The Educational Action Research and the Teacher

John Elliott,
Emeritus Professor of Education,
Centre for Applied Research in Education, University of East Anglia, UK.

Educational Action Research involves teachers making and creating *educationally* worthwhile changes in their classrooms and other learning environments. If teachers believe that they are mere functionaries in the educational system and have little control over what students learn and how they learn it, they will see themselves as technicians implementing a learning system prescribed by external authority. In order to do action research, teachers must be open to the possibility that there is space in their practical situation for them to make and create educationally worthwhile change. Discerning where these spaces are - these opportunities for action in a practical situation – is an important part of the action research process. Making and creating educational change involves teachers in developing their *situational understanding*. In the process their taken-for-granted practical knowledge is frequently challenged.

For example, teachers often believe that there is very little they can do to motivate and engage persistently disruptive students in their classroom, since their parents condone their hostility to formal learning. The only solution is to exclude them for the benefit of those students who want to learn. I am aware of a piece of action research in which a teacher came to see disruptive behaviour in his classroom in rather different terms. With the help of a University-based researcher he gained access to observational and student interview data that gave him a new understanding of disruptive behaviour in his lessons. He discovered that many disruptive pupils were engaged with the subject matter he was teaching and motivated to learn. The problem was that they lacked the social skills to engage in the forms of interaction with himself and their peers that he was seeking to establish in the classroom as a context for learning. However, this new understanding of the problematics of his situation opened up new possibilities for action in it. Such understanding was made possible by the teacher's own attempt to change the classroom environment from one that reinforced teacher controlled passive and individualised learning to one that encouraged a more socially interactive mode of teaching and learning.

In action research 'making and creating change' and 'developing knowledge and understanding of practical situations' cannot be separated. They go together. Many teachers say that they are too busy teaching to do action research. This is because they have learned to view research as a mode of knowledge production that is external to their practice as teachers. They have often been told in their training that their role is to apply the findings of research to their practice. Having failed to discern the relevance to their practice of many findings from externally conducted educational research, many teachers will interpret action research as a proposal to give them more responsibility for research in order to enhance its application to their practice. On the basis of such an interpretation teachers will inevitably resist what they perceive to be an additional work-load when they already feel overloaded and stressed by having to comply with the quality assurance mechanisms being put into place to render them more publicly accountable for their teaching. Such resistance is based on a misunderstanding of action research. It is not simply 'insider research' but research that is an integral part of teaching rather than a separate process. The findings from such research are not retrospectively applied to teaching but developed in the context of teachers' actions to bring about educationally worthwhile learning. Just as research is an integral part of teaching so teaching becomes integral to research. Of course this kind of research-based teaching may be more time-consuming than the traditional practice of teaching. The latter may appear to be less time consuming because it is largely grounded in taken-for- granted commonsense knowledge that is handed down to teachers as part of their induction into 'the practical realities' of teaching in classrooms and schools. Traditional teaching is largely based on tacit craft knowledge, which enables the teacher to make

quick intuitive judgements about what to do in a given situation. However, the rapid pace of social and economic change in society has meant that traditional teaching may no longer work in helping teachers to cope with the contingencies that arise in formal learning contexts on a day - to - day basis. These contingencies call for a more self-reflexive mode of teaching in which traditional understandings of situations are called into question and new understandings evolved as a basis for practice. 'Action research' is the name we give to this kind of teaching. Its importance resides in helping teachers to reconstruct together their professional tradition and the culture of teaching and learning. It does indeed take more time than teaching that is largely grounded in taken-for-granted commonsense understandings. It involves creating spaces for teachers to reflect individually, together and with their students (and also with other stake-holders such as parents) about the problems that arise in the contexts of their practice. And it also involves creating space for gathering evidence that will discipline such conversations.

Action research in my view is no longer an optional extra for teachers. There are fewer comfort zones into which they can retreat from the problems they are confronted with in formal educational settings. They can either strive to empower themselves to make and create change through action research, or simply hand responsibility for change over to policy makers and educational managers. The latter are attempting in many countries to re-engineer the educational system to render its outcomes more predictable. In this scenario teachers are cast in the role of technical functionaries responsible for delivering changes that have been planned and designed beyond the world of the classroom and the school. In effect it is a scenario that disempowers and deprofessionalises teachers as agents of educational change. It is also one in which the purposes of education are not open to reflection. This is left to market forces to decide. Teachers will not be expected to safeguard pupils' access to 'goods' that are specifically educational and refer to learning in both its achievement and process aspects. For example, teachers may aim to promote self-directed learning in their classrooms as an educational good. But this implies certain process values, such as teaching in a way that does not foster dependence on the teacher for knowledge and ideas, or giving pupils the freedom to express and develop their own ideas, or respecting the right of pupils to think critically about the subject-matter. The *educational* aims of teachers cannot simply be regarded as contingently related outcomes of the teaching and learning process. This is because they also imply what is to count as an educationally worthwhile process.

Action research is a form of ethical inquiry in which teachers reflect about how to teach in ways that are consistent with their *educational* aims and values. In the process they not only change their teaching strategies but also clarify their educational aims and values. For example, teachers have undertaken action research to create conditions for students to engage in more 'self-directed' or 'autonomous learning'. In reflecting about their strategies for realizing this aim they have inevitably called into question the way they have construed the aim itself. Initially 'autonomous learning' may be construed as a very individualised process, but as teachers reflect about the actions they take to realize this aim they tend to move towards a more social view of the process; one in which autonomy is fostered through opportunities to engage in free and open discussion with the teacher and other pupils. Hence, action research is a kind of practical philosophy of education, that opens up a space in classrooms for ethically committed action (*praxis).*

Some may argue that what I have termed 'action research' is best described as 'action inquiry' or 'reflective teaching'. I have always persisted with the use of the term 'action research' because research places teachers under an obligation to render the insights they have gained from an inquiry in some publicly accessible form. This is important because teachers need to build a stock of common knowledge about how to realise their educational aims and values in practice in order to enhance their claim to be a profession. Hence, any insights that have been generated by individuals and groups of teachers through this kind inquiry need to be made accessible to other teachers as hypotheses for them to test and explore in their own classroom settings.

It is often argued that case studies of teachers' attempts to bring about change in their particular contexts of action are not generalisable. Those who argue this have a particular view of generalisation in mind. They assume that generalisation depends on statistical aggregation. However, there are other uses of the term. We can generalise across cases by comparing and contrasting them in a way that highlights similarities in many of their practically relevant features. This is what many groups of teachers do when they carry out action research together into how to realise in their particular action settings the educational aims and values they share in common. By comparing and discussing each other's case data and case studies they develop shared insights into the practically relevant features of the situations that arise in their teaching. These shared understandings can then be reported by the action research group to other members of the teaching profession and grounded in evidence drawn from across their case studies. Even a single case study may have generalising potential inasmuch as teachers reading it may discern practically relevant features that illuminate their own practical situations. Educational action research aims to contribute to the teaching professions stock of practical knowledge. It should not be viewed as a process of private 'navel gazing' or personal 'therapy'. To do so would effectively hand control over what is to count as public knowledge about the practice of teachers in educational institutions to external researchers.

Action research is not lacking in scientific rigour as some have also argued. It demands like all science the exercise of what John Dewey called the 'democratic virtues'; namely, curiosity, honesty and integrity, open-mindedness, and respect for freedom of thought and discussion. It is shaped by a democratic as opposed to a technical rationality.