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## **Action Research and the Academy:** *seeking to legitimise a 'different' form of research*

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### **Doing and Writing Action Research**

Jean McNiff and Jack Whitehead

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Action Research (AR) is a major approach adopted by those working in educational and other professional contexts, and looking to do research that can make a real difference in practice. Like so many descriptors used in educational research, AR is contentious: being variously defined and understood. However, Jean McNiff and Jack Whitehead are well established and well respected commentators in this area, and their voices deserve attention.

*Doing and Writing Action Research* is written for the student who is undertaking a project for a university award, and argues for McNiff and Whitehead's vision for what AR is and should be. A major theme informing this book is that AR is "a different kind of research" (p.7) to traditional forms of research that have been valued in the Academy, but that AR can be informed by a coherent and systematic set of ideas and procedures that should be taken seriously in universities, and which offers legitimate (and legitimised) forms of knowledge deserving to be accepted in the Academy. This book is therefore an interesting mix of guidebook and thesis.

The student new to educational research, and attracted to the beginner-friendly title, the encouraging style of writing, the almost recipe style instructions in places, and the real and fictitious exemplars acting as models (that is, the guidebook features) will probably not be in a

strong position to appreciate the full significance, nor the strengths and weaknesses, of the thesis that underpins the book. This review article is an attempt to offer a critique of that argument. The core of the underlying thesis turns around the nature of AR and the rather different nature of academic research.

## **Research, but not as we know it?**

As it is generally understood, there are a number of features of AR which set it apart from more traditional forms of research: what might be labelled 'academic' research. These relate to who does it; where it is done; why it is done; how it is done; and how it is reported.

A key characteristic of AR as generally understood is that AR is carried out by practitioners. So, in education, AR may typically be undertaken by a teacher (Ferrance, 2000). Empirical research has to be carried out somewhere, in some setting, with some participants. In traditional academic research, a key part of the planning process may concern characterising and identifying suitable research sites. However, in AR this is not necessary: as the research site is where the practitioner works. On this understanding, an external researcher coming into a particular setting to do research *cannot* be considered to be doing AR, *unless* they are involved in collaborative AR supporting the enquiry of the practitioner(s) normally working in that context. Even in this situation, the collaboration will only be AR when the issue being addressed is that identified as needing research attention in that context by the practitioner (Bruce, Flynn, & Stagg-Peterson, 2011; Haggerty & Postlethwaite, 2003).

Another key feature of AR is that it is undertaken to improve some aspect of the researcher's practice (Elliott, 1991). The motivation for enquiry is the identification of some issue or concern or problem that the practitioner hopes can be addressed (i.e. changed, not just better understood) by the enquiry (Hammersley, 2004). AR may seek to improve classroom environment, rapport with learners, learning outcomes, progression rates; absenteeism rates, levels of tolerance of bullying, and so forth. It may be related to improving teamwork among a group of practitioners, updating schemes of work, improving the timetabling process, addressing community attitudes to the institution, encouraging learners to select more healthy lunch options, or a great many other things. These 'things', however, are necessarily things that are seen as important and open to modification in the research context. In other words, AR is *context-directed* research (Taber, Forthcoming).

By comparison, traditional academic research is not directed towards changing specific contexts, but to the development or testing of theory. Academic research makes knowledge claims that are formal (McNiff and Whitehead would say 'propositional'), abstracted from the specifics of a particular context, and more often than not expected to be - at least in principle - generalisable across contexts. AR is not like that (Hammersley, 2004). If the teacher is concerned that the students in a certain class seldom complete homework tasks, then the aim of AR would be to change the situation so that there is an improvement - such that the students come to generally complete their homework. Of course, in addressing this issue, the enquiring teacher may both refer to existing theories and theorise about what is going on in this particular class, and why particular

actions taken do, or do not, bring about the desired results. Yet, the key criterion of success would be a positive change in student homework completion behaviour, and not the development of a theory of student engagement with homework.

Because academic research is theory-directed - about developing or testing theory - it is motivated by theoretical considerations: such as the lack of a theory in some area of educational work, or the apparent failure of available theories to inform practice, or the basis for choice between alternative theories apparently competing for the same 'explanatory space' (i.e., seeking to explain the same set of phenomena). Of course this does not mean that academic researchers are never concerned with practical problems: far from it. But it is not the job of an academic researcher to address a practical problem in some educational context when it appears there is already in place well-established theory which has been shown to be successful in solving the problem at other comparable educational sites.

So academic research usually starts from a conceptualisation of a field of knowledge, the principled choice of a theoretical perspective, and the identification of (theoretical) research questions (RQ), before proceeding to look for suitable places to do the research (Taber, Forthcoming): whereas AR starts from a specific practical problem that needs to be solved 'here', which motivates the search for possible solutions that will work *here*.

Most academic research is planned as a fairly linear process - although not always, grounded theory uses an iterative approach - where data collection precedes data analysis, leading to (albeit often limited and sometimes tentative and conditional) conclusions; whereas AR is usually considered to be a cyclic process. Academic research is often organised into research programmes, within which discrete studies address issues incrementally and are reported separately (Taber, Forthcoming) - with each study adding something, perhaps something quite modest, original to public knowledge in the field. The expectation in AR, however, is that it is unlikely that a single action, a one-off modification to practice, will solve the target problem. Rather, it is more often the case that several things might need to be tried out before identifying a successful approach, and that even promising approaches may need several stages of refinement before there is sufficient improvement to assuage the initial concern. AR is therefore usually considered to be characterised by the 'AR cycle' (Ferrance, 2000; McNiff, 1992; Tripp, 2005), which somewhat akin to the learning cycle (Marek, 2009), involves undertaking action, monitoring any effects, evaluating the action, and then undertaking new action informed by the previous iterations of the research. The iterative nature of AR has been described as "perhaps its most distinguishing characteristic" (Tripp, 2005, p. 452).

Finally, the role of reporting in academic research and AR is very different. In the academic world, the researcher must 'publish or be damned' (or at least face ridicule and pity from the scholarly community - a kind of modernist version of damnation perhaps). If the purpose of academic research is to develop theory - abstract knowledge of general application - and the motivation for research is apparent limitations in current theory, then academic research becomes pointless unless any theory that is developed is published so that it contributes to the field, and can be drawn upon by other researchers. That is not to underestimate the potential practical *application* of

theory: for new theory can neither be critiqued, developed, tested by others; nor communicated in professional development (e.g., initial teacher education) or applied in practice (e.g., by teachers in their classrooms), unless it is accessible to others in the field.

By contrast, if the purpose of AR is to improve some aspect of professional practice 'here', then there is no strong imperative to publish the results. This is in part a matter of priorities. The busy practitioner may consider that putting their time and effort into practice (including AR to address the next concern on their professional list of issues) is more important than producing formal accounts of the research. The reporting of AR needs to be 'fit for purpose', and formal reporting may not contribute to the purpose of AR at all. Reporting, where it occurs, may often be motivated by purposes external to the AR itself, such as desiring recognition and accreditation.

Not only is the rationale for publishing weaker, but often so is the basis for writing a report likely to be considered acceptable for publication. This is not a matter of practitioners not having the ability to do 'decent' research. Rather, the educational AR project often does not justify wide-scale dissemination because of limited conceptualisation and/or lack of methodological rigour. It is the nature of AR, as discussed above, that often the processes of conceptualising a research focus, selecting a theoretical perspective, and refining RQ that would be part of the development phases of an academic research project are short-circuited. Usually the practitioner has limited access to research literature, and limited time for reading. Also, the problem is not a theoretical puzzle to enjoy mulling over, but a pressing and very real issue in practice. Often then there is limited attempt to conceptualise the issue in theoretical terms that could best support the development of generalisable knowledge of the kind considered suitable for research journals. Although there are now respected journals with a focus on AR, most of what they publish can be considered to be conceptualising issues in AR, or concerned with the education and development of action researchers, rather than simply being reports of practitioner AR projects as such.

In principle teachers can access literature and conceptualise their enquiry in the manner of academic research, even if AR does not require that. Indeed, many teachers undertaking AR based research for higher degrees do indeed offer reports that are of just this kind, even though AR is not well-matched to the norms of traditional academic research. This indeed seems to be the problem that motivates *Doing and Writing Action Research*: how can the 'square peg' of AR best be fitted into the 'round hole' of an academic research thesis acceptable to a University?

The issue of methodological rigour can offer a more difficult barrier for the teacher looking to publish an account of their AR. This is because of the practical purpose and cyclic nature of AR. Doing good AR involves making a change, and then monitoring its apparent effects *up to the point* where it is possible to make a judgement about that stage: and then moving on to the next iteration. By definition, AR does not involve continuing to collect data to the point where we can offer a robust argument that action A led to effect X. Indeed, the teacher that waited until there was a water-tight case that some innovation was proving ineffective (or even counter-productive) before moving on to the next idea might seem to be a thorough scientist, but is not being a good practitioner or a true action researcher. AR is a part of good practice, and teaching practice means

making myriad decisions upon limited evidence in real-time teaching contexts: knowing that sometimes we will inevitably make poor choices, but that:

- generally making a decision of some kind sooner rather than later is necessary (and not making a decision is itself a decision to prevaricate);
- nearly all our decisions in teaching are seriously under-determined by evidence (so like a judge in a civil court case, we simply weight up the available evidence and decide to act on the balance of probabilities);
- over time our experience develops, and we get better at making decisions, even when the evidence is limited.

The teacher's professional decisions, even when informed by a good understanding of pedagogic theory, are often based on the wealth of tacit knowledge developed in the job. This might be called intuition, but is a very real form of personal knowledge (Polanyi, 1962), albeit acting at a preconscious level, and often relying on cues of which we are not even consciously aware. That such tacit knowledge is not explicit (and so not open to formal analysis or reporting), does not make it imaginary, nor necessarily unreliable. Indeed a good deal of what is called 'expertise' is actually knowledge of this kind: real, usable knowledge, but informing judgements 'out of sight' of our conscious minds. Arguably, teacher research that encompasses the genuine spirit of AR, has more of the feel of classroom practice than academic research.

The academic researcher has to be sure that they can provide a clear line of argument from systematically collected evidence to knowledge claims that they wish to place in the public domain, because they are claiming to offer theoretical knowledge that has general applicability. Moreover, if evidence collected in *this* classroom does not suffice to make such a case, they will need to also visit *other* classrooms to continue their research.

The teacher undertaking AR has to balance action and research (Tripp, 2005): certainly decisions are made based on the analysis of evidence, but those decisions have to be made *here and now*, whilst action can still have an effect. The academic researcher studies *this* classroom as a model for classrooms (or more likely for a specified sub-set of classrooms) more generally, in order to look to inform classrooms (in general), in the future. The teacher undertaking AR studies *this* classroom *now*, to inform decisions that can have real impact on *this* group of learners *now*. The academic researcher has a responsibility to produce generalisable knowledge, and the research site is a means to that end; whereas the teacher has a responsibility to teach a specific class, and AR is one tool that can help do this job better.

This at least summarises some common thinking about the purposes, nature, strengths and limitations of AR, and why it is inherently different from research undertaken in the Academy. McNiff and Whitehead, however, offer a rather particular view of AR and claim it should take its place as a form of legitimate academic work. That is, they seek to persuade readers that the square peg of AR can be made to fit into the round hole intended for academic research.

## **McNiff and Whitehead's notion of action research**

McNiff and Whitehead address their book to the practitioner, and in line with other commentators see AR as a form of practitioner research. They tell readers that

“the differences between action research and traditional research mean that they are different in terms of:

1. What is studied, how it is studied and represented, and why it is studied.
2. Where the practitioner-researcher is in the research.
3. Forms of theory” (p.17).

This is certainly in keeping with the view outlined above. McNiff and Whitehead see AR as “the practitioner, individually or with others, studying their practice and showing how they hold themselves accountable for it” (p.1). AR is necessarily practitioner research, although - as was implied above - that does not mean all practitioner research is AR. This is absolutely nothing to stop a teacher undertaking research in their classroom, with their students, perhaps focused on classroom teaching and learning, that is not AR. So a teacher studying for a higher degree might well undertake theory-directed research matching the expectations of academic research, and indeed research training on university courses may well be primarily aligned with the priorities, logic and nature of theory-directed research.

The crux of McNiff and Whitehead's project seems to be to find a way to 'square the circle' of accepting that AR has the nature it does, which necessarily makes it different from traditional academic research, yet making it seem suitable as a basis for academic awards of universities without compromising its AR nature. This addresses a very important issue. For most teachers undertaking a research project as part of a university course, it is more important that they develop enquiry skills useful to practitioners - classroom teachers, heads of department, school managers - than they learn to produce research of the kind suitable for academic research journals. Certainly teachers can and do make the transition to academic researcher (this is the case for the author of this review, and many of his colleagues), but for those who wish to stay focused on school or college teaching, the value of a teaching qualification or higher degree is not in developing capacity for research publication, but in developing better insights into, and enquiry skills for addressing, issues that arise in the day-to-day work of the teacher.

Teachers undertaking higher degree projects may decide to undertake a case study (CS) relating some aspect of their teaching that interests them, which can be theory-directed research suitable for writing up as an academic research report, but based on work with their class, in their classroom, giving them much greater insight into their particular teaching context. Generalisability is limited: but if the focal phenomena is complex then an idiographic approach may be justified *on academic grounds*, and reporting 'thick description' allows the possibility of 'reader generalisation'. In other words, a CS might well be one way to meet the needs of traditional academic research (set up as theory-directed) whilst also being of real and immediate value in the actual teaching context.

The reason some practitioner-researcher prefer AR to CS is because AR is about making and evaluating changes to practice, and so addressing problems, whereas CS is often seen as only

suitable for investigating the way things currently are. The *perception* is often that CS can only be used to find out about and so understand better the *status quo*. This assumption is based on the notion that CS is a form of ‘naturalistic’ study and therefore cannot involve intervention in the natural state of affairs. This is indeed so, but a teacher introducing an innovation as a response to a perceived issue or problem in their professional work is part of the natural context of teaching, and a CS of such an intervention would be perfectly valid (Taber, Forthcoming). Where the practitioner intends to introduce and evaluate a single innovation (and not use the AR cycle), then CS is often likely to be a more sensible choice of methodology than AR.

But AR offers more than this: an approach which is explicitly context-directed and supports the development of solutions and improvements in that context: not just the evaluation of a specific innovation. McNiff and Whitehead suggest that in AR the RQ is of the form: “how do I improve what I am doing?” (p.107, p.111). So AR can seem very attractive to the teacher undertaking research for a university award. However, there are real compromises involved in trying to do effective AR and still meeting the expectations of an academic award: producing a thesis that presents an acceptable argument for new knowledge claims supported by a thorough analysis of systematically collected data; and following a research design addressing formalised research questions, informed by choice of theoretical perspective, supported by an initial conceptualisation of the field based upon a careful review of relevant literature. That is, the square peg of AR may need to be carefully reshaped to fit in to the round hole of a university thesis. It is common for students to produce a good thesis in the allowed time-span by compromising on the things that are at the heart of AR (and most often such reports are limited to a single cycle of AR). Whilst it is certainly *possible* to produce a good thesis true to the spirit of AR whilst meeting the expectations of reporting academic research (e.g., Philip, 2012), it certainly adds to the already considerable demands of undertaking a university degree whilst meeting the demands of classroom teaching.

McNiff and Whitehead’s project is based upon finding an alternative way of considering this problem. Crudely, I would characterise their approach as rather than reshaping the square peg, we try to give it the appearance (from a distance at least) of being round, and then once we feel the resistance of the round hole, we wiggle the AR peg around enough to distort the shape of the hole. In other words, we dress up AR to look like it has the kinds of things expected in traditional research, and then we force the fit so the hole will accept the peg. McNiff and Whitehead distinguish between action, research and the story of the AR such that: “the aim of the action in action research is to improve a personal or social situation; the aim of the research is to offer explanations (generate theory) for the action; and the aim of the story is to communicate the significance of the action research for public legitimation” (p.17). They acknowledge that “taking action and doing research happen together, in the action” but suggest that they can “analyse action and research separately” (p.17). More commonly the research would be understood to be the overall process of planning and taking action, monitoring and evaluating its effect, and planning the next cycle of action, etc. *Doing and Writing Action Research* however compromises on the AR cycle (McNiff, 1992), suggesting that the researcher completes “at least one action reflection cycle; if not, your give reasons” (p.107). Particularly at odds with more traditional notions of AR, is the emphasis that McNiff and Whitehead place on the reporting of AR.

## **Doing, but mostly writing, action research**

An intriguing feature of *Doing and Writing Action Research* is the strong focus on writing. The book is structured into three main sections entitled ‘What is written in an action research report’ (pp.5); ‘How is an action research report written?’ (pp.85); and ‘Why should your report be written?’ (pp. 161). The final section might be seen as a response to the common view of AR discussed above, where report writing is often considered low priority, or even unnecessary, as part of AR. However, McNiff and Whitehead have decided to make the report the key theme of their account of AR, and to consider publication as part of their a definition of AR as “systematic enquiry undertaken to improve a social situation, and then made public” (p.11).

The first chapter of the book is called ‘What is Special about Action Research Reports’ and sets out to tell readers ‘how they are different from traditional research reports’. The ‘traditional’ notion of AR as focused on action rather than formal reporting is completely reversed here, with the report being emphasised for the reader right from the start, almost as if the report is core, and everything else leads up to it. Of course, if the report is a thesis or some other kind of examined submission leading to a major qualification, some readers might well be thinking along the same lines, but this certainly shifts the heart of AR away from practical problem-solving to something else. That *something else* is the justification of the claim to have done some AR, i.e. legitimisation of AR (in this book AR in general, but for the student their particular AR enquiry) comes to the fore.

This emphasis on the report dominates the book. When, at the start of the Chapter 4, the reader is told that the focus “shifts from *doing* to *writing* action research” they are likely to be quite surprised: to this reader it seemed the focus was on the writing from the start. Indeed, according to *Doing and Writing Action Research* the action researcher should “begin the writing [of the report] from the start of the research” (p.77).

## **Putting values at the heart of research**

Often in formal academic research, issues of ontology and in particular epistemology are at the fore, and axiological considerations may be limited to the necessary treatment of the ethics of the research processes itself. McNiff and Whitehead seek to put values at the heart of the research. This is quite appropriate as AR is about improving professional (and for the authors, personal) situations, where values should always be informing action, whether that action is research or of any other kind. For McNiff and Whitehead, the impetus of any AR is a values-related concern, such that an AR report should: “explain that you were concerned because you were experiencing yourself as a living contradiction as your values were being denied in your practice” (p.58). For McNiff and Whitehead, a RQ in AR is “usually about how you can live your values more fully in practice” (p.75).

Whilst this might seem a rather particular perspective, it has considerable merits. There are many potential topics of teacher research so it is a good idea for the practitioner-researcher to ask themselves whether, and if so why, something really matters. Does it matter if the students do not enjoy Shakespeare’s plays? Or cannot solve quadratic equations? Or hand their homework in late?



Or talk when we ask them to listen? Probably such things do matter, but before we look to change a situation we should consider what it is about it we are unhappy about, and why. This might help us to justify the importance of committing resources - time and effort - to focus on changing something, and so to prioritise our concerns. The regular school uniform rule infringements may be more obvious in a tutor group than the grumbling hostility between some groups in the class: but which issue is more of a challenge to our values as a teacher? Where can we best focus our efforts to improve the world in some small, but important, way?

## **AR as a meta-methodology**

AR is usually found on menus of methodologies suggested for educational research. Traditionally, having reviewed literature and conceptualised the field, and identified a theoretical perspective and refined RQ, the researcher develops a project design to address the RQ. The first stage in this process is selecting an overall research strategy (methodology): such as experiment, survey, ethnography, case study or grounded theory. AR is often included in this list, but in a sense AR is less a strategy for addressing specific RQ within the logic of a research project than the adoption of an overall stance towards the research process (Taber, Forthcoming). AR is a choice of a context-directed mode of research, rather than the theory-directed mode, and so in a sense is meta-methodological. McNiff and Whitehead acknowledge this and see the selection of a methodology as part of the process *within* AR (p.93). They do not discuss specific methodologies most suitable for AR in any great depth (which might disappoint some of the likely readership) but refer to examples such as “self-study action research” (p.100) and an “action-reflection approach” (p.103).

What does seem common to AR methodologies, in the version of AR offered in *Doing and Writing Action Research* is a shift from the usual logic of research. Traditional research begins (or at least is claimed to begin) from a genuine sense of ignorance, and seeks new knowledge. Even when the RQ is of the form “can theory X make sense of the data to be collected in context Y?” or “can Z’s findings from educational context A be replicated in a educational context B?” and the researcher may actually have strong expectations of the outcome (as often the research project is built around a hunch), there still has to be some real doubt, as the research has to be motivated by a gap or inconsistency in the theoretical basis of the current conceptualisation. There has to be some question mark over the range of application of theory X, or some basis for suspecting educational context B is distinct enough from A that different outcomes are at least feasible (Taber, 2012). We would not bother with the research otherwise - for the same reasons that a medical research council is not going to fund a study to find out if newly born babies have hearts, or a science research council is not going to support research to see if freshly manufactured copper wires conduct electricity. We have very strong theoretical reasons to assume we already know the answers (even though these assumptions have not been empirically tested), and research resources can best be directed elsewhere.

However, McNiff and Whitehead suggests that an AR proposal should tell the reader “what knowledge claims you intend to make” (p.88) as “the unit of enquiry is the researcher's claims to

know about their own practice” (p.18) and “the purpose of the research is to test the validity of the claim and articulate its significance” (p.23). Rather than data collection providing material to analyse that might lead to knowledge claims, *Doing and Writing Action Research* suggests that “data collection is the source of generating evidence to establish the validity of your knowledge claim” (p. 129, present author’s emphasis). In relation to the participants in a study, the teacher’s students for example, McNiff and Whitehead urge the researcher to “remember the focus is on you, not them” (p.61). Once again, this reflects a rather particular flavour of practitioner research.

## **AR, knowledge and theory generation**

McNiff and Whitehead bemoan that “too often, action research is still seen only as a powerful means for professional development, but not as a means of knowledge creation or theory generation” (p.1), something they feel is in part due to the “still traditionalist Academy” (p.2). They note that practitioners “often find it difficult to secure strong funding” for research as “the funding system leans strongly in the direction of the establishment” being “created and maintained by the establishment” (p.3).

To examine McNiff and Whitehead’s complaints here, it is useful to separate out three distinct questions. Have McNiff and Whitehead persuaded the reader that AR leads to:

1. new knowledge;
2. new knowledge that is theoretical in nature;
3. theoretical knowledge that can contribute to the progress of an academic field?

According to *Doing and Writing Action Research*, AR allows researchers to “create personal practical knowledge” (p.19), as they have “learned how to do things better” (p.44) and so may make the knowledge claim that “I have improved what I am doing” (p.62). This is reasonable enough, as AR is likely to be an effective learning process for any practitioner who engages with it.

However, such knowledge is not automatically theoretical. Indeed, McNiff and Whitehead note that “traditional [i.e. theory-directed] research is about abstract ideas, and aims to predict and control practices, whereas action research is about real life and aims to improve practices” (p.49) and acknowledge that “action researchers tend to see research as a creative process of trial and error, working their way through and arriving at a ‘best for now’ position” (p.8). These characterisations are quite appropriate for a context-directed form of research intended as practical problem-solving apparatus, but not ideal as the basis for developing theoretical knowledge.

McNiff and Whitehead suggest that “descriptions and explanations for action constitute your living theory of practice” (p.108), and that ‘stories’ can “become real-life theories of practice [as] they contain descriptions and explanations arising from reflection on what you are doing, and your critical analysis of its significance” (p.31). They argue that “theory is embodied within their practices, and is generated through their practices” (p.19). AR enables the generation of “improving knowledge about existing situations, each of which is unique to the people in the situation, so the

knowledge cannot be generalised or applied, although it can be shared” (p.13). McNiff and Whitehead suggest to their reader that they will “have drawn upon [their] personal knowledge...as the grounds for the validity of the claim” (p.63).

However, it is not clear if what McNiff and Whitehead characterise as a “living theory of practice” (p.15, p.18) is a ‘theory’ in the sense that term is commonly understood in scholarly work. There is a ‘folk conception’ of theory where the term is often used for a hunch, hypotheses or inspired guess; but in academic work a theory is a coherent framework of related concepts that can support the generation of explanations and testable (refutable) predictions, and that has a relatively wide range of application in relation to relevant phenomena. For McNiff and Whitehead, however, “broadly speaking, ‘theory’ means ‘an explanation’ ” (p.10), which seems somewhat insufficient for ‘theory’ status. So if “the ‘research’ of action research is about offering descriptions, explanations and analyses for action” (p.12) that ‘constitute’ the “living theory of practice”, then that falls well short of generating theory as that is usually understood.

Theory needs to be abstracted from, not located in, unique situations. It needs to be knowledge that is made explicit, not implicit, personal knowledge that is embodied in practices (Collins, 2010; Polanyi, 1962). It needs to be generalised and applicable, or it is not theoretical. McNiff and Whitehead argue that “establishing the truthfulness of a claim within an academic context involves testing it against the literature” (p.75), but this is not the case (especially if it is understood, as readers might infer from the approach described in *Doing and Writing Action Research*, as finding resonances between one’s personal understandings and the writing of some major thinkers). Research needs to be informed by and related to the literature, certainly, but knowledge claims derive from a chain of argument based upon analysis of systematically collected data. *Doing and Writing Action Research* tell readers a lot about how to write up AR, but offers surprising little advice for students about data collection and analysis.

*Doing and Writing Action Research* reasonably suggests that the ‘strongest’ knowledge claims “are original ones, that you know something that no one knew before” (p.93). McNiff and Whitehead argue the practitioner can make an “original claim to knowledge” because “no one else does your practice, so no one else can claim that they know it with the authority of your own experience” (p.13). That is, because the knowledge claim is “a claim that you know how and why you have improved your practice” (p.28) the “claim is original because no one else has improved your practice, so no one else has made the claim before” (p.43). From this position McNiff and Whitehead argue that “your claim is that you have learned (come to know) about your practice, which enables you to contribute to knowledge of your field” (p.112). So even at undergraduate level an AR report “contributes to knowledge of your field, such as engineering or health science” (p.106). The doctoral candidate should be “saying that you know you are making an original contribution to your field, and you know the importance of that contribution” (p.163).

McNiff and Whitehead ask their reader to aspire to “contribute to new forms of theory, by placing [their] living theory of practice in the public domain” (p.94). Of course, every teacher has a wealth of unique knowledge, based on their personal experiences in the classroom. I have knowledge of

particular students, particular lesson activities, affordances of particular rooms I've taught in. I know things about teaching which no one else has ever known before: but most of that specific knowledge is only of value in its original context, and I would make no contribution to my field by making it public. To be a genuine contribution it would have to be informed by a conceptualisation reflecting the current state of knowledge in the field, and abstracted from the original context in a form that can be seen by others to apply across contexts. If I produce original knowledge of that form, then I can contribute to the field. Knowledge of the form championed by McNiff and Whitehead is inherently not of this kind. Traditional research, that is theory-directed research, takes the form it does, and is valued by the Academy and research funders, precisely because it is a generalised and widely applicable form of knowledge.

## **Persuading the academy**

Given this, many in the Academy will remain unpersuaded by the arguments in *Doing and Writing Action Research*. Readers are advised to set up critical friends to support their research (which is good advice) and 'validation groups' (p.63), so that "when your validation group looks at your research, they will judge whether you have been authentic in your dealings" (p.112). Reporting that you have sought "the critical feedback of others" (p.107) is good practice, but does not avoid the need for external scrutiny.

McNiff and Whitehead think that when AR is the basis of a university award, the "candidate and examiner [should] negotiate their standards of judgement" (p.51), and they advise their readers to "ask your examiner to judge your report in relation to your own standards of judgement" (p.45). This is perhaps a more ethical version of leaving a bank note in the examination script: in many universities, appointed examiners will feel it is not the candidate's place to suggest how they should evaluate the thesis. Whilst it is reasonable for McNiff and Whitehead to suggest this approach would be more democratic, it might be misleading to suggest to readers that this is acceptable practice - just as it is misleading to suggest that in "most institutions" a doctoral thesis can be passed with "up to about six errors in the manuscript" (p.79). A doctoral thesis can fail because of one 'error' if it is considered significant enough – and that 'error' could be assuming that contextualised, personal knowledge in the form of stories and explanations will be seen as a substantive original contribution to a field.

Ultimately I was not convinced that the square peg of AR belongs in the round hole of academic research. McNiff and Whitehead tell their readers that "your action research is part of the New Scholarship...different from traditional scholarship, and grounded in new fluid and transformational epistemologies" (p.170). This perhaps should be enough: enquiry that helps teachers better realise their values in their work; that helps them develop their fund of personal stories and explanations as a fluid resource allowing them to strive for improvement and be responsive to the flux of daily educational work in their own local context. But McNiff and Whitehead also want their readers to be "aware that [they] will be contributing to a reconceptualisation of educational theory, from its dominant propositional form, to a new living form" (p.102). This brings to mind the aphorism that

one 'cannot have one's cake and eat it'. Context-directed AR has strengths and limitations, and these are complemented by the very different affordances of academic, theory-directed, research.

The teacher who wants to improve their practice, and to bring their actions more in line with their espoused values, should certainly consider adopting AR. It can help solve problems, improve situations, and provide valuable insights that can inform future practice. However, for the teacher who wishes to engage in educational scholarship to make a public contribution to the development of their field, a form of theory-directed enquiry is indicated. McNiff and Whitehead are right that AR has not been highly valued in the Academy as a mean to generate the kind of public knowledge that contributes to scholarly fields: there are good reasons for that. Despite this, AR continues to have much to offer teachers as the basis for enquiry grounded in specific educational contexts.

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