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Literature-informed, one-turn action research: three cases and a commentary

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Although action research is a common feature of courses of initial teacher training, the evidence as to its efficacy, in encouraging reflection among trainees, is mixed. This article discusses cases of action research assignments carried out by three trainees into their own practice in relation to (a) behaviour management, (b) monitoring and assessing, and (c) pupil-centred education. The assignments are analysed using Bloom *et al.*'s (1964) typology of thinking skills, Handal & Lauvas's (1987) model of reflective practice, and typologies of action research by Noffke (1997) and Rearick and Feldman (1999). They are positioned as cases of 'literature-informed, one-turn' action research; a concept which is discussed in relation to other concepts of action research.

Introduction

Since the late 1950s, some courses of initial teacher training (ITT) have required trainee teachers to use action research approaches in order to encourage them to become more reflective (Zeichner & Gore, 1995)—that is, to explore educational dilemmas in the context of their own values, and those implicit in the social and cultural contexts in which they work (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Although there are few studies of action research within ITT (Price, 2001) there is a developing literature in which a variety of claims have been made for the helpfulness of action research in promoting reflection. For example, action research can help to influence the way in which trainees construct their roles as teachers, including the ways in which they reflect, learn about students, learn about pedagogical content knowledge and experiment in their classrooms (Price, 2001); it can help trainees to develop

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their beliefs, for instance, about what counts as good teaching (Dinkelman, 2000); and it can help trainees to see themselves as agents of change (Franco & Lisita, 2004).

However, the use of action research in ITT has not been an unmitigated success. Brunner, reporting on her action research as a trainee teacher, concluded, 'Although I did achieve a small part of my goal ... there was a good amount of failure in my efforts' (Brunner, 1995, p. 41). Schuyler and Sitterley (1995), undertaking action research into their work with trainees, declared themselves 'only marginally successful at encouraging reflective practice' (p. 56). Dinkelman (2000) suggests that 'among those teacher educators who have sought to promote critical reflection, reports of success have been limited' (p. 195) and Edwards (1996) agrees:

The development of the informed reflective practitioner has been a thwarted aim in so many ITT programmes and, with a few exceptions ... teacher educators are unable to demonstrate a well-substantiated case for its general effectiveness in the initial preparation of teachers. (Edwards, 1996, p. 142)

The reasons why action research can sometimes fail to develop trainees as reflective practitioners are many and various. Some of these are located in the trainees, others in the schools, and others again in the relationships between the trainees and the schools. For example, the concepts and theories involved in reflective practice do not appear meaningful to trainees, who are primarily interested in 'survival' (Schuyler & Sitterley, 1995), schools can be resistant to change (Brunner, 1995), and trainees have relatively little power within their schools (Price & Valli, 2005). The variety of these reasons demonstrates that, when researchers declare action research successful or otherwise, much depends on what they are looking for. In the face of conflicting evidence, and in the present standards-driven climate (e.g. Teacher Training Agency, 2003), it might be timely to reconsider what action research approaches can do to encourage trainee teachers to become more reflective. What are the strengths and weaknesses, the affordances and constraints?

Action research assignments

This article examines three cases of Master's level action research assignments from trainees on a one-year, postgraduate ITT course. This required them to:

[Discuss] a pedagogical focus, appropriate to the subject, arising from one or more of the [TTA] Standards and [explain] how this is followed up in subject teaching. (University of Southampton, 2003).

In the music course, additional requirements provided more detail. During their first school placement (35 days, before Christmas) trainees collected data, in the form of audio or video recordings, from a minimum of three lessons that they taught, obtaining the necessary permissions for so doing. Data also included lesson evaluations, mentor reports and pupils' work. Over the Christmas break they studied the data and came to a general idea as to a pedagogical focus they wished to improve. They investigated the literature around their chosen focus and developed an action plan for improving their practice in relation to this. Before starting their second

school placement (80 days, either side of Easter) they submitted the first part of their report, including a review of literature, an analysis of data arising from their first placement and an action plan. Cain marked this and returned it to them, noting any aspects that needed strengthening. During the second placement they investigated ways in which their practice in this area developed, again drawing on an analysis of their data, and submitted a final report at the end of their course.

This was only one of the means for developing and assessing reflective teaching—others included lesson evaluations, weekly target-setting, tutorials and weekly meetings with mentors—but, because the reports were of 6000 words, it was the most substantial. The following are summaries of three of the eighteen assignments submitted by music trainees in 2003–04. They are chosen because they are good assignments (graded ‘A’ or ‘B’) and, since each trainee came to the course directly from a first degree, none had extraordinary prior experience, such as a Master’s degree, which might have made the achievement of high grades more likely. Analytical strategies included breaking the assignments into short sections (sometimes, but not always, corresponding to the trainees paragraphs), locating key phrases within these sections, and joining these together to form a narrative. Sections were analysed using Bloom *et al*’s. (1964) typology of thinking skills, Handal and Lauvas’s (1987) model of reflective practice, and typologies of action research by Noffke (1997) and Rearick and Feldman (1999). Each narrative was edited by its respective author, now a qualified teacher, and the authors were interviewed to ascertain their responses to the article as a whole. In much of the relevant literature, trainees’ (often anonymised) voices are heard only briefly; here, the cases are presented more fully, to enable readers to gain a deep understanding of them. The use of their surnames acknowledges the authors as researchers, rather than simply research subjects.

Case 1: ‘Behaviour Management in the Classroom’ by Joanna Mattock

Mattock’s assignment dealt with behaviour management, an area that many trainees find difficult. Her literature review explored the work of Fontana (1985, 1995), Rogers (1998), Cowley (2003) and Jacques and Ellis (2002). She found a great deal of practical advice which was firmly supported with theoretical underpinnings, often from psychology. From Rogers she understood the functions of behaviour management in terms of socialising individuals, providing for their moral development, their personal maturation and in providing emotional security. From Cowley she learned the importance of setting clear expectations, appearing authoritative, applying sanctions in a fair and graduated way, of reacting from the head rather than becoming emotionally involved and avoiding confrontation.

Occasionally she met conflicting advice. She quoted Philpott:

Many of the causes of misbehaviour can be pre-empted if the music lesson is well planned, well prepared with, for example, stimulating resources, interesting, suitably differentiated [and] musical. (Philpott, 2001, p. 70)

But she says that, whilst she found this ‘a very common opinion’, it was ‘not one I was entirely convinced about’. She preferred Blum’s (1998) approach:

[Disregard] the current 'inspector speak' which says that pupils behave badly when the quality of teaching is insufficiently stimulating. They often behave badly when lessons are brilliantly planned because they stop the teacher from starting properly. (p. 2)

She video recorded herself teaching and used the recordings to analyse three of the lessons on her first placement. The use of video allowed her to observe herself closely:

There are moments when I am hunched over, sometimes with my arms folded, which creates a very negative, insecure impression ... there are occasions when I fidget and fiddle for example with a pen lid ... I think I speak loudly and animatedly which excites the class ... when issuing instructions I come across as very weak, asking them to do something, rather than telling them in a polite, assertive manner.

Looking at the lessons as a whole, she found that

The first few minutes were always the worst; uncontrolled and chaotic. However, for the majority of my lessons, once the register had been taken and I actually started to teach, the class settled down, listened and worked well ... I therefore had to look at the beginnings of my lessons and decide where the problems lay.

At the beginning of her lessons she sometimes felt that she was inconsistent, responding to some pupils' poor behaviour by telling them off and to similar behaviour in other pupils by sending them out of the room. She found that she became emotionally involved in situations, sometimes becoming defensive and occasionally confrontational:

Throughout the Y8 lesson I was confrontational; sometimes rude ... I almost had a full-blown fight with 'Jack' ... the aggressive manner in which I dealt with the situation led to 'Simon' getting wound up ... My frustration was demonstrated when I shouted, ordering them to 'shut up'. This is not only rude but exacerbates the situation.

Through applying her reading of the literature to her interpretation of classroom events she began to understand the need some pupils have for attention and said, 'It was important for me to make sure that I did not reinforce negative behaviour through giving students attention when they misbehave'. At the same time, she recognised a need to help the students to develop positive self-images.

Her action plan addressed these problems and included the following points,

- Decide on personal expectations for a class;
- Develop a personal plan for responding to misbehaviour;
- Stay calm, positive, polite and non-confrontational;
- Use non-verbal signals (body language, facial expressions), wait for silence.

As her second placement began she was concerned to find out what she could about her students by reading their profiles and talking to their teachers. Her greater knowledge of the students helped both with individuals and with the whole class. She discovered, for instance, that a particular pupil was liable to lose his temper if provoked. When he misbehaved she ignored him but later, when the class was busy working, she spoke to him on his own, and was able to discuss his behaviour without attracting an audience. Her knowledge of individual pupils also enabled her to

change how they were grouped, specifically to separate the most difficult students. She says, 'This did not solve all the problems but it made them easier to handle'.

Because most of the poor behaviour happened at the start of her lessons she developed starter activities to focus the class. These were not always whole-class activities. For instance, because a particular class arrived from physical education lessons, in twos and threes, she wrote down a simple activity on the board that they could do at their own pace, and was better able to engage students individually.

Through studying her transcriptions of lessons before and after the plan, Mattock analysed her improvements. These were partly a matter of making expectations clear:

By getting the class to practise [stopping playing instruments] I lay down the rules in a fun and interesting way. By encouraging them to do it better, they felt enthused and wanted to do the best they could ... by telling them that they were the best class I had heard yet, they felt encouraged.

It was partly to do with self-presentation:

My general body language had improved considerably. I stood up straight, with my arms by my side, keeping my body relaxed and open. I moved freely around the classroom when explaining a point instead of standing behind the desk.

And it was partly to do with language. In an early lesson she was assertive but confrontational, saying, 'Right, you know the rules. Register in silence or you're in at break'. Later, she was able to give the same instruction in a more positive way, saying, 'Okay ... let's see if you can do this. Register in silence. I know you can do it'. She reported that her voice had also changed:

I found it useful to drop the level of my voice when a class was being particularly noisy, rather than shouting over them ... I also developed several phrases to use when I wanted their attention, such as, 'Ok, headphones off, keyboards off' or 'Everyone turn and face me please'.

In conclusion, Mattock says:

This assignment has allowed me to address the issues that gave me the greatest concern and demonstrate how I have systematically improved in these areas. Developing a discipline plan increased my confidence in dealing with incidents of poor behaviour and implementing my action plan in the classroom meant I had a much better control of the classroom situation. Of course, the work I have done over the past few months does not mean that my abilities in this area are infallible, but it has given me a good foundation to build upon in the future.

Case 2: 'Monitoring and Assessment in a Musical Environment' by Melanie Holmes

Holmes believes that assessment is integral to teaching and she quotes Swanwick (1988), who says, 'to teach *is* to assess' (emphasis in original). She discussed Swanwick's (1988) model of assessment and compared this with the attainment target levels in the English National Curriculum. Her reading of Black and Wiliam

(1998) taught her the value of feedback and feed-forward (target setting). Her reading of Hargreaves (1990), Adams (2001) and Bray (2002) taught her the benefits of ipsative self-assessment, not only in terms of increased motivation but also in terms of aligning pupil expectations with teacher expectations. She explored the issue of objectivity in arts education and questioned Gipps's (1994) statement that 'assessment models should be as objective as possible'. Rather, she aligned herself with Daniel (2001), who questions whether it is possible to 'objectively assess an art that is inherently personal and individual'.

Holmes took a multimethod approach to investigating her own practice, interrogating her schemes of work, her lesson plans, her pupil records and lesson evaluations. Her interrogations of written evidence were an important part of her assignment but, for reasons of space, only her work on verbal assessment is presented here.

To analyse this she made sound recordings of her lessons and transcribed parts of five different lessons that took place within a one-month period. She reduced the data thus produced to a table (Table 1). For example, the following extract shows how a conversation with 'Daniel' was reduced to tabular form.

Holmes: How are you getting on? Can I hear what you've done?

D: It's not exactly brilliant at the moment (*plays*). That's all I've got at the moment.

Holmes: Well done. That's really good. To expand that you could, instead of just using one octave, you could do the first part here and then play the next bit down the octave. (*Demonstrates*)

D: That's what I was thinking. It's quite confusing.

Holmes: I know it is quite confusing but if you practise it you will be able to play it. It's sounding really good, well done.

Close scrutiny of 12 such conversations revealed both strengths and weaknesses:

Table 1. An example of Holmes's tabular display of data

Transcription	Strategy	Main points of interaction	Result of interaction
17/11/03 (Daniel)	Verbal monitoring: work in progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Praise. • Explain what I thought he could do to expand his work, demonstrated it. • He said he had been thinking of doing that but it was confusing. • More praise. • Asks for me to hear it. (Later) • Praise. • Set him on next target. • Pupil worried about size of the task—too much. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Firstly motivated by our interaction as demonstrated something he wanted to do. (Had done very good work compared to what was expected). • Slightly demoralised. • I did not let him tell me his plans.

I am good at motivational and positive interaction with the pupils. The emphasis on praise and my up-beat tone of voice ... produce an overall encouraging experience for the students and myself. I am also good at always having lots of ideas regarding targets and ways to improve ... My main area of improvement must be to let the pupils contribute to their own assessment, not only in a one-to-one situation, but also in front of the class.

Her action plan was expressed in terms of a table (see Table 2)

In her second placement Holmes again recorded and transcribed assessment-focused conversations with pupils. Her change in approach and the consequences, in terms of pupils reflecting on their work, are illustrated by the following exchange:

Holmes: (Having listened to a performance) Right. Well done. What mark would you give yourself?

ƒ: 2 (general agreement).

Holmes: Why would you give yourself a 2?

ƒ: I wasn't here last week so I'm just playing the easy part.

Holmes: The way you played together. Did you play in time?

S: Yeah, I thought we did. (*General agreement*)

Table 2. Holmes's action plan

Reasons for action	Action
Formative verbal assessment should improve motivation. It should not be there to tell them what they should do, but encourage independent thought and help develop their own ability to use descriptive language.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective questioning is needed instead of instructing on what I think is best in my feedback and feed forward. • Give them time to explain what they want, focusing on their reasoning. This may help them to realise ways to improve for themselves. • Start with pupil(s) (self) then open it out to whole class (peer). Add my comments if needed. • Make it more frequent, especially in monitoring their own practical work before it is assessed. • Less bias towards literacy skills. Encourage verbal monitoring first. • Allow the pupils to compare similar work they have done previously to check for improvement. • Paired work; feed back to the teacher. • Do not influence a pupil's composition to suit my own subjective opinion. • If using a subjective opinion, say that it is just that. • Think about what the examiner will be looking for at GCSE level. • Use records to inform this process.
Self-assessment is important to put the pupil in the teacher's role. It can improve understanding of the task and what they get the pupil a good result to their work. Ipsative assessment should be used where appropriate to encourage the self-assessment process and independent thought. Objective opinions are important at higher levels, as these pupils should have well informed opinions of their own at this stage. Use judgement in KS3 areas, as some need more 'help' than others.	
Diagnostic assessment should filter into all other assessments.	

Holmes: I thought you did as well. So you were in time ... do you think that's a bit fast maybe, for what you could do?

K: I think it was a bit fast 'cause I sort of lost my place. Instead of playing D I kept playing C. [*J, S & K are pupils*]

Her revised approach produced improvements but was not without problems. She says:

On the whole, the level of verbal formative teacher assessment has decreased noticeably since the action plan was formulated ... My role within the assessment situation has shifted away from an instructor and moved towards the role of a facilitator. In the majority of my interaction with the pupils, the quantity of effective and broad-ranging questions has increased, thus enabling the students to make meaningful comments on their work ... using descriptive musical vocabulary. On the other hand, some pupils struggle to answer the questions in front of their peers ... Pupils seemed to feel more comfortable explaining their ideas and thoughts in a small group, rather than to a class ... I found that an embarrassment was felt about evaluating your own work, affecting their level of engagement in the activity.

She concluded:

Overall, the action plan has been the springboard by which I have greatly improved my assessment strategies and techniques in a verbal and written sense. I have allowed my level of control, in respect to evaluations, to decrease and have become more receptive to the role of a facilitator. Although this is not a consistent event, I believe that as my classes get to know me better, it will become easier to pass the evaluations more successfully and wholly over to them.

Case 3: 'Freedom to Learn' by Alison Larrett

Larrett's work centred on the pupil-centred theories of Carl Rogers (for example, Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). Rogers contrasts traditional methods of teaching, which he characterises in terms of teachers imparting knowledge and information, with child-centred approaches in which the needs of the pupil are paramount. Larrett found that her own approach to teaching had been influenced by traditional assumptions; she was didactic and teacher-centred, lecturing and demonstrating and not expecting input from pupils. Her analysis of her teaching during the first placement revealed three ways in which she fell short of Rogers' ideals. First, she imparted information, rather than encouraging learning by discovery. For example, she began a lesson on chord voicing by saying, 'The words "chord voicing" mean the way that we break up chords, the way we change the notes of the chord around'. She wrote:

On consideration I believe that essentially this statement is already sending a signal to pupils that I do not expect them to think for themselves; merely that I expect them to listen and recall this factual knowledge.

Second, she used questioning more to enact her role as a teacher than to encourage reflection. Her questions to pupils were closed—'who can tell me what sort of chord I am playing?' In her assignment she commented:

The use of questioning techniques was very narrow and used to check factual knowledge rather than encourage independent thinking ... although the use of closed questioning is a useful tool for the traditional teacher to check how much knowledge a class has absorbed, I believe I should begin to consider whether these closed questions would motivate a class to respond or discourage them due to a fear of failure.

Finally, her approach to poor behaviour was dominated by 'threats, verbal warnings and enforcing tighter discipline'. In contrast, she wanted to be, as Rogers and Freiberg (1994) describe:

A person who is perceived as an authority figure in the situation is sufficiently secure within herself and in relationships with others to experience an essential trust in the capacity of others to think for themselves, to learn for themselves. She regards human beings as trustworthy organisms. (p. 212)

Her reading of Vygotsky helped her to articulate her understanding that learning is essentially social in nature and that pupils' talk assists their learning. She drew on the child-centred literature (e.g. Entwistle, 1970; Aspy & Roebuck, 1977; Darling, 1994) to imagine ways in which she might promote a more person-centred education. She realised that this would not be fully consistent with her role as a trainee but identified aspects of the Standards (Teacher Training Agency, 2003) which might support such an approach. She drew up an action plan in which she aimed to become more pupil-centred in her pedagogy, and aimed 'to develop a semi-facilitative role ... in which students feel valued'.

Larrett transcribed each of her video-recorded lessons and coded the transcriptions according to the activities that took place. She identified the following categories and calculated the time spent on each:

- Lecturing
- Closed questioning
- Questioning encouraging independent thinking and guided discovery
- Musical modelling
- Teacher demonstration
- Pupil demonstration
- Self-evaluation
- Pupil discussion

These categories enabled her to examine the lessons she had recorded and she found evidence that she had improved in all three aspects she had identified. Her approach became less dogmatic; for instance, in her final recorded lesson she led a rhythmic exercise and, once it had been mastered, asked pupils to come to the front of the class and lead similar exercises while she herself sat with the pupils. Her questioning became more open:

Larrett: What do you think you could have improved?

A: We did it for too long. It was meant to go faster as the music went up.

Larrett: Okay. Can you think of any other musical devices that you might use?

B: We could have used a drone.

Larrett: Maybe you can get that in next week then. Anything else?

C: Silence.

Larrett: Yes. Perhaps silence because the music was fairly constant. [*A, B and C are pupils*]

She found evidence of a more facilitative approach to class management. For example:

When students were asked to sit in a circle it became clear that the circle was not round and some students were left outside ... I said to the pupils, 'Okay guys, look, at the circle. What needs to happen?' In this way, pupils are encouraged to think for themselves ... it also eliminates the potential hostility that could be caused through using teacher dictatorship to instruct students.

Although she found such evidence, Larrett was not convinced that her teaching had become pupil-centred:

Upon reflection, I felt that this research was not sufficient to show whether or not I had met the aims of my action plan. The implementation of more child-centred learning into the classroom is a gradual process which demonstrates a change in the atmosphere of the learning environment which is a joint venture between teacher and pupil. I did not feel that recordings and lesson plans could capture truly how pupils felt about this process.

She therefore administered a questionnaire survey of pupils' opinions and, from this, learned that most of her pupils enjoyed 'having an element of choice in the work', 'taking on responsibilities in the classroom' and agreed with the statement that they 'find it easier to be creative when working with others'. This confirmed that the moves she was making made the pupils feel better about their work. Nearly all of her respondents agreed with the statement 'I understand how to behave in music lessons', which showed that her move towards greater freedom did not produce confusion as to acceptable behaviour, although only around 50% agreed that they enjoyed 'evaluating my own work'.

Larrett did not intend her lessons to be as child-centred as Rogers advocated; what she sought and, to a large extent, found, was a balance in which 'pupils benefit from an increased amount of freedom and choice in their learning without losing the structure and security of the more traditional practice to which they may have been accustomed'. Through analysis of her lessons against her coding categories, she also found that she had learned to use a much wider range of teaching strategies, including guided discovery, role play, inquiry and self-assessment. She felt that her teaching had improved and concluded that

As a direct result of giving pupils 'freedom to learn' ... teachers [too] can benefit from freedom to experience increased trust ... teaching and learning become a shared experience rather than a teacher dominated affair.

Analysis

All three assignments showed higher-level thinking skills (Bloom *et al.*, 1964), applied to complex situations. The researchers synthesised concepts from literature, analysed

their own practice and evaluated it in the light of their reading. They reflected on the details of their practice, the practical and theoretical reasons for those details and the ethical justifications underpinning their reasoning (Handal & Lauvas, 1987).

Certainly, the cases exemplify characteristics of educational research, conceptualised as 'systematic enquiry' (Stenhouse, 1979), but their status as action research is less straightforward. Noffke (1997), reviewing the literature, identifies three dimensions of educational action research, linked to purposes of the research—the professional, the personal and the political. These dimensions are not mutually exclusive, but are likely to be present in different degrees in different action research approaches. She describes them as, 'interconnected circles, offering bridges to understanding and evaluating the significance and potentials of the multiple interpretations and practices of action research in education' (p. 308).

Using Noffke's dimensions as analytical categories, these assignments appear located mainly within the personal dimension, which has to do with the impact of the research on the researchers and the 'subjective, lived experiences of practitioners' (Noffke, 1997, p. 329). The fruits of the research process are seen in terms of self-awareness, fulfilment, development of personal relationships and growth. Mattock, Holmes and Larrett saw the research largely in terms of improving self-awareness and classroom relationships, as the following statements exemplify:

I am already feeling defensive about the whole situation and, instead of reacting rationally and calmly, I set myself up for further conflicts. (Mattock)

[My] comments only describe their failings and how they could improve ... I feel that they deserve to know what they are doing well, at least to boost their confidence. (Holmes)

... my reaction to bad behaviour is largely dominated by threats, verbal warnings and enforcing tighter discipline. I seem to be determined to show that I am in charge. (Larrett)

The professional dimension is also present. Noffke (1997) conceptualises this as, 'a means to professionalisation' (p. 322). It concerns the production of knowledge about teaching, the development of teachers and increasing the status of teachers. Although not evidencing concern about the status of teachers, these cases demonstrate a concern for becoming professional. Meeting the Teacher Training Agency's Standards is a recurring theme, and there is also a sense of the researchers fulfilling their own ideals of professionalism. For example:

As teachers we are expected to be role models to our students and must expect to be treated as we treat them. (Mattock)

Analysing many types of data has allowed me to investigate what I need to do to fulfil the monitoring and assessment standards to a professional level. (Holmes)

I believe a more democratic approach with increased equality of power and engagement between teacher and student would result in a more healthy learning environment. (Larrett)

Noffke (1997) sees the third, political dimension to be present, in that 'all research efforts ... are inherently political' (p. 308). This dimension is clearest in research

which foregrounds issues of democracy and social justice—research with an explicitly critical framework—but it is also apparent when the aim is to create ‘teaching that acknowledges the voice and power of children’ (p. 334). This wider interpretation of the political dimension makes an appearance in each assignment. For example:

We must remember that the students in our classes have rights as well ... and that the most fundamental rights for our students are respect and fair treatment. (Mattock)

Self and peer assessment have become integral parts of my assessment, where pupils have their say in their own and others’ performances. (Holmes)

This demonstrates my tendency to come across as a dictator of behaviour and discipline ... resulting in a largely undemocratic teacher–student relationship. (Larrett)

Noffke’s (1997) three dimensions provided a useful tool for analysing these assignments, revealing that, although they were largely situated in the personal dimension, all three dimensions were present. Another analytical framework appears in Rearick and Feldman (1999). This includes Noffke’s professional, personal and political dimensions as well as three categories deriving from the researchers’ theoretical orientations—the technical, practical and emancipatory dimensions (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, drawn from Habermas). Also included are categories drawn from the types of reflection involved—autobiographical, collaborative and communal.

On this analysis, these assignments are autobiographical, since the pupils are collaborators only in a broad sense. And, although there is a tendency towards a technical orientation (for example, Mattock appears to see some of the advice she reads in terms of ‘rules’), the researchers have a largely practical orientation which involves ‘considering the alternative courses of action possible in a given situation and deciding which of these possible courses of action most fully expresses the purposes and commitments of the actor’ (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 93). Each of the researchers explored their purposes and commitments and used them to shape and evaluate their teaching.

Such an analysis can uncover strengths and weaknesses of the research. Guided by literature, the researchers achieved a strong sense of personal development, sometimes technically, but more often in practical terms, as they learned to become professional. They also showed a developing concern for democratic practice in the classroom. However, there was not a concern for the professional status of teaching, nor for political and social contexts beyond the classroom. Education was seen in relatively apolitical terms, and there was little awareness of methodological dilemmas, or of the affordances of collaboration.

Commentary

As a teacher educator committed to action research approaches, I constantly seek to improve the course. One impulse is to arrange the curriculum so as to address these weaknesses, but questions arise: is it possible for trainees’ action research to focus on

both individual and collaborative learning; on both action research methods and teaching; on both classroom and school? There is some evidence to suggest that the answer to these questions is not a straightforward 'yes'. In two studies (Valli, 2000; Price & Valli, 2005) researchers found that it is difficult for trainee teachers to study both their own practice and that of institutional contexts. In the first study Valli reported that:

I fully expected ... that students would be able to simultaneously study their own teaching practice and school-level practices. Instead the unit of analysis produced two radically different forms of action research. One form embodied teacher development; the other, school improvement. Not a single student was able to bridge the two. (Valli, 2000, p. 720)

In the second study, four cases of trainees undertaking action research were presented; two trainees effected significant changes in themselves as teachers whilst the other two attempted to effect change at an institutional level. Only one of these succeeded, partly because she was 'well into her 8th year of active participation in the school' (p. 66). The researchers concluded that the role of action researcher 'is feasible for student teachers [and] preferable to the seemingly non-political and non-reflective alternatives' (p. 67). Commenting on trainees' projects, they suggest that 'few projects can or should guarantee success at the outset' (p. 65) and, for trainees whose focus is on individual change, 'They could be asked to consider, hypothetically, institutional changes consistent with their classroom focus' (p. 68).

Well, possibly. But trainees, in such an approach, might experience their first encounter with action research as one of disappointment or even failure. A better approach might be to acknowledge that action research approaches need to be adapted for student teachers, their contexts and needs (Hermes & Zengerle, 1999). This isn't always acknowledged; indeed, the ITT literature often describes action research as necessarily political, emancipatory and collaborative. For example:

If it is to be ultimately valuable ... such research must be democratic, interactive, collaborative, and responsive to the needs of students. It must in an important sense be 'critical' or 'emancipatory' ... teacher educators should foster the development of such an approach in preservice teachers. (Kosnick & Beck, 2000)

The implication here is that, if the research isn't collaborative and emancipatory, it is without value. But, as Noffke (1997) demonstrates, not all action research is like that. A collaborative and emancipatory approach is a powerful means of creating change in educational communities, but the cases presented here show that action research approaches can also be helpful when they are small-scale and intended primarily to promote personal development.

These cases can be located within current typologies of action research; they also contain two features which might be considered as adaptations (Hermes & Zengerle, 1999). First is the researchers' use of literature, which is not usually considered essential for action research and is even disregarded when action researchers take up political positions against what they see as unhelpful theorising. These assignments demonstrate a sophisticated approach to the literature about the chosen topics. The literature was used to formulate research questions, to understand and to evaluate

classroom practice, and to suggest improvements in the practice. It helped the researchers to engage with controversial issues, drawing out points of disagreement, contrasting different authors' views and articulating personal standpoints. It served to clarify existing concepts, to make finer distinctions between related concepts and occasionally it introduced the researchers to new concepts. The second adaptation is to do with the structure of the research. Action research is normally conceptualised as a process which necessarily involves several cycles (e.g. Elliott, 1991; McNiff, 2002). In contrast, this research had a relatively simple design of reconnoitre, plan, implement (at least three times) and evaluate. The reasons for this were largely due to the short time-span available, but the research nevertheless yielded significant changes.

That there are different types of action research is unarguable. Noffke (1997) talks of a 'family' of action research approaches; McTaggart (1997) refers to action research as 'a broad church' and explains that 'The addition of the term participatory to action research is now necessary to distinguish authentic action research from the miscellaneous array of research types that fall under the descriptor "action research"' (p. 1). Perhaps the time has come to make finer distinctions. I find it helpful to conceptualise these assignments as cases of 'literature-informed, one-turn action research'. They are literature-informed because of the guiding role played by the literature, and one-turn because, at this stage in their professional careers, one turn of the planning, acting, observing and reflecting cycle is sufficient to effect significant improvement. The term 'one-turn' also implies that the research might be mostly autobiographical and classroom-based because, within one turn of the cycle, there may be little opportunity to change the wider, institutional world.

Such a term helps me to read the research for what it is, not for what it is not. It can help trainees because, in signalling that there is more than one approach to action research, it helps them locate their research as trainee teachers within the educational action research family. And it is offered to the research community as an attempt to name one member of this family, one which has been found particularly fruitful in initial teacher training.

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