Social identity and parallel text dynamics in the reporting of educational action research

Abstract

This paper focuses on textual issues in the reporting of action research. There exists a large body of text-analytical work on research reports from various fields, examining for example the organization and rhetorical purpose of research articles or sections thereof. However, less has been done on the specific issues of reporting action research, and this paper seeks to fill that gap by an exploration of text dynamics in action research reports. It focuses on three small corpora of educational action research reports: page -length reports intended to share classroom practice, medium length article reports which situate pedagogic interventions in some detail, and lastly, full length research article reports.

The research discussed in this paper indicates possible relationships between text patterns and action research processes, and facilitates examination of the issues involved when attempting to represent a cyclical and often recursive process in textual form. It allows an exploration of the textually articulated relationships between the researcher and other aspects of the research context, be they structures or actors. This is a particularly complex and important issue in action research where groundedness, collaboration, appropriacy and reflexivity are key values.

The paper has teacher education implications. Given the role of action research modules on in service teacher education programmes there is a need to facilitate, for new action researchers, an insight into forms of discourse that may assist them to articulate their experiences. To be of maximum benefit, such insights should also be educational in the sense of facilitating the development of discursive literacy.

Keywords

Action research, Discursive literacy, Genre analysis, Teacher education.

## 1.   Introduction: the purposes of action research literature

As Somekh (2006: 87) argues, action research leads to 'actionable, and therefore potentially transformative, public knowledge' via ' the unique case study knowledge generated from a large number of in-depth studies'. Arreman (2005), from a teacher education perspective, argues that such knowledge constitutes a particularly beneficial research base for teacher education, in that it both addresses the needs of particular classrooms and validates the teacher as a researcher.

Reservations about the value of action research in educational settings have also been expressed: Jarvis (2001) argues that it has yet to be proved whether action research leads to improvements in practice, and Rainey (2000) has doubts about its impact, when its findings may not be widely disseminated. Such reservations arguably stem from an assumption that the role of research findings is to provide cumulative knowledge on which the education profession can rely.

However Pring (2000) argues that the knowledge developed by teacher research is qualitatively different to the knowledge that lends itself to the cumulative building of generalisable truths. One of its characteristics is that it positively needs to be reinvented, rediscovered and reconceptualised constantly, as societies and contexts change. A main purpose of a written canon of action research work is, therefore, to provide other researchers and practitioners with vicarious access to experience. A second purpose is to encourage others to become involved in action research. Arguably the best motivation to do reflective work in one's own context is to see that others have done the same – to their benefit, to that of their students, and to that of fellow professionals.

2. The action research process

The cycle of action research, widely known in the broad field of educational research, is perhaps gaining increasing currency in TESOL (Burns 2005a, Burns 2005b, Mann 2005). One of its best known representations, based on the spiral concept of Lewin's original work, is the following by Carr and Kemmis (1986):
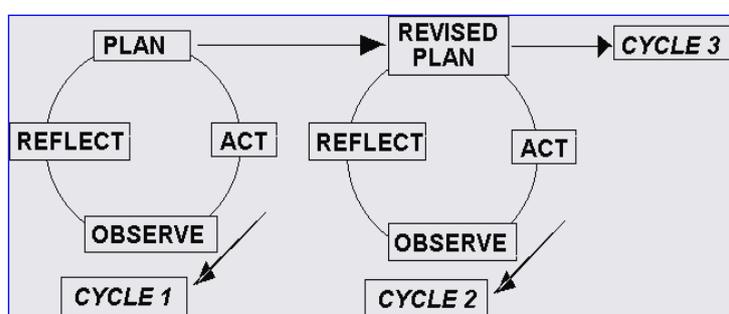
These cyclic representations should not be seen as definitive of the action research process; many action researchers perceive a more complex series of steps (Burns

2005b) and to specify strictly detailed procedures would limit the potential for contextual variability that is a major strength of action research (Hopkins 2002). Nevertheless the cycle is a useful representation of the conceptual elements that most action research projects include.

3.   A familiar discourse pattern

Writers in the field of TESOL are familiar with the idea that published research reports, especially those detailing some sort of methodological intervention, can be described using the discourse pattern that Hoey (2001) terms Problem-Solution.   Its realization in this genre has been described as follows:

Situation   This is where I work, both literally and in terms of an area of ELT

Problem   This is the aspect of my work on which I intend to focus (frequently problematic)

Response   This is my preferred response, my centrally important statement

Basis for Response   Here are my reasons in principle for advocating this response

Evaluation   Here are some data in support of the claims that I make.

(Edge & Wharton 2002)

In this paper I will show by analysis of relevant texts that educational action research procedures can be effectively reported with reference to the Problem-Solution text pattern. I will further show that parallel versions of that pattern, and then more subtle variations within each parallel version, allow the action researcher to portray key distinctions of research motivation and complex patterns of contextual relationships.

4.   An initial parallel: research and discourse

Let us first explore the connection between the action research process as described by Carr and Kemmis, and the Problem - Solution text pattern. Prior to a discussion of texts, I offer the following diagram (Wharton 2005: 5) which indicates how stages of the action research process can be paralleled by elements of the basic Problem-Solution text pattern:

Situation 1

Evaluate Situation 2

OBSERVE

Identify problem

ACT

REFLECT

PLAN

Implement response: Situation 2

Develop response
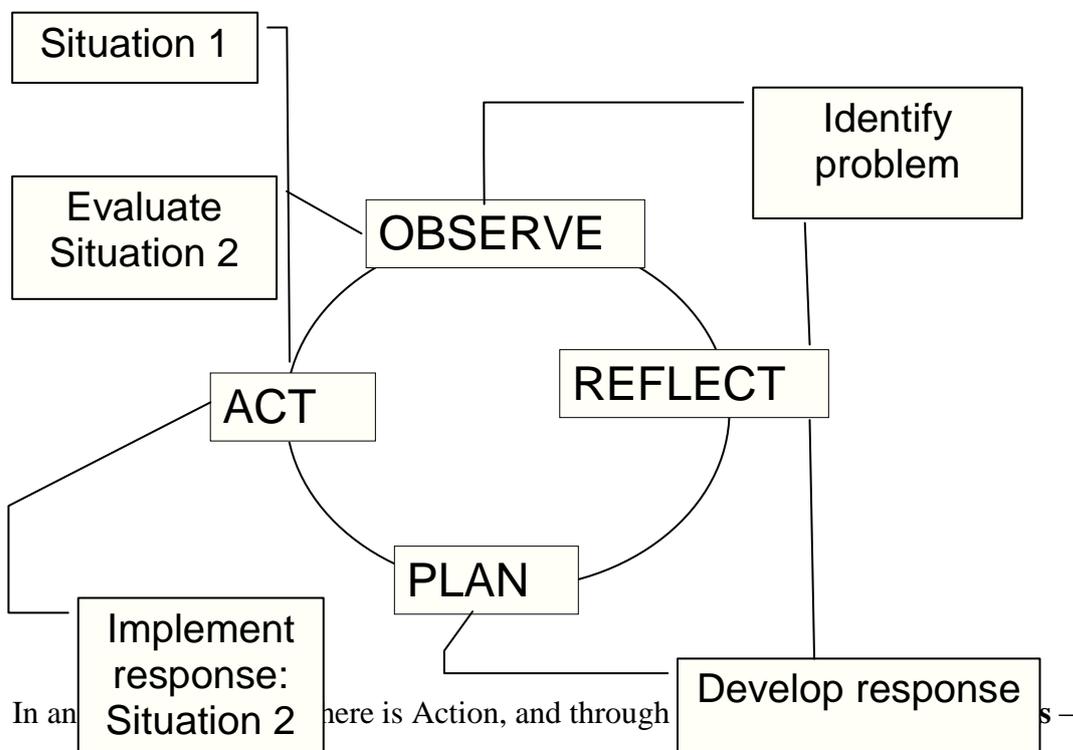
In an[...]here is Action, and through[...]**s** – perhaps problematic – is identified. This leads to a **Response**, comprising Reflection,

Planning, and finally more Action, at which point **Evaluation** of the changed

Situation is possible.

In process and in text, elements of the cycle or pattern are neither entirely discrete,

nor necessarily linear. Carr & Kemmis (1986) point out that each of the four

'moments' of the action research cycle is both retrospective and prospective: each

'looks back to the previous moment for its justification, and looks forward to the next

moment for its realisation.' (p186). In this sense too there is a similarity between the

conceptual chronology of the action research process and the final form of the written

representation of that process.

5.   Extending thinking on text dynamics

Action research has been criticized for being excessively problem-oriented (e.g.

Allwright 1993, 2005, Brown & Jones 2001, Hopkins 2002) and indeed a focus on

difficulty is frequent in its literature: 'In practitioner research the starting point is

always a felt dissatisfaction with some aspect of the teaching or learning' (Pearce

2004: 8, emphasis mine). However, some of the best known figures in the tradition

emphasise rather the intention to improve situations: 'the study of a social situation

with a view to improving the quality of action within it'. (Elliott 1991: 69).

Experienced teachers and researchers know that improvement of a situation does not

have to be linked to a perceived difficulty; one can also seek improvement by

attempting to reach goals, by recognizing opportunities and capitalizing on them, by

increasing knowledge and understanding. These other purposes bring to mind Hoey's

(2001) argument that a textual focus on difficulty, typical and eponymous of the

Problem-Solution text pattern, in fact has various alternatives. Some of these alternative patterns are Goal-Means of achievement, Opportunity-Taking, and Gap in knowledge-Filling.

In order to explore the potential of this approach to analysis, I looked at action research reports of various lengths and from three different sources. Below, I will show examples of the text patterns discussed above used to organize action research reports, and will discuss the implications of this.

6.   Patterns in short and medium-length reports

As a first step (Wharton 2005) I examined page-length reports from the 'My Share' section of the JALT publication *The Language Teacher.* These are reports of action intended to enhance classroom experience, which Allwright and Bailey (1991) and Nunan (1991) consider essential to be communicated for the development of the profession. Of 20 reports published here in 2003, I was able to categorise 17 as action research reports in that they raise an issue from the author's own classroom, detail a pedagogic intervention designed to address it, and comment on its significance. In terms of the text patterns used to organize the reports, I categorized one as Problem-Solution, seven as Opportunity-Taking and nine as Goal-Means of achievement.

In order to see whether variants of the Problem-Solution text pattern would also allow insights into more detailed action research reports, I studied articles published in *TESOL Journal* in 2003. The 'Features' section of this journal includes articles of approximately 4000 words. I examined the 15 articles published here in 2003 and,

using the same criteria as for *The Language Teacher*'s page-length reports, was able to categorise five as action research reports.

These articles differ from the single page reports in that their length allows them to contextualize and explain the projects reported on in far more detail. Their textual organization follows dynamics similar to those seen in the short reports, and illustrate the parallel between text pattern and action research procedures discussed in section 3 above.

Problem-Solution itself seems to account for two of the articles. In each, observation in a situation indicates a difficulty: *It is a familiar problem. In … school …, most of the seventh- and eighth-grade students in the multilevel ESOL classes had acquired good basic interpersonal communication skills, but had not yet mastered the more sophisticated academic literacy they needed for success in their mainstream classes and beyond. (Vann & Fairbairn 2003:11); Situations and miscommunications such as these [previously outlined] are becoming commonplace in restaurants and hotels across the United States. (Gerdes & Wilberschied 2003: 41).*

In both reports, the apparent difficulty is analysed in some detail, and this analysis leads to an attempted solution: *The following section provides details on the project designed to tackle two of the most challenging aspects of academic literacy: making formal presentations and using computer technology. (Vann & Fairbairn 2003: 12); To address some of these issues, we looked to the greatest resource the restaurant did have available – its NS associates. … Building on the peer tutoring foundation, we*

incorporated elements of cooperative learning theory and situated learning,

respectively. (Gerdes & Wilberschied 2003: 42).

Each report discusses the implementation of the attempted solution in some detail. It also discusses its planning and its justification, in terms of both the theoretical knowledge and the relevant experience of the researchers.

Each article evaluates, in some detail, the benefits and drawbacks of the attempted solution. *Vann & Fairbairn* have a half page section *Follow up reflections and learning outcomes; Gerdes & Wilbershied* includes a two page section entitled *Benefits and Challenges*, with subheads *Benefits to learners; Benefits to co-workers; Benefits to management; Overall benefits; Challenges in development; Challenges in implementation.* Each article also discusses implications for future action research cycles. *Vann & Fairbairn* have a section *Conclusions and implications* and *Gerdes & Wilbershied* a section *Lessons learned* which fulfill this function.

In *Van Wyk 2003* and *Hayward & Tuzi 2003*, observation of a situation leads not to the discovery of a problem, but to the articulation of a goal. For van Wyk, the goal arises from a study of a social situation: *[Quotation from South African government policy documents on access to higher education] Policy guidelines have spurred innovative thinking regarding tertiary access at many institutions in the country. One such initiative is the Career Preparation Programme (CPP) at the University of the Free State. (van Wyk 2003: 29).* Whereas for Hayward & Tuzi, the goal arises through study of educational literature: *In summary, many studies showed that collaborative writing technology increased the amount of student participation,*

reduced the role of the teacher, increased students' writing practice time, and

provided multiple responses for students. (p4).

In each of the articles, the bulk is then devoted to explaining the means of achievement for that articulated goal. The process of action research planning is portrayed through analysis of context and of relevant literature, then the intervention itself is described in detail. The two articles differ somewhat in their approach to evaluation and reflection. *Van Wyk (2003)* concentrates mainly on positive evaluation, arguing that the articulated goal is successfully achieved. *Hayward & Tuzi (2003)* devotes more text space to reflections, and consider negative as well as positive outcomes. They focus specifically on the relevance of this discussion for future action research cycles: *… a more in-depth evaluation of feedback modes might provide a clearer picture of how to use e-feedback more effectively in combination with oral feedback' (p7).*

The fifth article in this group, Quinlisk 2003, seems to be organized on an Opportunity-Taking pattern. A discussion of typical classroom practice leads to the identification of an opportunity: *Many ESL and EFL educators rely on newspapers, magazines, advertisements, Internet sites, film, and TV as convenient, up-to-date sources of authentic communication. Mass media offer a variety of visual, audio and written texts that can be used in many classroom contexts to develop literacy skills. Moreover, new technologies and growth of international media corporations have created unprecedented access to media such that, today, nay language teachers and students around the world have the opportunity to tap into these innovative and engaging resources.*

A detailed analysis of the nature of this opportunity leads the author into a discussion of the importance of media literacy. The action research intervention, then, is a course designed to use the resources available to teach and promote media literacy. The writer emphasises that the 'opportunity' is available for many educators: *Media can be an effective source of language input for EFL/ESL pedagogical purposes, but educators must also take advantage of the opportunity to reap more from this powerful resource (p39).* Very much in the spirit of action research, she also points out that the way the opportunity is taken should be a context-sensitive decision: *I offer activities, not in a prescriptive sense, but as models that can be adapted to the needs and resources of various contexts, including ESL and EFL in secondary and postsecondary classrooms. In all cases, teachers must rely on their own personal knowledge to select linguistically and culturally appropriate materials for local contexts'. (p36).*

7.   Implications for semantic pattern terminology

From the two small corpora discussed above, we see evidence of the basic Action Research / Problem-Solution parallel, and yet we also see that it is more complex than might have at first appeared. That is to say, *sometimes* the Problem-Solution dynamic is supplied by, precisely, a problem and solution. Whereas at other times it is supplied by something else, for example a goal and a means of achievement. Each text pattern, if used to organize an action research report, represents a dynamic of movement: from the situation in which the research begins, to the changed situation after the reported intervention.

These observations have implications for semantic pattern terminology. I would argue that it is unhelpful to use the term Problem-Solution both as the name of the superordinate and as the name of one of the hyponyms. I prefer, then, to refer to this central textual dynamic as exactly that: the central textual dynamic. This leaves Problem-Solution to function at the lower level, as one of the various semantic pairs that power this dynamic.

The choice of semantic pairing has significance not only in terms of ideational representation but also in terms of interpersonal representation. The portrayal of a teaching issue as a problem to solve, a goal to achieve, or an opportunity to take constructs the teacher-researcher in different ways. As I will discuss below, the choice particularly affects the articulation of the researcher's relationships with other participants.

8.   Parallel dynamics in research article reports

The analytical approach outlined above can also elucidate action research reports in full length research articles. Wishing to keep a focus on educational contexts, I looked at articles in the journal *Educational Action Research.* Having examined all of the articles published there in 2004, I selected eight which included a detailed report of an action research process. One of these contained reports of three separate action research projects. There are then ten reports commented on in the present paper. Full texts of *Educational Action Research* articles are available on the journal website, via http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles

8.1   Locating the report within the article

In these full length research articles, the report on an action research process is embedded within a longer text. The report is a research narrative: in Bal's (1997) terms, it functions to turn the *fabula* (content, events) into a *story* which is presented in a certain manner.

The focus on the report within the article raises the question of how to label the person, or the textual subject, who does the reporting. This is not necessarily the same as the author of the article; for example, three of the articles have two authors but the action research intervention is reported in the singular. Established scholarship on communication (e.g. Goffman 1981, Hymes 1986) is clear that a distinction should be made between the person who presents a message and the person who is actually responsible for it and there seems to be an example of that phenomenon here: within an article, there is an action research 'story' with its own protagonist. As the *fabula* known to the researcher(s) becomes a *story*, a new subject position is constructed. I therefore use the term 'reporter' to refer to the textual narrator of the action research sequence, and assign gender on the basis of information within the article.

To tell a personal story in research is a psychologically challenging task. As authors, we need to give an account that presents us, including to ourselves, in a positive light. This implies not only a justified account of our actions and motives, but also an account of events and structures which itself lends acceptability to those actions and motives. In research articles, identity is a strategic notion: 'something one asserts and deploys' (Brown & Jones 2001: 76).

8.2   Framing patterns and nested patterns

In the longer research reports as in the shorter ones, the central dynamic of movement from an initial to a changed situation is expressed though a variety of semantic pairings and text patterns. Of further interest, in these longer texts, is a distinction which emerges between *framing patterns* and *nested patterns*.

I use the term *framing pattern* to describe the text pattern employed by the reporter to indicate the dynamic driving the whole project in its context. It is signalled particularly via the lexis though which they articulate the purpose of the project and via the criteria on which they evaluate its success. *Nested patterns* occur within the framing pattern, in one of two ways. Firstly a nested pattern may be used to describe a particular part of the action research project. So for example, as part of solving a problem, one may focus on filling a gap in knowledge. Secondly, a framing pattern may morph into a nested pattern. In this case, the nested pattern is placed in a relationship of instrumentality with the framing pattern. By analogy with the example above, one could also seek to solve a problem **by** filling a gap in knowledge. In seven of the ten reports studied it was possible to make a distinction between a framing pattern, and one or more nested patterns.

8.3   Framing patterns

My categorisation of the framing patterns of the ten reports discussed is summarised in the following table.

[Table 1 here]

Framing patterns express not only relationships between events over time but also relationships between participants in the context. They require that difficulties, goals, gaps in knowledge etc, be linked with participants in the situation, as must be the responses to such focuses. Action research has a transformative intention, implying an intimate involvement of researcher and research context, and rejecting the subject-object division associated with positivist research (Altrichter et al. 1993, Heron 1996, Winter 1998, Pike 2002). Therefore, issues of representation of relationships are particularly acute. In the following sections, I will show how choice of framing pattern and choices of participant-linking within the pattern have significant implications for the portrayal of contextual relationships.

8.3.1 Opportunity-Taking: where do opportunities come from?

Four reports are categorised as using this framing pattern. In *Grandsen 2004* and *Halai 2004*, the opportunity to be taken is presented as arising from a teacher education course: *The elements required for the award of Diploma included a professional development journal, a number of peer teaching observations and an action research project. (Grandsen 2004:19); Hence, to support reflection and enable a questioning stance towards their practice participants were expected to engage in small scale action research projects. (Halai 2004: 518).* Both reporters refer to the obligatory nature of the action research component on the teacher education course. However, the first writes as a student who took an opportunity, the second as a tutor who gave one.

In the two reports from *Meyer et al. 2004*, neither reporter uses any lexis of obligation. One specifically locates the decision about how to use the opportunity in

group consensus: *Christine suggested that we use this opportunity to assist the students on our team who were failing all academic subjects, but did not qualify for special education services. As a team, we determined that this would be an excellent use of our time. (Meyer et al. 2004: 559).*

The presentation of research via Opportunity-Taking raises issues then about how opportunities are provided, and at what level engagement in research is perceived and/or presented as a choice. Hopkins (2002) sees teacher research including action research as an emancipatory activity for students, teachers and schools. Key to this is the notion of engagement through choice, and the supposition – which may be questionable – that the interests of all involved parties can be made to coincide.

8.3.2 Goal-Means of achievement: who wants to change whom?

Smith 2004, Lee & Coombs 2004, and *Gravett 2004* all have Goal-Means of achievement as their framing pattern. In *Smith 2004 ,* the reporter represents himself as a teacher trainer developing his practice: *This article reports upon a 3 year action research programme intended to provide trainee teachers with peer support in planning and carrying out class teaching. (99).* In *Lee & Coombs 2004*, the reporter represents herself as a temporary team member collaborating in a school: *My roles as an action researcher within the school are to enable school improvement through curriculum change practices via an innovative programme of staff development. Much like an on-site professional development consultant with expertise in research methods, I worked alongside the management and teachers ... (365-366).* In *Gravett 2004,* the reporter represents herself as in charge of a large teacher development initiative: *I was invited by the joint curriculum committee of these institutions to*

conduct teaching development aimed at assisting teachers to adopt a teaching

approach that would facilitate deep learning in students. (262).

All three reports, then, articulate a change goal as the main purpose of the action research, but they differ in the positioning of the reporter vis a vis the intended change. The first reporter aimed to develop his own practice, the second to develop whole school practice where she was working as a guest, and the third to change the practice of teachers from various schools for whom she was running a training programme.

A similar cline can be seen in the reporters' evaluations of their projects. The first reporter uses a wide variety of data to evaluate the extent to which his model of paired placements is supportive of and developmental for, trainee teachers. He concludes: *If care is used in structuring a paired placement, this can scaffold both of the trainees learning, with clear benefits for trainers and pupils. (124).* The second reporter makes comments on beneficial changes to both students: *The action research evidence suggests that the use of LPs has resulted in students' increased interest in learning …(376);* and teachers: *From the teachers' perspective, this action research project will contribute towards professional development in Singapore, …(378).*

The third reporter evaluates her workshops in terms of how much deep learning and reflection they seemed to foster, and in terms of the teachers' implementation of the approaches introduced, as evidenced through the teachers' observed behaviour, journals that they were required to keep, and questionnaire responses. This evaluation, then, examines the extent to which a goal for other people was achieved.

8.3.3 Problem-Solution: whose problem?

Lamaster & Knop 2004 uses Problem-Solution as its framing pattern. The abstract identifies difficulties as the starting point for the research: *This study evolved as an instructor took over a course that recently had been converted to a web-based course. While navigating the web-based course the instructor and students recognised several issues and concerns…(387);* and establishes a focus on solving them: *In response to the data, several pedagogical changes were made to the course. Additionally, suggestions were made concerning future web-based course design. (387).*

The reporter presents herself as tackling difficulties that were negatively affecting the students. This is in keeping with a view of action research articulated in the article: *Action research involves the researcher(s) and stakeholders in the research process to **improve the environment for the stakeholders**….(389, my emphasis).* The difficulty is positioned as pre-existing, and the reporter is positioned as an incoming factor who works towards a solution for the student beneficiaries. Brown and Jones (2001) argue that such positioning is common in action research reports. A problem may be construed as intrinsic to the social identity of other research participants, for example via a construct of social disadvantage. Or it may be linked with an actor who has now left the scene, as here. Either way the external location leaves for the reporter the role of seeking solutions, and ensures that their own positive self-identity remains intact.

8.3.4 Gap in knowledge-Filling: who is learning?

Despite the common assumption that action research is always about intervention and changes in behaviour (Allwright 2005), two reports are framed by the Gap in knowledge-Filling pattern: *Bennyce's case* in *Meyer et al. 2004*, and *Nixon & Akerson 2004*.

Bennyce's case is Gap in knowledge-Filling in the sense of self-examination: *This narrative presents a critical look at how a few of my lived experiences have shaped my identity as a classroom teacher (566); Here, I have attempted to examine how my experiences as a student influence my practice as a teacher (569).* In Nixon & Akerson, in contrast, the gap in knowledge is positioned as a community 'research space' in the sense of Swales (1990): *There are many reasons to consider the interdisciplinary instruction of science and language arts…. However, whether there is equal developmental progress in both disciplines concurrently is still unclear…. What has not been investigated in depth is whether reading and writing skills also show significant development through this interdisciplinary instruction. (198).* The action research project is specifically positioned as an intervention set up to create a context in which the gap can be filled: *Because I was interested in exploring the influence of a science context on the development of elementary students' language arts skills, I designed an action research project to be carried out in my internship in a fifth grade classroom. (200).*

For this report, the Gap in knowledge-Filling dynamic is also seen in results section. The reported results of the intervention are, in terms of student learning, mixed: *The science and reading objectives were, to a degree, both being met throughout the study. The writing objectives were not being met throughout the study, though there*

was an improvement in writing skills by the end of the study. The integration of the writing structures sometimes had a negative effect on the science objectives. (206). Were the dynamic Problem-Solution or Goal-Means of achievement, with the main purpose of the action research being to improve the particular teaching-learning situation, we might expect the only partially positive result to trigger the need for another cycle. But in this report, it does not do so – the reporter's purpose was to fill a gap in knowledge, and this has been done.

In these two reports, the implications of the Gap in knowledge-Filling dynamic are presented very differently. For *Bennyce's case,* the result of the filling of a gap is greater self knowledge. For *Nixon & Akerson 2004*, broader implications are claimed: *For those in a school in which science and language arts are forced to be taught in an integrated fashion, the results of this study may be shared with policy makers to help them see when disciplinary instruction might be more important (215).* This looks like a general claim, a position which I would not intuitively have associated with an action research report.

8.4   Nested patterns

Having discussed the framing patterns of these reports we now turn our attention to the notion of nesting: different text dynamics that appear within the framing pattern. Three of the reports from the group of ten (*Gravett 2004, Nixon & Akerson 2004*, and *Bennyce's case* in *Meyer et al. 2004*) do not have nested patterns within their framing patterns; the framing patterns are in themselves sufficient to describe their organisation. The remaining seven reports however do nest, in distinct ways which I will discuss in the following sections. The issues of identity and positioning discussed

with reference to framing patterns continue to be of relevance in the discussion of nested patterns; but by using more than one semantic dynamic, the reporter achieves a greater variety of self-presentation.

8.4.1 Type 1 nesting: to describe a project phase

Three reports include nested patterns to describe a particular project phase, as summarised in the following table:

[Table 2 here]

In *Lamaster & Knop 2004*, the nested Gap in knowledge-Filling pattern emphasises the detailed work that took place to understand the nature of and reasons for difficulties with the web-based course. In *Lee & Coombs 2004,* the overall process of Goal-Means of achievement is broken down into separate phases. The reporter first describes a Gap in knowledge-Filling phase: *The purpose of this part of the project was to use a staff development forum to elicit from teachers the nature of the pedagogical problems being faced in the classroom (365).* Then the knowledge gained allows the reporter to conceptualise a Problem-Solution dynamic which drives two cycles of intervention.

In both of these reports, the inclusion of a nested Gap in knowledge-Filling pattern is a key index of the social identity of the reporter because it shows where the perception of problems comes from: ie, from a detailed study of the particular context. Solutions which are proposed to ameliorate these difficulties then appear very much more grounded than they might otherwise. Foster (1999) criticises action research and

teacher research generally for focusing only on improvement, at the expense of knowledge building. But in both of these reports, improvement is positioned as only possible *after* the building of knowledge. By their use of nested semantic dynamics, the reporters emphasise both the descriptive and the interventionist strands of their work.

Smith 2004 also contains two nested patterns, first Problem-Solution and then Gap in knowledge-Filling. The report covers three cycles of action research, and the dynamic changes at the transition point between cycles. The first cycle is driven by the Goal-Means of achievement dynamic of the framing pattern, but a difficulty is encountered. This triggers cycle two with a Problem-Solution pattern. The difficulties encountered in cycle one are unexpected, and the reporter positions himself as having the perceptiveness and flexibility to respond to them. The problem is intrinsic to the research process, and so stands in interesting contrast with the externally located problem of *Lamaster & Knop 2004.* Cycle two leads to a more positive evaluation: *In terms of increasing trainee-teachers' repertoires, there was evidence that paired placements formed a successful course intervention. (111).* Nevertheless it is still partial: *However, all three class-teachers expressed concerns about the potential (or actual) domination of one trainee-teacher in the pair. (111)* On cycle three this leads to a new focus of study, ie learning from vicarious experience. The reservations expressed by class teachers lead to a cycle driven by a Gap in knowledge-Filling dynamic, as the reporter seeks to explore the extent to which their reservations are well founded.

This report is a clear portrayal of action research cycles driven by developments in understanding. The reporter is portrayed as both flexible and agentive, taking responsibility for the research process by choosing where to focus and how to intervene. The motivation of the research dovetails with the motivation of the educational practice: both are focused on the promotion of learning.

8.4.2 Type 2 nesting: as morphosis

In four reports, the framing pattern does not include a nested pattern to describe a particular project phase, rather the framing pattern turns into a different pattern, as follows:

[Table 3 here]

In all cases, it is the Opportunity-Taking framing pattern which leads to nesting as morphosis. This suggests that Opportunity-Taking is in itself an insufficiently specified dynamic for action research reporting – one has to say what one used the opportunity *for*.

Halai 2004 is perhaps the most interesting report from this perspective, in that a two-way morphosis seems to take place. The reporter presents her work as both Gap in knowledge-Filling: *A purpose of the action research undertaken by the tutor-researcher was to generate local evidence of impact and look for micro impacts that would help justify teaching these methods to teachers more generally (519);* and Goal-Means of achievement: *The main aim of the programme was to develop exemplary teachers who are reflective practitioners (518).* However, these are not

sequential dynamics – rather, each presentation is linked to different research participants and represents the reporter in different ways. In the Goal-Means of achievement pattern she is like the reporter of *Gravett 2004*, attempting to benefit students by fostering change in their teachers. In the Gap in knowledge-Filling pattern she is like the reporter of *Nixon & Akerson 2004,* experimenting with a training approach and looking for evidence to justify its implementation in wider contexts. This is a dual identity then, for different audiences.

9.   Variation and aspiration

As we have seen, the semantic patterns explored here allow action research reporters to communicate not only process narratives but also sets of relationships in a context. Framing patterns portray the main dynamic of the report, but nested patterns allow the possibility of shifts of emphasis in identity, and therefore the representation of the different relationships that a researcher assumes during an action research project.

There is more variety than I would have intuitively expected. Opportunities can be taken, or given, and can be semi obligatory. Goals can be for oneself, for oneself and others, or only for others. The action researcher can be both part of the problem and part of the solution, or come in and work towards solutions only. Gaps in knowledge can be personal or general, and different conclusions can be drawn about the implications of any knowledge gained.

It would not be appropriate to respond to this variety by a debate about whether all the positionings found 'really count' as action research. As Edge (2001) suggests, an essentialist argument about the nature of action research would belie the constantly

developing nature of the approach. It may also put up barriers, and allow some individuals to limit the access of others to action research as a way of working. I prefer, then, to note the status of all these reports as published accounts in a journal dedicated to action research and learn from the range of possibilities that this analysis of text dynamics has revealed.

All of these semantic dynamics in the reporting of action research emphasise the purposive, intelligent nature of the actions undertaken by the researchers and others. Reporters are cast positively as agents, not passively as determined by structures and events. This is an assertive voice, emphasising the reporter's responsibility and control. It is an attractive voice, evoking independence and purposeful collaboration.

And it may of course be illusory. As Fairclough (2003) might say, we can construe an emancipatory and responsible reality, but that does not mean we can construct it. Even so the aspiration to do so is key to the action research endeavour, and this aspiration influences action research both in its methodology and in its stance vis a vis its findings (Rué 2006). Winter (1998: 372) argues 'action research raises key questions about the actual experience of taking responsibility for attempting to initiate change. It is about the possibilities and limits for responsibility and creativity within the lived experienced of highly problematic organisational and political conditions'. It is hardly surprising, then, that action research should find itself reported using semantic dynamics that emphasise the purpose, intelligence and commitment of the researcher.

10.   Action research in teacher education

An increased awareness of the discourse of action research is of potential relevance in teacher education, where action research modules are fairly widespread. As a first step to involving teachers in education in this investigation, I contacted in-service teachers studying part time at the University of Warwick school of education, engaged on courses which have included action research work. To comment on the issues which can be raised, I shall discuss a particular case. One teacher, Barbara, provided me with two assignments which she and her tutors had categorized as action research. Both projects had been undertaken in the school where she worked. The first was an investigation into improvements made since the school's last OFSTED inspection, with recommendations for further action. The second was an account of a project to improve numeracy via the use of laptops.

For me as analyst, the 'Inspection' assignment was organized on a Gap in Knowledge-Filling dynamic and the 'Laptops' assignment on a Goal-Means of achievement dynamic. I discussed this with Barbara:

S Well in the second assignment then, the one about investigating school improvement, you

B That was the first

S Sorry that was the first one

B yeah

S You talk about the purpose

B yeah

S of, um, as being where is it yeah, you say 'This project attempts to understand what school improvement is …. To what extent the TCC has improved'

B yeah

S So is that a goal in the same way that this [laptops] is a goal, this is a goal to help them do the times tables, this goal [school improvement] is 'find out'

B No – that one is also to do with the children

S OK….

B I knew that if I could do this [laptops] … and that's probably totally wrong, but I knew that if I did this, then it could help them

S uh huh

B That one [school improvement] ah well, the school may or may not take on my… ideas…

S OK so that

B It's personal

S yes

S So the main difference is that this one YOU could implement the plan,

B yes

S and this one

B somebody else would have to say 'Yes Barbara you're doing the right thing'.

What emerges, then, is Barbara's reason for choosing two different text dynamics. Where the carrying out of the actions was in her own remit, she used a Goal-Means of achievement pattern. Where actions to be taken would have been at whole school level, she rather couched her work as knowledge gathering, leading to recommendations. She was conscious that the decision to put them into action was not hers to take.

11. Discursive literacy and teacher education

Despite the widely argued importance of sharing experiences and discoveries with other practitioners and researchers (e.g. Allwright & Bailey 1991), an emphasis on forms of articulation seems to be missing from many conceptualisations of action research. For example Thorne & Wang (1996) discuss processes and roles of action research in teacher education without placing any emphasis on reporting or other articulation. Indeed, the lack of genre stability for the reporting of action research is widely acknowledged. The website of *Educational Action Research* states that 'the Editors will … welcome exploratory forms of presentation.'. Scholars such as Crookes (1993) and Freeman (1998) have argued that the complexities and innovations of action research should lead to new and different discourses and styles.

However an argument in favour of variety does little to protect action research from the argument that its research reports are not rigorous, and arguably leaves action researchers without the sense of a recognized genre or genres in which they could communicate their work. I would argue that the parallels which have been argued in this paper between the action research process and a specific set of text dynamics can help action research to meet the challenge of developing shared and appropriate forms and processes of articulation.

Given the complex choices to make when writing up action research projects, and there is a role for of a more proactive teacher education initiative in the writing of action research. (Edge, in preparation, Green & Brown, 2006, McDonough, 2006). The inclusion of discourse literacy work on action research components of teacher education courses is one way to help new researchers 'break through the amnesia that

protects research from recognizing its own textuality' (Maclure 2003: 106). As readers and writers, we can think about the causes and consequences of our own textualisations and those of others. Brown & Jones (2001: 78) argue for an understanding of practitioner research as 'a construction of self in relation to the professional and social context we face'. These parallel dynamics show some of the clearest ways of making that construction.

To end this article, I will focus for a moment on the wider social, political and interpersonal contexts in which action research takes place. There is a challenge, to build appropriate textual schemata to convey the nature and content of action research experiences. But the promotion of action research and of a discursive literacy among action researchers goes far beyond these local strategic aims. Any such work is part of an argument for the centrality of teacher-researcher voices in educational research (c.f. Hayes 1996). It contributes to a movement away from the discourse of theory/ application which has brought us limited benefits and some harms (Clarke 1994, Delandshere 2004, Pring 2000, Roulston et al. 2005) and towards 'a discourse of investigation and articulation' (Edge 2003: 90).

Such a discourse has a number of potential benefits in educational contexts. In terms of representation, it acknowledges the individual realities of research settings, and the complexities of transfer. It respects the purposeful nature of the actions of research participants, which is consistent with an acknowledgement of the motivated nature of educational endeavour. It also has considerable developmental potential, encouraging individuals to undertake research and articulate our experiences and conclusions and

encouraging other community members to listen to and to value this vicarious experience.

Acknowledgements

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