienation and despair among the students.

Although Clearing House was designated as a democratic environment, the reality was that the dominant and parental discourse of the staff represented a form of exclusionary discourse, which designated some participants as deviant and lacking in rationality (Mitchell, 1991). This approach was often successful for the staff

who seemingly justified it by pointing out their accountability to a higher departmental authority. The result was that students expressed their frustration and anger with the "system" by shouting, leaving the room, ignoring what was happening or remaining silent. The effect was to divert attention away from the problems of students to problems to do with students themselves. In keeping with this agenda, while staff informally acknowledged problems such as inappropriate referrals, interactively they distanced themselves from the young people, if anything tending to blame them for many of their problems. In short, I found that the staff subordinated the wishes of students to the requirements of employers and the government because they were employed to deliver these labor market programs and wished to achieve their aims to ensure further funding (Martin, 2000).

As my review of the research literature made abundantly clear, the existing social order is never indifferent to ideology (values, ideas and beliefs), which in its negative form invariably serves the interests of dominant groups and classes in capitalist society (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985; McLaren, 1995a). Exemplary of this, Clearing House served as a device of social control by reaffirming the authority and values of the staff and inducing conformity amongst students. These were attributes much valued in an employee by an employer. They were achieved through Clearing House because "it is a way of bringing out the students' anger and frustration so it can be dealt with in such a way that the students either take themselves out of the course (and so further lessen their chances of employment) or they remain in it (becoming more passive and accepting and therefore more suitable as employees" (Tripp, 1998, p. 45). My argument, therefore, was that by regulating and containing the noisy and disruptive discourses of the young people, LEAP staff made the insertion of "docile bodies" into capitalist relations of exploitation not only possible but also even *desirable* (Foucault, 1977).

Plan

As I engaged LEAP students and staff in a search for an alternative institutional structure, I decided that my first action step would be to reframe the narrative by providing each team or group with opportunities to articulate their positions in order to determine what was known or not recognized (L. Rogers, personal communication). In conjunction with my critical friend, I chose to use a form of triangulation interview with focus groups to obtain a "fairer" picture of what was happening in the classroom (Tripp, 1996, p. 48).

Act

Making myself not only open but also vulnerable, I began by explaining my intentions to all the participants and invited them to break into teams or groups so that they could respond to a series of written questions about their perceptions of Clearing House, myself, LEAP staff and students. Initially, the students divided themselves into three teams. However, these teams soon disbanded with students consolidating themselves into two larger teams or groups: A and B. To deepen the

students' involvement in the inquiry process and to ensure that I was not imposing an authoritative claim on what was written, in the second cycle of interviews, the two groups of students and LEAP staff were provided with the opportunity to read and to reply to each other's responses.

The responses I received from each group were informative and useful. Tripp (1996) argues that it is impossible to obtain an "objective" or "true" account of what is happening in the classroom (p. 48). For example, I wondered if students would feel that their views would not be valued or be careful with their responses, fearing reprisal from LEAP staff or even myself in this institutional context. In pursuing a participatory approach that is emancipatory, Tripp (1996, p. 48) observes that triangulation is useful in providing an understanding of each of the group's positions. In this respect, by reviewing the data obtained from the triangulated interviews, it was evident that there were differences of opinion amongst each of the student groups and LEAP staff. Despite these differences, however, Group A and Group B identified the LEAP staff as their primary source of conflict. Group A, when asked about Clearing House and their perceptions of LEAP staff, replied that they "... over react about the simplest things. Bitches!" while Group B stated that LEAP staff, were "always docking us," "changing rules" and "take jokes too seriously." At times angry and defiant, both of the student groups were frustrated about the ability of LEAP staff to make and change decisions with little or no regard to students. Group A felt powerless to express their concerns in Clearing House:

These discussions are just plea-bargains to get a better deal. The decision has been made prior to discussion with little chance of reversing decision ever with group unity.

In general, I found that the feedback on my practice from the student groups was positive and encouraging. However, I acknowledged that the students might have been hesitant to share their "true" feelings, even though I encouraged them to engage in a critique of my own position as teacher/researcher. For example, Group B stated that the teacher "sees things from both sides" and "suggests ideas to resolve conflict."

Unfortunately, I was unable to continue with the triangulation process because LEAP staff took offence to comments made by a student in Clearing House and temporarily banned this component of the course. At the end of my employment contract, I asked for some formal feedback from LEAP staff, which I explained would be used in a self-evaluation of my action research project. Janice, the LEAP Coordinator wrote, "Listening to the young person's point of view is an important aspect of conflict resolution and you put this into practice on many occasions." Bracketing this, a more critical appraisal of my practice was contained in the following:

I found that you were reluctant to enforce the rules of the project, especially if it meant having to 'dock' someone's wage. Unfortunately, this meant the participants knew they could push you and get away with it. The rules (and

consequences to breaking the rules) were initially produced by the young people themselves and were therefore not unrealistic. As such, it is important that leaders ensure the rules and consequences are adhered to. (Janice, LEAP Coordinator).

In this instance, it seems that my failure was to adequately ensure the self-regulation of the students by getting them to be complicit in their own oppression.

Reflect

An inherent difficulty of the action research process was that it politicised the contradictions embodied in the relationships of the participants, who did not share identical interests or agendas. In spite of the collaboration between the two groups of students I was unable to negotiate anymore time because the research generated such anger, hostility and conflict that LEAP staff no longer wanted to participate.

To this end, the ideology critique and triangulated interviews provided me with an understanding of how LEAP experiences were structured within specific relations of power and authority (McLaren, 1986). While the praxis of the research project was to open up spaces of dialogue and participation in order to change the working environment for all the stakeholders, the question of student choice and agency ran up against the reality of administrative authority. Lagging behind the students' knowledge and understanding, I became aware of how the different locations of LEAP staff enabled them to control important sites of cultural production that shaped the students' identities and actions in relation to their class, gender, ethnicity and age. It was within this oppressive context that students continued to engage in forms of resistance such as shouting, kicking chairs, punching holes in walls, or remaining silent. These acts of resistance were in response to their sense of oppression and despair and represented an attempt to reaffirm their dignity and the validity of their lived experiences (McLaren, 1986). Clearly, the young peoples' behaviour was regulated through the discourse of the staff who had the final say in determining whether a student completed the course. In fact, almost half of the participants were eventually removed from the course for breaking the rules and regulations.

Understand

If nothing else, my analysis of Clearing House enabled me to re-evaluate the taken-for-granted assumptions and expectations guiding my actions (a liberal belief in freedom of choice and social mobility) and to identify the problems I faced in realising my values in practice. By selecting which action steps I would take as a means of realising my newly redefined commitment to social justice, I understood action research to constitute a form of critical rather than technical inquiry. Without altering the underlying relations of production, I realised that my original focus on "technical" expertise was a misguided form of individual inquiry, which implied a "top-down" approach. Obviously, in light of my commitment to issues of

social and economic justice, my understanding of unequal power relations within the LEAP dramatically shifted the focus of my inquiry toward an "emancipatory" approach which sought instead to "empower" the young people (Kincheloe, 1995).

Plan

Moving away from a mythic conception of liberalism (full rights of political participation, access to social choices and social control over the curriculum, workplace and living places), I decided to try to shift power from "the system" to the participants because I wanted to provide more opportunities for student agency in order to help the learning environment become more alive with possibilities for growth and substantial change. To do this, I planned to:

- be less exclusionary and provide everyone with the opportunity to speak and be heard (Giroux, 1994);
- make my class into a space place where students could engage in a genuine dialogue with me and the other students (Freire, 1972); and
- enable students to rethink the ways things were to develop a sense of self and their connection to the world in which they lived.

After I delved back into the literature on critical pedagogy and consulted with the students and my critical friend, my next action step was to begin this process through:

- acknowledging the different histories, locations and experiences of students (McLaren, 1994);
- recognising that the social use of language incorporates many discourses and consequently acknowledging the different terms of reference and narrative styles used by the students to enable everyone to be heard (Mitchell, 1991);
- repositioning the students as "makers of meaning";
- encouraging the students to subject this approach to continuous critique through shared conversations, written assignments and teacher evaluations

To monitor the process of implementation and the outcomes of this strategy (whether intended or not), I then:

- made a point of recording anything I saw as a critical incident;
- worked with the above approaches, inviting the students to discuss anything I saw as a critical incident with me;
- wrote up their responses and, still with the above approaches, checked with them that I had understood and accurately reported their points of view;
- then used this information to plan my next action step (see also Tripp, 1998)

Compelled to take sides, in this way, I was still able to proceed with a typical action research cycle and navigate my way through the program until the end of my contract.

VIGNETTE 2: LISA'S EXPERIENCE: TRANSITION PROJECT

As the class space teacher involved with student transitioning from primary to secondary school I noticed the pleasures and pains of transition in my students. I had worked with the primary schools whose students would be coming to my secondary school the following year. I had many, many hours of conversation with mum, a year 7 (final year) primary teacher when I was a year 8 coordinator, conversations about the inconsistent messages and positioning of students in the different schooling contexts. I had been going to meetings between schools in the same locality to think about how we could organize some of our processes to ensure more effective and efficient resource allocation and practices around transition. I had studied students' experiences of transition with the intention of making the experience more productive for students and teachers. However, none of these actions felt like they really made any noticeable difference to either the young people I worked directly with or the young people in general who had to deal with transition.

I was intent on using my privileged position as an adult to make changes, with and for the students, in considering how we organize our schools, knowledge and learning, and therefore "what [we are] saying to students about how seriously we take them, their opinions, abilities and learning" (Holdsworth, 2005, p. 140). I wanted to create a more socially just and engaged class space for the young people in my class, one that would be part of the transition process where transition becomes the curriculum, as understood and experienced by those in the process. With my knowledge of critical theory, feminist theory, middle schooling and action research I tried to put into practice these ways of knowing as action, with interesting results.

It was a warm sunny day and I was ready to get stuck into the day with my class, a vibrant but "difficult" class in their last term of elementary school. As many teachers who go through this know it is a time of excitement and angst for the students, but also for yourself who, after spending such quality time with 30+ personalities for a year, you are attempting to make the transition to secondary or middle school as positive and effective as possible. Knowing that for some of my students this transfer would be quite traumatic and for others a very welcome change (to start a new leaf or to branch out into unknown territory) I was determined to make it a useful learning experience rather than just a "right of passage" that they experience as a homogenized group where we all hold our breaths and hope for the best.

Instead of spending the term doing a multitude of numeracy and literacy tests, spending weeks of my time marking and reporting for the teachers' information in the new school (most which is never used), our class decided to negotiate our final term curriculum as a class so that our "product" was not a report card and lots of empty "facts" but a set of portfolios that demonstrated individual and group knowledges within the class. These alternative "products" would be used to introduce the new year 8 teachers to my students so that they would know the range and

depth of abilities these students had; so they could meet them as capable people dealing with a new context collectively but with different individual needs.

The first step was to outline to the students what I thought the issue/s was/were and facilitate discussions and activities to get a better understanding of what transition was and how the different people involved perceived it. This meant doing small focus group discussions between those in our class, designing a survey for other year 7's and for those who had been in year 8 for nearly a year, as well as a few interview questions for the year 8's and their teachers and parents. Some students digested a few newspaper articles and a couple of journal articles and book chapters I had collected about transition. We also linked with another school in China via the web, a school with which we had already done some online conversations previously, and asked them questions about what transition meant to them and what sorts of things they did as part of transition. This was the reconnaissance phase of the project and the idea was to include all participants in the process.

Individuals and groups of students had produced various "data sets" of information about transition, some about us specifically and some with a broader focus from the literature and sources outside our class. Many of the literacy, numeracy, group work, research and reporting knowledges that had been practiced throughout the year were put into relevant practice. Along the way there were also other knowledges developed including ways of thinking using philosophy and sociology and ways of acting, like in activism and collective decision-making. Using James Beane and Barbara Brodhagen's model (1995) of negotiating the curriculum we planned a curriculum for the final term that would take into account everyone's feelings about transition, what they wanted to know more about, and how we might represent what the students were capable of. We also planned a possible term 1 curriculum for when we went to secondary school. This was with the help of some of the new teachers the students would have in year 8 and after talking more with the year 8's and their parents.

That was the planning phase so now we would move into "action." Through our work we had realized some of the differences between students and how different students were already experiencing transition differently. Some had brothers or sisters in the secondary school while others had never set foot outside our primary school. Some who had often been marginalized by their primary colleagues were looking forward to a different set of potential friends while others felt this would just increase their marginalization. Some were looking forward to the new subjects that would be available to them while others talked of missing the smallness and familiarity of the primary school. Through our research it became clear that these were not unusual feelings and that our year 8 colleagues had similar issues the year before. It also became apparent that for some they were in constant transition, within their family, in where they lived, in who was part of that family, and the roles they played within it. Some of the issues related to what transition meant for girls or boys, what it meant in terms of their relationships with each other, what it meant for the two newcomers from Japan, and what it meant for one student who never had money to go on school trips or to socialize with his friends on the weekends.

Our actions included ways of making school a nicer place for the students and ensuring they were learning and knew what and how they were learning. They also involved lots of activities around relationships, feelings, passions, support, and seeing our own worlds from others' perspectives. We developed skills in problem solving as we role played some of the situations of angst that the year 8 students had described. We put together reports of our data and a small guide for other year 7's about the stories of year 8's experiences of transition. We organized talks by year 8's and 9's and developed relationships and strategies for getting the most out of high school with them. We documented the skills and knowledges that individuals and different groups demonstrated and constructed three possible year 8 term 1 curricula units for the year 8 teachers to think about. We created a small website to store all of this information and make it available to others and then made individual portfolios that highlighted what each student had accomplished.

One of the points that became quite clear when we reflected on the process so far was that our school, like many schools, made learning fairly abstract, monotonous, fragmented and narrow in the sorts of knowledges we drew on. The richness of students' lives became apparent when we gave the time and focus to their lives, to their issues, and to their dreams. This was not without challenge and much of my work was in facilitating group dynamics and to work with those students who were exclusionary, dominant and privileged in many ways that others were not. As teachers we realized that most learning activities provided purposes for students that are deferred rather than present. They had been positioned within the primary school as decision-makers but had a very passive role in secondary school, shielded from responsibility. We also realized how tokenistic some of the roles they had in primary school despite teachers attributing these roles as responsible. Many of the values around transition were those that we as adults valued but did not match the students' collectively or given the heterogeneous nature of the individuals in the class. While we had been organizing high school orientation visits, common reporting frameworks between the primary schools, and preparatory classes in primary school for the new secondary school subjects, on reflection many of these were largely a waste of teacher time and students learned very little from them. In the past we had listened to what students had to say about transition but we had never created the space for that to result in action or agency where decision-making was supported and shared and action was implemented and reflected upon WITH the students.

As we reflected on the project so far, like moving through the first large cycle of the project we began to understand the complexity and pluralism within the group, that which would be totally interrupted and reformed in many varied ways in the new school year as the students moved to high school. In planning the next cycle of the project teachers and students had a greater appreciation of each other, of the dynamics of groups of people, of the transitions within one person's life and some of the strategies for understanding how one is positioned by others and how one can try to reposition oneself and that which might be valued within groups. We understood that transition was not a static and homogeneously experienced event but part of an ongoing process that we made together. Our suggested planning for

the next cycle had started with the year 8 teachers agreeing to trial one of our suggested curricula and we started to plan how the students would be a part of that in the first few weeks of secondary school. The students practiced group building activities, challenge activities, debating techniques and PowerPoint presentations in order to facilitate the first few weeks of secondary school, leading activities to include the new students and teachers. But there was still much work to be done in the form of what their data collection would look like in the following year and who would keep the project going. But we had made a start.

CONTEXT OF PAR(T)

At a time when our social institutions such as public schools, day-care centers and hospitals are marked by a catalogue of ineptness and cruel indifference due to restrictions in government expenditure and shameful tax cuts for the rich, struggles for social justice are, or ought to be, as urgent today as they ever were in the past. Unfortunately, in public discourse the horrors and crises associated with the plight of the ever growing ranks of the poor, the hungry and the homeless are tucked neatly away behind the politically paralyzing media stoked fears and paranoia of random weather, flu pandemics and terrorism. Utopian rhetoric aside, we know that social change is not a spontaneous gift of good fortune. In this regard, as teachers are stripped of their social roles and reduced to mere technicians and supervisors in the educational assembly line, we argue that social life ought not to be presumed to be static and eternal but rather the product of struggle and history. Likewise, as students continue to be forgotten as participants in social issues it is important to also be mindful of the positioning of those *in loco parentis* and their young people in the struggle and history; legally required to spend a substantial part of their lives in the institution of school. Within the framework of PAR(T) the construction of socially useful knowledge is based upon action, where individuals and groups of people come together in community groups to work on real issues and problems. As critical researchers we propose that a move towards a deeper engagement of the political within these issues and problems, referring to the intentions advocated by action researchers such as Wilfred Carr and Stephen Kemmis (1986), might be achieved by the idea of "activism." This form of action differs from the structure and boundaries of activity in general because it is also mediated by theory, which directs its means and end.

Throughout this chapter, we take an oppositional view of theory, which understands it to be critical (not simply affirmative) and capable of producing knowledges that provide subjects with an understanding of their situatedness/positionality within emerging social relations (McLaren, Martin, Farahmandpur & Jaramillo, 2004). At root, critical theory is not neutral and identifies itself with specific and concrete interests that are based in material struggles for survival and justice of the people we are involved with as educators. Much of the work in this critical tradition is preoccupied with uncovering the ways in which social reality is variously negotiated and resisted "from below" within established networks of power and authority. In sharing the vitality, strength and life of people engaged

in emancipatory and school reform movements, one criterion for critical theory is the degree to which analysis uncovers the practical "unactualized potential" for transcendence, social change and human liberation "inherent in any social institution" (Kirkpatrick, Katsiaficas & Emery, 1978). In challenging the current social order that systematically negates the full potential of human knowledge, creativity and solidarity, the philosophical ambition of activist scholars goes beyond social theory. As a guide to action, a criterion for judging the soundness or truth of critical theory "is praxis, or the degree to which sociological analysis is responsive to human values" (Kirkpatrick, et al., 1978). Rather than embark on a random foray into research, the type of methodology we are advocating provides an interactive architecture for critical awareness and operation in the world.

This chapter is written for students, teachers, academics and administrators who are actively involved in promoting social change in immediate social situations such as school and community contexts. By active, we mean collectives who are involved at the point of knowledge production in the often less-than-glamorous political struggles to "make a difference" in their everyday labor practices. Under difficult and trying conditions the difference these critical and self-reflexive agents for social change aim to make on the ground (amidst constraints) implies an intentional act of consciousness. Regardless of the topic or methodological approach, the purpose of all research is ultimately to extend our understanding of the world and to influence ideas and action through the generation and application of new concepts and practices. Despite the human potential to change everyday life, it is important to remember (if one allows the analogy) that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. To say this is to recognize that research is not a neutral process but is always informed by the theories, values and intentions people bring to it. This is the understanding brought to us by Marxist, feminist, queer, critical race and postcolonial scholars who point out that research is inherently a value-laden practice (judgments and decisions about what to research and how to do it), even if we are unaware of the philosophical traditions of knowledge that inform it.

Unwittingly, perhaps, it is precisely for this reason that most researchers tend to overlook the epistemological assumptions that guide their social practice and research agendas. In its institutional guise, epistemology is concerned with the study of knowledge, how it is acquired and the external criteria used to verify and justify truth claims, i.e., to distinguish between "true" knowledge and "false" knowledge. Closely related to this is ontology, which like many rich and complex philosophical disciplines, is not easily defined. Marked by a range of different philosophical projects, ontology in general is the application of methods that may have a formal theoretical foundation to solve classical philosophical problems relating to the notions of being or existence. What remains to be indicated, is that at its core:

Ontology is therefore concerned with the level of reality present in certain events and objects, but more importantly with the systems which shape our perceptions of these events and objects. These perceptual systems are important because they apply values that attribute meaning to such objects and events. (Jackson, 1998)

This highlights the fact that the definition of ontology we decide to use has consequences at a concrete level, which can place limits on human agency and research. As distinct from a metaphysical and idealist ontology that inspires personal reflections and idle speculation, the materialist ontology of Karl Marx has an active subject and is grounded in the material. Against the impotence of a metaphysical ontology, with its voyeuristic detachment from the social world, materialist ontology takes on a gritty and radical dimension. Certainly, from the standpoint of socialist feminists such as Nancy Hartsock (1998), Marx's materialist ontology is important in the sense that he "escaped the duality of observation and action by beginning from a worldview founded on acting and feeling human beings" (p. 87). Without dispensing of idealism, the subject is an active participant in the process of knowledge production, with an emphasis on understanding and transforming the actual everyday conditions that are the effect of the relationship between the economic base of society and its institutions. In action driven ontologies idealism and materialism are clicked together like Lego and emphasis is placed upon the "dialectical relationship between the improvement of understanding and the improvement of action" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988, p. 6). The formation of this dialectical ontology serves to justify social change as a process whose outcome is determined by the value orientation and value criteria that inform the subject's research and social practice (Callinicos, 1983, pp. 62-63). Animated by a variety of commitments (feminism, Marxism, lesbian and gay activism, anti-colonialism), radical ontology is "something made" through praxis as subjects engage in social interaction to identify and change the historically specific conditions underlying observable social and economic inequalities (Martin, 2005).

Although eighty percent of the world's population lives in poverty (less than two dollars a day), we live in a period when most people who live under stable "democratic" regimes accept the ideology of capitalism and believe that it is the best possible system. At the same time, the demands of the global market on national governments (e.g., downward wage pressure on local employers from slave labor-style wages in China) have brought the underlying contradictions of capitalism surging to the surface (a reduction of wages, social benefits and "security"). Given that these social inequalities and social antagonisms pose a very real threat to the state's legitimacy, the treadmill of research and theoretical analysis is focused on practices and prospects of participation and promotion within the "Security State," which supports institutions that preserve the ideological and material interests of dominant classes, groups and strata (Martin, 2005). Written into institutional relations, the crisis of the state and the crisis of politics have given rise to a new form of "pragmatism that serves in this crisis moment...as an apparatus of crisis management" (Zavarzadeh & Morton, 1994, p. 3).

To resolve the underlying class, gender and ethnic tensions that always threaten to spontaneously erupt (riots in Paris, Los Angeles and Sydney), the regulatory state has acted to cut itself off from an ethical relationship with community by exporting this crisis "outside of itself" (Zavarzadeh & Morton, 1994, p. 3). Here, the downward recycling of blame is achieved through the deployment of "self-management" and "improvement" discourses, strategies and structures, e.g., decen-

tralization and devolution. Under neo-liberal rhetoric of greater individual choice and market freedom, local actors and authorities such as principals, parents and teachers in newly decentralized schools are "empowered" through these reform efforts to make decisions (hiring) within certain parameters such as global budgetary constraints. However, in actuality, real power is (insidiously) exported to higher administrative tiers of the state bureaucracy through national forms of curricula, standards and assessment. Too often we hardly notice but the ideology of efficiency and control finds expression in these accountability discourses and practices (often punitive), which serve to enhance administrative rationality. What matters here, as Gerard Delanty (2003) notes, is that "Legitimacy is achieved through efficiency" (p. 75).

Researchers/educators need to critically examine the development of these discourses and practices because as a form of performance management, the self-improvement discourse is not value-free. In its erasure of conflict and struggle, it points to the limits of the dominant ideology and boundaries of allowable meaning. While certain administrative responsibilities are devolved to the local level, as a technology of surveillance and control, the forcible articulation of the improvement discourse functions as a never-ending cycle of target setting monitoring and reviewing designed to increase the productive efficiency of teachers and potential workers (students) (Hill, 2005; Rikowski, 2000). Instead of preparing innovative programs that promote an understanding of issues and democratic practice, teachers are required to perform to targets and manage the performance of learners, e.g., standardized test results. In turn, analogous to Erving Goffman's (1968) study of regulatory life in asylums, the "inmates" that inhabit the public education system are forced to enter into a degrading arrangement (social contract) within this "total institution," which finds concrete expression in the institutional fetishisation of performance appraisals (teaching) and so on.

In short, the pragmatic model of traditional research associated with professional development supports the ideology of capitalism in the workplace by producing compliant dispositions and shutting down critical thought. Despite expressions of discontent over the speed up of work, overwork, and burnout, subjects are sucked into the logic of self-propelled capitalism, which is elevated as a principle of social life. Make no mistake about its origins: the pragmatism of managerial capitalism is nothing short of a management of its crisis. Mas'ud Zavarzadeh and Donald Morton (1994) write:

This pragmatism teaches the subject of late capitalism how to "survive" (get through) the contradictions of their "daily" life by ignoring the "big picture"...and by dwelling instead on the actual, empirical aspects of "community" life. This pragmatism therefore rejects "theory" (the knowledge of totality) and focuses instead on the "dailiness" of life, taking the various facets of life as separate, discrete and utterly disparate entities. (p. 3)

Foreclosing the possibility of solutions from the "outside," most research operates as a sophisticated instrument of social control (pragmatic problem solving) to create new types of subjects and objects that are subordinated to capitalist accumu-

lation, e.g., regulating knowledge, values and bodies to ensure “standards” and maximize work performance. Tied directly to the interests of transnational capitalism or other collectives of privilege such as race, gender, ethnicity or sexuality, in its most popular form this kind of value-added research distorts social practice and is almost entirely disconnected from the life circumstances and interests of ordinary individuals and groups.

A HISTORY OF ACTION RESEARCH

Let us now proceed with a brief overview of action research’s salient features, forces and moments that contribute to a genealogical understanding of its commitments and possibilities. From its earliest stages of development, the story path of action research is complex, labyrinthine and still emergent. Since the social psychologist Kurt Lewin, a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany, coined the term “action research,” it has emerged as an established research method in teacher professional education, education management and organizational development (Kincheloe, 2003). Driven by a concern for the democratization of the workplace and the reduction of prejudice, the intellectual impulse inspiring Lewin’s pioneering work was an optimistic view of action research as a tool for reducing prejudice and improving inter-group dynamics and social relations (Lewin, 1998). Using real life situations and problems “as the locus of social science research,” Lewin’s conception of action research was grounded in experiential learning or “learning by doing,” which was understood to be specific to each situation (McKernan, 1991, p. 9). To achieve this goal, Lewin’s well-defined spiral process was based on repeated cycles of planning, action and evaluation. Breaking down the hierarchical (traditional) relationship between the researcher and researched, Lewin argued that in order to “understand and change certain social practices, social scientists have to include practitioners from the real social work in all phases of inquiry” (McKernan, 1991, p. 10).

Certainly, Lewin’s work was the benchmark, the point of reference for Stephen Corey at Columbia University’s Teachers College, who introduced the term action research to the educational community in 1949 (Kincheloe, 1995). From professional development to curriculum reform and school restructuring, Corey defined action research as the process through which teachers, working together in groups, solved problems specific to their own schools and classrooms. It is by no means insignificant that Corey was strangely ambivalent toward Lewin’s principled commitment to democratic ideals in the workplace. Swaying slightly from Lewin’s formula, Corey was primarily interested in action research for narrow instrumental purposes related to professional development and educational improvement (Nofke, 1997). It must be pointed out that Corey was influenced by the logic of positivism and in his efforts to secure the acceptance of action research as a legitimate research form used it to resolve social problems “scientifically.” Thus freighted, the relationship between theory and practice was understood to be largely technical and despite his best intentions action research was increasingly carried out by outside researchers with the cooperation of schools and teachers. Whether we agree

with this approach or not, this positivist framework made it difficult to imagine that action research be used for political purposes, especially in the conservative climate of 1950s (Noffke, 1997).

To his credit, Corey did launch the "teacher as researcher movement" that flourished in schools during this period. Despite a promising start, however, action research quickly fell on hard times in the 1960s. Few would disagree, we think, that the theory used to guide the research process has a profound effect on its outcomes. What bothered the false objectivity of traditionalists, however, was the formation of a linkage between the language of critical theory and left-wing political activism (Smith, 2001; Stringer, 1999). This radical strand of participatory action research (PAR), which did not hide its political project, had its roots in the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, feminism, Third World socialism, Latin American research traditions based on indigenous knowledge, the movement for popular education as expressed for example at the Highlander Centre and Paulo Freire's well-elaborated notions of education for "critical consciousness" (conscientization) and "cultural action for freedom" (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Freire, 1972). In fleshing out a practice that gave salience to the often silenced struggles of oppressed and exploited individuals and groups, participatory action research gained a significant foothold as a grassroots movement both within the realm of community-based participatory approaches to research and action (CBPR); and as a form of political mobilization and research oriented to the recuperation and enrichment of educative encounters, organizational change and social transformation (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Addressing the reality of power and authority, its commitment to shared problem-solving, distributed decision-making and local activism distinguished it from styles of management and administration common in many highly centralised, autocratic and unresponsive institutions such as schools. Unlike the kind of detached research that is so often undertaken by outside experts, the amount of life and energy that is projected into this collaborative educative process (through repeated face-to-face interactions) creates a rather specific value commitment (Martin, 2005). Here, action research is not a means to an end but an end in itself.

Unfortunately, the critical focus on questions regarding power and authority largely fell off the agenda of action research after it was embraced by educators influenced by Lawrence Stenhouse's view of "teacher as researcher." No wide-eyed radical, Stenhouse revived the teacher-as-researcher movement in the 1970s. He achieved this by hailing the practicing classroom teacher as the most effective person in the research process to identify and prioritize problems and to develop and evaluate solutions, whether it be to improve their own reflective teaching practices in the classroom, for teacher preparation in pre-service and graduate education programs, as school-based curriculum development, or in the formulation of education policy (Johnson, 1993). During this catalyzing period, action research evolved as a specialist area of research under the direction of John Elliot and Clem Adelman in the UK, as exemplified by the work of the Ford Teaching Project between 1973 and 1976 (Holly, 1991). Unlike its previous incarnation in the United States, the teacher as a researcher movement that gained new life in the UK as well as throughout the Western world resisted its previous pragmatic addiction to "sci-

ence" and "technical control"-and sometimes even with an edge. Placing teachers at the centre of theorizing about their own practice, it experienced exponential growth in the school system as it boosted professional identity, autonomy and status (Winch & Foreman-Peck, 2000).

However, there was a downside to the increased acceptance and visibility of action research, for example, through its connection to labour and social reproduction. Contrary to loose claims of political status and efficacy, Chris Winch and Lorraine Foreman-Peck (2000) observed that most teacher-led action research "is much more prosaic and practical, and always was." Its prevailing disposition is the result of an optimistic belief in the individual as a free and creative participant in the social and political life of the community, where teachers nonetheless are "are torn between believing in the school's goals and frustrated with carrying them out" (p. 97). Viewed in such administrative and ideological contexts, action research can become just another normalising practice if its quiet acquiesce with the status quo is not challenged (Martin, 2000). Far removed from Lewin's group method of creating change, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Kemmis (1991) argued that action research had become "too individualized" and tied to the pragmatic realities of particular classrooms and schools, whether undertaken by teachers for their own intrinsic purposes or externally motivated, e.g., institutional rewards in the form of wage income or accredited expertise (p. 70).

To help combat this tendency, in its next phase of development, action research became more subversive. Despite appearances, the radical formulations of action research such as those grounded in the work of Freire did not collapse in the 1960s but rather became actively pursued by a widening community of action researchers and action research facilitators around the world (Kemmis, 1991, p. 70). Clashing over the most basic issues of theory and practice, Kemmis had a bone to pick with the latent pragmatism of the UK strand of action research. To this end, in the 1980s, he led an academic group of "barefoot educators" at Deakin University (which became a haven for academics interested in critical theory and action research) out of this pragmatic thicket (Kemmis, 1991). The quest to move beyond professional pragmatism and institutional patronage ignited a debate between the two schools of thought in the UK and Australia, and signaled the beginning of substantial radical scholarship, rooted in critical theory. There is a powerful populism that resists critical theory and indeed, there has been a certain amount of hostility between these two camps (Elliot, 2005; Carr & Kemmis, 2005). Embracing the notion that the contradictions of capitalism will find resolution only through social struggle and change, the response of the Australian group was to argue that older models of action research were uncritically aligned with conservative economic interests and the maintenance of the status quo. According to the Australian group, "as action research becomes more methodologically sophisticated and technically proficient, it will lose its critical edge" (Anderson, Herr & Nihlen cited in Diniz-Pereira, 2002, p. 388). Mapping these territorial struggles, Kemmis and Shirley Grundy (1997) distinguished the unique features of Australian action research from its counterparts in Britain, continental Europe and the United States:

It is important to note that Australian educational action research emerged as distinct from its counterparts in Britain, continental Europe and the United States of America. British action research in the 1970s shared with Australian action research the participatory and collaborative style of work, but was less strategically-oriented and probably less politically aware. It emphasized interpretative inquiry where Australian action research was more critical. Continental European action research shared a similar critical perspective with Australian action research, but did not appear to have developed the same practical thrust of the Australian work, and American action research developed as more teacher-oriented and teacher-controlled. (cited in Diniz-Pereira, 2002, p. 388)

Against the dominance of "teacher-as-researcher" forms of action research, critical frames (Lather, 1992) have also looked to include participants other than teachers, calling for research as radical pedagogy in order to locate students' voices (e.g., McLaren, 1998; McLaren & Pinkney-Pastrana, 2000) or more broadly those of the oppressed (Freire, 1972). While notions of "voice" or representation are problematic (Holdsworth, 2005) it is the intention of PAR(T) to explicitly deal with this to ensure agency, as participants act in the framing and intervention practices of the issue.

WHY "TEAMS" AND "PARTICIPATORY"?

In integrating the personal as, and with, political change, indigenous, feminist and socialist feminist researchers such as Sandy Grande (2004), Morwenna Griffiths (2003) and Nancy Hartsock (1998) have been primarily concerned with the relationship between epistemology and power, particularly in terms of knowledge relations (Coalition politics, allowing others to tell own stories). To ensure knowledge relations are worked through as part of the method it becomes important to involve as many of the participants as possible to reduce yet another form of oppression instigated by limiting who has agency within the research. While some research collectives use action research principles as a form of participant agency and empowerment, others argue that it is not so much about empowerment as it is power. As such it becomes important to understand, and possibly shift, the power relations that exist between the participants and their conceptualizations of the issue at hand, ensuring it is not just another interpretive research project driven from only one portion of the collective. As such, "team" suggests a form of cohesion between participants, this cohesion not necessarily inferring a reduction of pluralism but rather a shared issue of concern. Clearly reflexivity is essential in this process. The researcher participants must constantly be aware of how their values, attitudes, perceptions, practices and therefore positioning within the "team" are influencing the research process, from the formation of research questions, through data collection state, to ways in which data are analyzed and theoretically explained.

Whereas traditional research is based on implicit norms and values (dominated by white/male/capitalist ideology) that shape our understanding of education and

regulate society by integrating individuals into the logic of the system and bringing conformity to it, researchers in the critical tradition are concerned with the relationship between power and knowledge and changing the underlying relational basis of exploitation and oppression that constitutes this historical set of social relations (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). The production and transmission of knowledge is intimately connected to the way society organises itself, particularly as it relates to the systematic marginalization of knowledge of the Other (McLaren, 1995c). Here, at the level of consciousness, knowledge operates as a mechanism of social control and is inseparable from its process of production, reproduction, legitimation and representation. Grappling with these issues, action research offers a way out of this quagmire because it is a type of non-linear inquiry that opens up a field of questions, challenges and possibilities including interaction with participants. Here, it is not controversial for the often conventional methods (modified to avoid racism, sexism, homophobia) that it uses (quantitative or qualitative) but for the areas that it focuses on and the manner in which it employs its findings (Elliot, 1997).

The question of human agency and social change is central to action research. Rory O'Brien (2001) writes, "It is often the case that those who apply this approach are practitioners who wish to improve understanding of their practice, social change activists trying to mount an action campaign, or, more likely, academics who have been invited into an organization (or other domain) by decision-makers aware of a problem requiring action research, but lacking the requisite methodological knowledge to deal with it." Unlike the stratifying ontology of traditional forms of research that concentrate power in the hands of experts, the kind of action research we are advocating is socially enabled by a commitment to shared participation in problem identification, problem solving processes and social change. This causes the configuration, the power relation between the researcher and researched, to change, initiating a new structure of knowledge which generates insights and thoughts, that are transposed into action.

Explicating the political bias in socially critical participatory action research runs counter to the stereotypical view of research as pure and objective. Given the ideological dominance of scientific inquiry or positivism this skewed understanding, particularly amongst preservice teachers, is understandable. Positivist researchers maintain that the relation between the researcher and subject should be a distant one in order to minimize response bias due to interviewer effect and interpretation bias due to excessive empathy with the world of the respondent. This approach discounts the degree to which social and political commitments "are built into the technical details of scientific practice as well as their subsequent use in the public sphere" (Demeritt, 1998, p. 187).

While the logic surrounding this traditional scientific paradigm appears fairly innocent and direct, feminists have called this regulatory method into question over the past thirty years. Contrary to the claims of positivists, researcher bias and subjectivity play an inevitable and invaluable role in the way meaningful knowledge is created. More often than not, though, the epistemological or philosophical approach that forms the basis of research is "missing in action." It is a classic case of

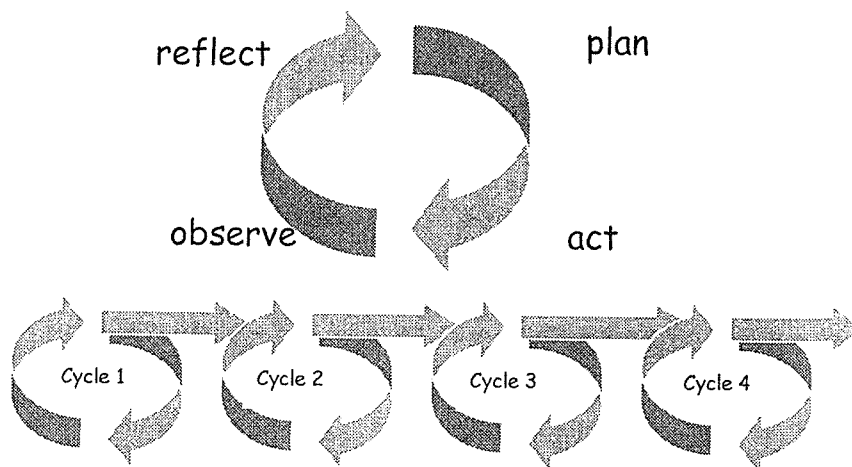
the divorce of thought from action in that particular lineage of drive-through (in-and-out) research, which ends up collecting dust in cardboard boxes. By contrast, feminist engagement with epistemology has demonstrated that all measurements involve values and scientific "facts" are not "out there" waiting to be discovered, obtained independent of human social interactions (Hartsock, 1998). Facts are not discovered but are rather made, through praxis, and therefore it is critical that all who are positioned within the issue or problem have access to the definition, clarification, understanding and practices in making change (Hartsock, 1998).

METHOD

Action research is often described as a complex set of spirals that make a larger spiral of understanding, planning, acting and reflecting, each stage informed by theory (see figure 7.1). As previously mentioned it is vital for there to be a critical awareness of the discourses informing the process (see figure 7.2). Questions that ask "who gains by how we understand the issue?" and "who does not?," or even "who gains/loses as a result of the issue/problem?" become important drivers of the research. Other questions might include:

- "what are the power relations inherent in the issue?"
- "who is privileged in the planning?"
- "who gets to act and who does not?"
- "how do particular actions benefit some while disadvantaging others?"
- "how are participants encouraged to reflect and whose reflections count?"
- "how do we come up with the research question initially?"

Figure 7.1: Action research cycles



PARTICIPATORY ACTIVIST RESEARCH

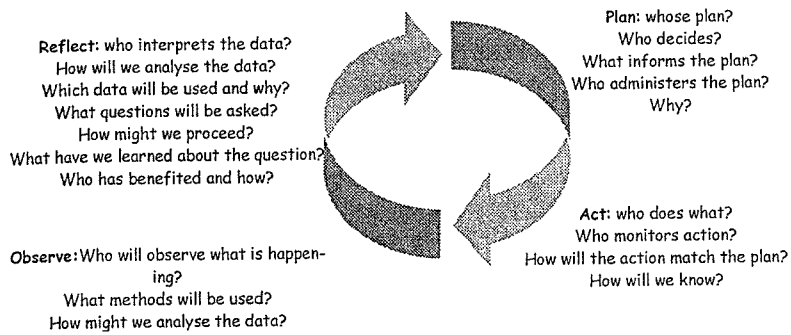


Figure 7.2: Some of the discourses informing the phases

The practical approach to this form of research is to determine the initial idea for change, that is identify a theme or concern and then observe the context and anything that informs your knowledge of the concern. This is done as a reconnaissance and leads into planning for the change. Once you have implemented the initial ideas it is important to evaluate the action through systematically collecting data including observation and other forms of evidence. Using this information you may amend the plan and continue the cycle. Kemmis and Robin McTaggart (1988) use the steps indicated above, that is Plan, Act, Observe, and Reflect while others use differing degrees of detail to work through this process. An example of this is Elliot's use of 5 phases:

1. Identify initial idea
2. Find out facts and analyse
3. General plan with action steps
4. Monitor implementation and effects
5. Reconnaissance

enter into new world.

Some of the key points to note about this type of work is that it is participatory and collaborative, it is focused on change and improvement; it is based on self-critical communities; it develops and includes a self-critical community, and embodies praxis – critically informed committed action, that is action informed by literature and theories beyond that of the group. This also includes the group theorizing its own practice through the data collection and testing assumptions. It is also important to note that it is explicitly political in nature, a point that is sometimes ignored by all research but upfront in PART and AR.

It is often difficult to initially frame the process of change so we have found it very helpful to focus on a particular issue, problem, question, or issue. If working from the idea of an issue you might target sexism, transphobia, racism, diversity, teacher-student relationships for example. Particular problems such as incomplete homework, only having a single text for a range of learners, poor communication

processes in the classroom, or some students not engaging with group work. It is often useful to have a question that drives the action, for example what are the challenges in using digital texts? Or how do we assess learning? You might also want to work through an idea as your organizing framework driver. Examples might include teaching math through physical activity; integrating the Health and Physical Education curriculum; addressing middle schooling in a traditional school, or enacting a democratic classroom. Clearly there are overlaps in each strategy that might initially frame the process so it will be less about which to use and more about starting somewhere to begin.

Finally, there are core values of this way of researching, that of the pursuit of social justice, deliberative activism, collective practice and reflective practice. Social justice has multiple definitions (see McLaren, 1995b) but it does indicate that you are attempting to reduce oppression for a collective of people who are coming together to implement the change). Thus the action is informed by careful and strategic planning based on what you understand about the issue and those involved in it, but drawing on what is also known about the issue beyond that of the participants' experiences. It is deliberate in that it involves "doing" and not just intending to "do" and not just becoming aware of the issue but the importance of reflecting on actions and asking some purposeful political questions such as "who benefits?" and "what power mechanisms are occurring?" The process is always evolving and is therefore represented as a spiral or a series of cycles.

As the mechanics of the process are outlined briefly above to give you an introduction to the process you might find that PART is a very useful tool, method, and philosophy in your work and want to learn more. There are numerous "how to" sources in texts and on the web so rather than going into more detail here we will now alert you to some of the limitations and cautions before returning to the vignettes to illustrate PART.

RETURNING TO THE VIGNETTES

To help you make a connection between the "real life" examples of two attempts to 'do' action research we revisit them to make more explicit the methods, theory, outcomes and limitations of actual practice. Clearly the process is neither straightforward, uncontentious, unproblematic, unidirectional nor singular given the range of theory and method that informs and is informed by practice. However, we will make some of these stand out as we now refer to both the sites of practice and the theory that informs it.

Methodological illustrations

In "Transition" vignette the various phases of the first cycle might be described in Table 7.1:

PARTICIPATORY ACTIVIST RESEARCH

Table 7.1.

Understand	Researching the problem or issue of transition broadly from the literature
Reconnaissance	Year 7 and year 8 interviews Surveys of parents and teachers Talk with Chinese colleagues
Plan	Negotiate what we need to know and how we might know it, e.g. further interviews,
Act	Skills around group work, ways of understanding people through philosophy, cultural studies, psychology and sociology Construct year 8 curriculum
Reflect	Create reports of findings Read and discuss findings Compare with other contexts Ask who was included and who was left out, how and why? Were there other questions we should ask? What worked for who and what didn't? How could it be done next time to be more helpful to all? What does this mean for the next stage or cycle for year 8?
Understand Reconnaissance	Use reflections and build understanding of new context Use meetings and focus groups in year 8 of newly formed classes to develop an understanding of the issues important to the new students and those important to the students who were there previously

In "LEAP" vignette the first phase of the cycle written up for this chapter might be described in Table 7.2:

Table 7.2.

Entry	Initial contact as Formal Training Facilitator and Bachelor of Education student at Murdoch University Explanation of research process Negotiate participation/co-operation within a mutually accepted framework
Reconnaissance	Orientate myself to the particularities of the LEAP program and how I feel about it Use journal to begin writing up observations and reflections immediately Write up critical incidents and critiqued incidents (Clearing House) and share with critical friends (see Tripp, 1993) Draw picture of the classroom to establish the structure of teaching/learning environment Establish a dialogue with LEAP staff and students through shared/informal conversations in order to engage the participants in "their own knowledge (understandings, skills and

	<p>values)" and stay in touch with what is happening in the classroom (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000)</p> <p>Operating from a standpoint of social justice in a way that values the young peoples' interpretations and actions in the program, I identify student resistance as a "thematic concern" for the project</p> <p>Contribute to process of resolving practical problems and concerns raised by LEAP participants by targeting a social practice that is susceptible to improvement, i.e., Clearing House (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998)</p>
Understand	<p>Critically reflect on prior learning experiences including earlier LEAP</p> <p>Research the issue or topic area of student resistance (McLaren, 1995d)</p> <p>Develop theoretical orientation by reviewing a large body of literature on critical social theory and critical pedagogy</p> <p>Write up research proposal and reflect on constructive feedback provided</p>
Plan	<p>Set aside time to write and reflect as I attempt to balance work and study</p> <p>Plan first action step in detail</p> <p>How does the project aim to improve practice?</p> <p>How can the project be participatory?</p> <p>How can students be involved in finding solutions to their problems?</p>
Act	<p>Decide what action to take initiate a formal dialogue and to "capture" data, e.g., methods such as focus groups</p> <p>Implement focus groups to ascertain what is happening from as many different perspectives as possible (triangulation)</p> <p>Record observations and reflections in journal</p> <p>Ensure LEAP participants are not "disadvantaged" or put "at risk"</p>
Reflect	<p>Critically analyse and discuss initial data and experiences of facilitator and group to evaluate past actions</p>
Understand	<p>How can project be understood as emancipatory?</p> <p>Revisit the literature and make an interpretation</p>

Where one stage finishes and the next stage starts is sometimes not clear or clean cut and smaller cycles within one stage might be occurring as you reflect on what is going on and make changes according to where things have moved to rather than sticking to a rigid plan.

Theoretical illustrations

As well as the cycles, some of the qualities of PART that were informed through theory in Transitions are highlighted in Table 7.3:

Table 7.3.

Social justice	<p>There were various points in the project where it was important to acknowledge everyone's feelings and experiences, perceptions and imaginations so we used methods such as surveys or small friendship focus groups and reported on the differences as well as similarities within the group.</p> <p>We endeavored to understand the plurality of the group when it came to negotiating what the curriculum would look like particularly when most wanted to go one way but some others wanted to go another way. In cases such as this we talked about the process of democracy but also the violence that it creates and explored ways of meeting everyone's needs at some point, even though it might not always be everyone's needs and all at the same time.</p>
Activism	<p>Students were very much a part of the process but it was not in the form of just participating, although this was important that they all participated, but also in the form of political action; an understanding of the power plays at work and strategies to destabilize some of the taken-for-granted ways that power played out in the group, between people, and in decisions made.</p>
Participatory	<p>All students were involved in different ways but there were points where it was important that each person was "heard" and had an opportunity to "act" as well as claim responsibility for "products" that could be included in their portfolios</p>
Team	<p>We would work between the individual and the group or the individual and smaller groups within the group and then the larger group to develop the notion of "team" as being all who are involved in the same project. We worked very strongly around the notion of teaming to include practices such as informed debate, problem solving, cooperative learning, collaboration and collective outcomes</p>
Reflexivity	<p>At the end of the first cycle we were able to draw on many of the smaller events where we developed skills of reflection, critical thinking, application of critical theory, and reflexivity. Not only did they develop conceptually in these notions but expanded metacognitive skills to a greater number in the group and as part of the process that informs the next</p>

Limitations and Cautions

Far from representing clinical case studies, the LEAP and Transition vignettes contain cogent and convincing warnings about the limits and challenges of "doing" PART. It is important not to romanticize (or pathologise) PART as it requires a

significant investment in both time and energy (intellectual, emotional and political) and is difficult to do (Moore, 2004). Tripp (1996) writes that the action research sequence should be carefully thought out and planned. It ought "not be rushed" as changes in practice take time (p. 90). To add to this, questions of validity are habitually raised by traditional researchers about "openly ideological research" (Lather, 1986) and the action potential of subjects are often constrained within the current conservative environment in which teachers must justify their understandings and actions to authorities at a higher administrative scale (Kemmis, 1991).

Challenging and changing exploitative and oppressive practices at the level of everyday life (face-to-face) also requires critique, which is often thankless task. In the face of capitalist authority, the effort to democratize knowledge and power through an emancipatory research framework can result in damage for the local participants (e.g., in the form of retaliations and reprisals). This is why it is vitally important for the committed researcher to understand the issues and the local power structure from the perspective of the participants, e.g., in terms of framing the problem, discussing solutions, and interpreting findings. Using critical theory as a guide, McLaren (1995c) maintains that educational research "must be organic to and not administered upon" (p. 291). Clearly it is of vital importance to understand not only how the situated understandings that make up the participants' own beliefs influence what counts as valid and relevant knowledge in the classroom, it is also important to understand how the researcher's own political, theoretical and methodological biases influence the process of analysis. Not only must researchers have a strong transdisciplinary grasp of the capitalist totality within which research is refracted through institutional, academic, cultural, political and economic systems of mediation in class society, they must understand how hegemonic pedagogical practices created at the micropolitical level are dialectically related to these systems.

Limitation Illustrations

Blind or manipulative power dressed up as emancipation or empowerment

There is an argument that in order for PART to fulfill its claims of participation, activism, critical inquiry and team there should be a process of democratic decision making throughout the project. Within the transition project the issue was framed by the researcher initially, rather than one raised by the students so it could be argued that it was not the other participants' issue but rather one that someone already privileged perceived incorrectly. One of the cautions in attempting to make spaces for agency available to those seen as passive (in this case the students) is that the missionary zeal of the privileged does not just become another way of colonizing others' experiences. This limitation was also evident in the LEAP where decisions about the production of the curriculum constituted sites of struggle, which ultimately determined what was learned. Here, the credibility of the data gathered influenced the research process as Greg attempted to decentre power in

the classroom to reconstruct the relationship between LEAP staff and students. Forced to operate within the margins of his own area of teaching responsibility (*Work and Personal Effectiveness*), Greg strived throughout the remainder of his employment contract to put into effect a curriculum that acknowledged the notion of different curricula, and the different histories, experiences and locations of students (Martin, 2000). Greg's relationship with the young people was inherently problematic since his dominance was not only sanctioned by the institutional structures in which the students lived and worked but constantly re-inscribed through the advantages conferred upon him at every turn as he "negotiated" with the youth people. As Greg reflected on his practice, he discovered that he would seemingly defer to the young people and solicit their ideas and opinions as he sought to have them comply with the requirements of the course. On his part, this was a genuine effort at "empowering" the young people. However, Greg realised that he was simply fostering the illusion of choice and that, in being mindful of how he enacted his power in the classroom, he was "negotiating" a more powerful position for himself (Mills, 1997).

Partiality, fluidity and complexity

As with any research certain politics or epistemological positions are foregrounded and backgrounded. Regardless of which theoretical positions and methods used there will always only be a partial representation of reality and so it is vital that we constantly ask "from which position do we speak?" and how can we work reflexively to ensure a less oppressive reading of, and participation in, our world as a result of the research. This "reality" is also contextualized and so may be fluid, or constantly changing therefore recognizing the complexity and fluidity of the context and perhaps even the question/s acts as a reminder to the research process and its participants to be open for multiple and sometimes even contradictory outcomes. One characteristic of this type of research is that it is often difficult to make fixed, simplistic and unitary statements about project outcomes without asking another barrage of questions. Like the example in the LEAP vignette, in *Transitions* the position taken was rooted in critical theory, feminist theory and the work of transgressive educators as we attempted to shift the balance of power and curriculum construction from a few adults (year 7 and 8 teachers) to the students about to experience school transition. We did not foreground the experiences of teachers or parents in this instance but in recognizing this perhaps one of the changes we would make for the following cohort would be to include these people a lot more. It was also important for us to realize that the experiences of this cohort, and how they were positioned within the school, how they positioned each other, was dynamic and potentially very different to the cohorts they would become a part of in year 8. So too would the following year 7 cohort be equally complex and different although they were all experiencing transition. It was an important reminder to us that these "events" were very complex and although we could not fully capture and represent everyone's experiences we could, through the PART process, begin to have a more clear understanding of the process and a more

relevant and inclusive attempt to learn through transition rather than just have it "done" to the students.

Focus

Methods of inquiry that do not foreclose findings as being "in support of" or "providing evidence against," as may be found within the positivist tradition, have the potential to grow beyond a form that is both manageable or focused enough to be able to say anything. In order to "keep on track" without becoming so fixed in the process that reflexivity cannot occur it is important to return to the question/s (issue/problem) that generated the research action and ensure that micro and macro phases of the cycles act to help answer the question/s. That is not to say that other questions will not be generated and that part of the project's reflexivity is to ignore other possibilities but this situation might call for a redesigning of the question/s based upon the outcomes of the previous cycle, so that it is informed through practice and theory. This new question then acts to generate a new cycle but systematic data collection, theory, and rigorous planning should still inform action if anything substantial can be added to how the question is understood and answered. For example, in Transition many subsidiary questions and opportunities for action were raised and it felt quite overwhelming in how we might manage this, particularly given the diversity within the class. By returning to our original question "how can transition become a more productive learning experience for students and teachers" we could return to the research process that helped us answer this question while at the same time keeping a list of subsidiary questions for possible attention in the next cycle or as a possible question for another group to take up, or after we were happy that we had answered our first question.

Winners and losers

At the outset we tried to make it clear that this form of research was to recognize oppressive situations within education and attempt to change the context to ensure more socially just outcomes for those participating in the project. It is important to note though, that where some participants may have been positioned very powerfully and being very privileged, it might be necessary for that positioning to be changed to allow for a more equitable space for those oppressed by the current practices. In Transition the "popular" students who also had many positive connections with the secondary school could not see the value in much of what we were doing and took an individualistic approach to what their learning should be. They could not see the value of working with others or learning about others' lives, perceptions or perspectives. Likewise, very technically oriented teachers obstructed some of the processes that we attempted to put in place, particularly for the year 8 curriculum planning believing that they knew what was best for the primary students, students who were essentially the little fish in the big pond, beginners in the knowledge stakes, and characterized by many deficits. As these teachers came from a dominant position of subject experts and secondary (as opposed to primary) school there was much to be lost by agreeing to a curriculum that did not introduce the new year 8 students to the basics of their subject areas. What is important to

note is that with change in practice there will also be a change or redirection of power for some individuals or collectives. It therefore becomes necessary to be aware or ready for the resultant implications while working to subvert current positions and argue for a more equitable positioning of participants with a more positive eventual outcome or cultural wealth for all involved.

CONCLUSION

Visions of a democratic life with a generation of public spaces and where sustained communication would critically interrogate distortions of democracy caused by various forms of oppression including racism, patriarchy, colonialism and transphobia have important implications for education "as they generated a re-envisioning of the function of schools and the media as places where social, economic, and cultural power could be confronted and, in some ways, transformed" (Shapiro, 2002, p. 2). As part of this vision we have attempted to provide you, the reader and new researcher, with some background literature and field stories to illustrate how and why you might "do" PART within your work. By now you will be aware of some of the relationships with other forms of research paradigms, such as positivism and action research, as well as some of the ontological and epistemological differences between some methods. There is still much to learn—from the literature in terms of the "how" and "why," and from the stories of those who have participated in this type of research in differing contexts. Again, it is in the dialogic relationship between theory and practice, each informing the other as praxis that you will enact PART and take it beyond these printed words, an adventure in which we invite you to participate so as to interrupt some of the oppressive practices in which we are ourselves involved, instead working towards a more socially just society for all. There are pragmatic considerations in research and foolish to ignore them, however, also ethical and political questions that ought to be addressed.

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