

The Contribution of Action Research to Development in Social Endeavours: a position paper on action research methodology

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ABSTRACT *In this invited paper, presented at the 1994 BERA conference, the author reviews key ideas arising from her own practice of action research and that of close colleagues over the past fifteen years, in particular John Elliott. The paper is divided into two parts. The first describes and comments upon the main characteristics of action research as perceived by this group; the second deals in rather more depth with a range of methodological and epistemological issues related to its practice. The latter include: the role of action research in teacher education and curriculum development; the context-sensitive nature of action research and the resulting variations in its methodology in professional settings such as nursing, the police and commercial companies; the role of self in action research; the nature of practitioner knowledge; action research and writing; and action research and the structure–agency debate.*

Writing a position paper does not strike me as easy, at least from my current point of view as a writer at the beginning of the first page. A summary, perhaps, 'of my particular approach to action research', as the conference organisers put it, which sounds rather dull to write as I have written about it all before. Or a literature review, presenting 'the "school" of action research to which I subscribe', to quote the conference organisers again, but that causes me real problems as I have tried hard to be inclusive rather than exclusive in my approach to action research, rejecting, for example, the polarisation between a Cambridge–East Anglian and a Bath school of action research in the UK of the kind which McNiff (1988, p. xvii) identifies. Such distinctions do little, I believe, other than create a warm cosy feeling for those who work at the named universities. More dangerously, the notion of a 'school' commodifies disparate sets of ideas and has the effect of fixing them like a long-dead fly in polished amber, so that they constitute a claim for power and status and close down the opportunities for open dialogue.

In thinking through what a position paper might be, I have tumbled upon my first

statement of belief about action research: that it is a methodology which is broadly defined and takes widely different forms, and that this is the right and proper consequence of action research being grounded in the values of the individuals or group who are carrying it out; that underpinning action research there is a set of democratic values, which endow the action researcher with the right to take control of the research process and make decisions about the full range of methodological issues on the basis of careful judgement and contextual knowledge; and that, since life's contexts are richly varied, this autonomy of the researchers precludes the development of 'schools' of action research in the sense of a group of adherents to a single, clearly-defined methodology.

Nevertheless, although I try to avoid narrowly defining action research, I do have a clear sense of what it is in broad terms. These ideas are personally and socially constructed. They derive from my experience of using action research and related methodologies in my own work over the past 15 years, first as a teacher researcher and later as co-ordinator of action research projects, a tutor for enquiry-based higher degree courses, co-ordinator of the Collaborative (formerly Classroom) Action Research Network (CARN) [1] and an editor of *Educational Action Research*. Inevitably I have been strongly influenced by the work of those I have collaborated with during that time (by no means all from East Anglia), including Herbert Altrichter, Roger Aspland, Rod Coveney, Marian Dadds, Richard Davies, Chris Day, Charles Desforges, Dave Ebbutt, Peter Holly, Barry MacDonald, Maggie MacLure, Jennifer Nias, Nigel Norris, May Pettigrew, Peter Posch, Jon Pratt, Lou Smith, Ian Stronach, Angie Titchen, Melanie Walker, Geoff Whitty, Richard Winter—and most centrally John Elliott. I can only write this paper on the basis of my experience, acknowledging that I owe much to these colleagues. But I do so with the proviso that my ideas are provisional and continue to develop in response to challenge and dialogue. Moreover, the group of people named above would agree with me wholeheartedly that we/they do not comprise a school, the more so as they all use a range of research methodologies and some have never been involved in what they would call an action research project.

I have divided the paper into two parts. Part one outlines what I judge to be the main characteristics of action research, drawing upon the introductory chapter of the book by Altrichter *et al.* (1993). Part two reviews a range of issues relating to action research which I currently find interesting. In this way, part one constitutes a provisional starting point for the workshop and part two a provisional agenda for more extended debate.

Part One: characteristics of action research

Action research methodology bridges the divide between research and practice. It directly addresses the knotty problem of the persistent failure of research in the social sciences to make a difference in terms of bringing about actual improvements in practice. It does so by rejecting the concept of a two-stage process in which research is carried out first by researchers and then in a separate second stage the knowledge generated from the research is applied by practitioners. Instead, the two processes of research and action are integrated.

So, the first main difference between action research and other forms of research is that it is carried out by people directly concerned with the social situation that is being researched. It is a precondition of action research that the practitioner researchers have 'a felt need ... to initiate change' (Elliott, 1991, p. 53). Action research starts from their practical questions arising from concerns in their everyday work. The investigation takes place in the workplace and no effort is made to 'control' the research context or design

an 'experiment'. We are all practitioners in some sphere and the only distinction between practitioners and those often called 'outsiders' in action research is that the latter are not full-time participants in the social situation but have a short-term role, peripheral to the main action, as observers or facilitators or 'critical friends'. The problems of change in practice are inherent to *all* practitioners, because human action is rooted in routines developed through experience and fundamental beliefs of the individual. We have relatively poor control over our own actions, and worse still, little consciousness that this is the case (Somekh, 1993a, pp. 34–36). An empathetic outsider is, therefore, an invaluable resource in action research, although almost certainly beset by the same difficulties in bringing about change in his or her own practice. This emerged clearly in the Initial Teacher Education and New Technology Project (INTENT), which I co-ordinated from 1990 to 1992, in which teacher educators in higher education faced intense problems in integrating the use of information technology into their own teaching, despite their considerable experience as facilitators of their students' professional development in teaching (Somekh, 1992).

A second major difference is that the findings of action research are fed back directly into practice with the aim of bringing about change. This is because, unlike traditional research, the validity of action research does not depend upon measuring the extent and frequency of phenomena over a period of time in order to justify precise (and therefore narrowly defined) statements of cause and effect. Action research is concerned with exploring the multiple determinants of actions, interactions and interpersonal relationships in unique contexts. Its aim is to deepen practitioners' understanding of the complex situations in which they live and work, so that their actions are better informed. Rather than specific 'findings' or 'outcomes', action research generates what Elliott (1991, pp. 52–53) calls 'practical wisdom' and Dreyfus (1981) and Elliott (1993a, pp. 66–70) call 'situational understanding'. However, an important part of this is usually in the form of specific insights which the action researcher uses as the basis for practical action steps to bring about improvements in the social situation s/he is researching. The validity of action research is tested by evaluating the impact of these action steps in a continuous process of data collection, reflection and analysis, interpretation, action and evaluation (Altrichter & Posch, 1989, pp. 27–30). At a later stage it can be further validated through the process of communicating a range of outcomes to other practitioners (either orally or in writing) who will make implicit comparisons with their own repertoire of experience and judge the work to be worthwhile or not on this basis. (Whitehead [1989, pp. 46–48] describes a particular approach to this kind of validation.)

A third major difference is that action research has a highly pragmatic orientation. It recognises that there is a trade-off between the benefits of giving practitioners the central role in research (e.g. they alone have the power and ability to bring about change in the field of action) and the resulting limitations in terms of the time they can devote to research and their lack of certain kinds of specialist knowledge (e.g. skills of data analysis). Action research uses many of the same methods and techniques as traditional qualitative research (e.g. Miles & Huberman, 1984; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) but the aim is always to make the best possible use of these tools within the constraints of the workplace. Time for research is always limited, since the primary responsibilities of the action researcher are those of a working practitioner. Data collection is inevitably guided by opportunities; data analysis is as systematic and thorough as possible, but a high priority is given to writing analytic memos as a starting point or supplement to formal analytic techniques; reporting of the research is as thorough as possible, but writing is only one means of doing this, e.g. priority is often given to verbal interim reports to

colleagues in the form of discussion papers which are likely to increase their involvement in the action research. An important way in which action researchers can make economies of time is by using some parts of the research process as opportunities to take strategic action, e.g. an interview with a colleague can be used as a means of moving that colleague's thinking forward, as well as a means of collecting data; or analysis can be carried out by a group of colleagues on the basis of a discussion paper prepared by the action researcher, thus preparing the way for collaborative action introducing effective change.

A fourth major difference is that action research is grounded in the culture and values of the social group whose members are both participants in the research field and researchers. It may be instigated by an individual, but its momentum is towards collaboration, because the emphasis on social interactions and interpersonal relationships has the effect of drawing other participants into the research process. The focus of the research is likely to be on an issue which is of concern to the group. Even when the focus is upon testing out the practicability and usefulness of ideas generated by others (e.g. government policies), it is never merely about implementation of these ideas without critical exploration in the light of the action researcher's values and those of the group (Elliott, 1993b, p. 43). Furthermore, because action research incorporates a high degree of reflection upon both the conscious and unconscious meaning of individuals' intentions and actions, and their impact upon others, it contributes to the further development of the group's values and improvement in working conditions.

Finally, a fifth major difference is that action research raises particularly knotty ethical questions (James & Ebbutt, 1980). The researcher is a practitioner and the research involves an investigation into his or her own practice and that of colleagues. As an example, it is impossible to draw a line between data which have been collected as part of the research and data which are available to the researcher as part of the job. Likewise, it is impossible to carry out analysis and interpretation of the data without doing so in the light of prior knowledge. The advantages of insider knowledge are great, but it is always important to specify a set of ethical principles to act as ground rules for the research, e.g. making it clear how much control colleagues will have over how their work is reported. These ethical principles not only provide necessary safeguards to all concerned; more importantly, they are essential in order to ensure the quality of the data and the depth of analysis which will be possible in the research. When an outsider is working with the practitioner researcher as a co-researcher or facilitator of the research, the roles and responsibilities of both partners also need to be clearly defined. This form of collaboration is usually extremely productive, because of the different kind of experience and/or skills that the outsider brings to the work; nevertheless, the expectations of each partner are grounded in different working cultures and institutional expectations, and there are issues arising from perceptions of differential power and status which need to be addressed by a formal agreement (see Elliott, 1988a, in particular his differentiation between 'first order' and 'second order' action research).

Many writers have developed graphical models to represent the action research process. Most of these are cyclical in structure and set out problem identification, data collection, data analysis and action steps as recurring steps in successive action research cycles. They are not always helpful to those coming new to action research, who tend to interpret them too literally as representing a set of very distinct steps, rather than broad stages in an integrated process. For instance, there is no reason to place any specific scope or time period on an action research cycle—one cycle might last 3 months and another 2 days. The models are no more than graphical tools to help us to

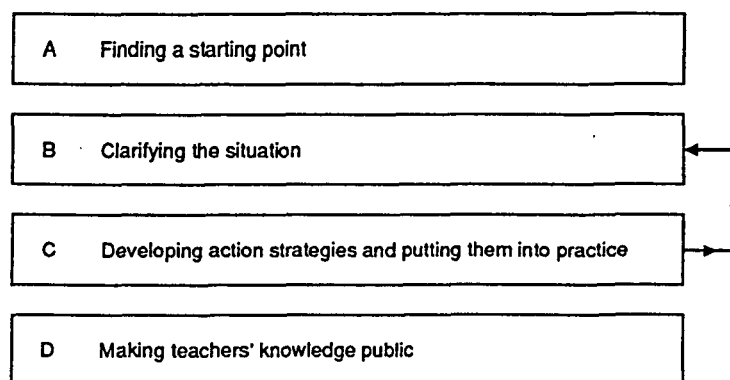


FIG. 1. Diagrammatic representation of the action research process.

conceptualise the action research process and, used in this way, they are useful. One of the simplest ones is that given by Altrichter *et al.* (1993, p. 7) (see Fig. 1). It has the advantage that it does not create an artificial divide between data collection, data analysis and interpretation, but incorporates some aspects of all of these in three at least of the four stages (data collection has usually stopped by the time writing begins, although analysis and interpretation may be at their most intense at this stage).

Part Two: issues raised by action research

Action Research, Teacher Education and Curriculum Development

Since a major aim of action research is to develop the practical wisdom or situational understanding of the practitioner researcher, it constitutes a powerful means of professional development. The process of change is integrated with the development of new understandings of the implications of personal action, in particular of the unintended consequences of habitual or routinised behaviour. The nature of the change, and the strategies for bringing it about, are under the control of the practitioner as part of the process that Elliott calls 'the realisation of educational values in a teacher's interactions with students' (1991, p. 107). (He is referring to schooling, but the point refers equally to any other intentional social practice.) The practitioner, therefore, has a high degree of ownership of the endeavour, fulfilling the central prerequisite of successful innovation identified by Fullan (1982, p. 103); that it should have '“meaning” for those who are implementing [it]'.

There are also other reasons, in my view, why action research provides powerful support for the development of professional practice. Professional development is professional learning with an action orientation and it seems clear that action research incorporates a lot of the features which cognitive psychologists see as essential for effective learning. When writing of students' learning, Desforges (1989, p. 18) emphasises that 'teachers need a vision for learning, some notion of high quality intellectual life which they seek for their pupils'. Not only does action research help teachers to develop such a vision, more significantly, perhaps, it provides them—and other practitioner researchers—with a 'high quality intellectual life' of their own. The routines of professional practice are enriched by the intellectual challenge of research.

Frequently this arises directly from the development of a new kind of professional dialogue with colleagues, and again, Prawat (1991, pp. 3–10) is but one of many writers who stress the importance of ‘dialogue or discourse during learning’. Action research is also, by definition, learning which is integrated with working experience, making it a good example of ‘situated learning’ as described by Brown *et al.* (1989, pp. 32–42). The key idea here is that part of the cognitive task of learning is ‘off-loaded onto the environment’ (we do not have to think about some aspects of the issue because they are tangibly present) in contrast to learning away from the context of practice in which an additional layer of difficulty arises from the need to imagine practical applications for what is being learnt, or alternatively manipulate the ideas in an abstract form which it may subsequently be difficult to translate into practice.

At a time of enormous political and social pressure to reform schooling, action research has been particularly useful to teacher educators in Britain, in providing a set of procedures for working with teachers and supporting educational change. Much of this work has taken place in the context of teachers studying for higher degrees, and their research studies have commonly been written up as theses or dissertations for academic accreditation. Action research has, in this way, filled an institutional need of higher education for a form of research which could merit academic accreditation while still answering the practical needs of teachers and their schools.

There have been some disadvantages to this involvement of higher education in leading teachers’ action research. First, it has led to rather too much emphasis on teachers working alone, depending upon their course tutor and fellow students at the university for support and critical feedback rather than upon collaborative partnerships with either colleagues in the school or concerned individuals from outside the school. Second, it has encouraged a dependency relationship in which equal, open and honest research partnerships between teacher researchers in schools and concerned educators in universities have been difficult to achieve, since the latter are typically responsible for awarding or withholding academic accreditation for the work of the former. Third, it has led to an assumption that the teacher researcher’s written report is primarily for purposes of accreditation rather than being a contribution to public knowledge which will be published and read alongside other research reports. At the same time, there seems little doubt that the large number of action research studies undertaken by teachers within the context of higher education has enhanced their professionalism as well as making an impact on the quality of their students’ education (Nias & Groundwater-Smith, 1988).

In Britain, a strong influence which has promoted the importance of teacher research *as research*, over and above its effectiveness in supporting professional development, has been the curriculum development work of Lawrence Stenhouse (1975, 1985) and later John Elliott (Elliott & Adelman, 1976; Elliott, 1994a). Stenhouse’s insight that curriculum plans were never the same things as curriculum practice, and that the greatest determinant of the latter was the ‘traditional curriculum’ of teachers, led to his belief that ‘curriculum research and development ought to belong to the teacher’ (1975, p. 142). He had come to understand that only if teachers were centrally involved in research, and thereby able to engage with the implications of classroom practice for students’ learning, would it be possible to develop the curriculum in any meaningful way. His vision was of an accumulation of case studies of teaching and learning, written by teachers, which would constitute a body of professional knowledge similar to the case law of the legal profession, with sufficient status to influence the practice of teachers as a whole. Elliott traces the origins of action research in Britain to the school-based curriculum reform movement, which arose in the innovatory secondary modern schools of the 1960s, and

in which he himself was a participant (Elliott, 1990). As a colleague on the Humanities Project team, Elliott's influence upon Stenhouse's thinking was clearly considerable, and in the Humanities Curriculum Project and subsequent curriculum development projects he has established a tradition of curriculum action research which has gone some way to putting Stenhouse's vision into practice (despite an unfavourable political climate in Britain in recent years) (Elliott, 1991, pp. 13–42; 1993b; 1994c).

Elliott bases his understanding of curriculum upon the work of Stenhouse, in that he sees curriculum not merely as the transmission of a selection of the values and knowledge of a culture, but as an interactive process whereby students and teachers construct values and knowledge through cognitive engagement with materials selected by the teacher, mediated by student–teacher and teacher–teacher interactions. For both Elliott and Stenhouse the involvement of teachers in research is an essential component of curriculum development. However, Elliott's concept of educational action research differs from Stenhouse's concept of the teacher as researcher, because he does not see the development of understanding as preceding the introduction of changes in practice. For Elliott, educational action research is a hermeneutic process of movement back and forth from the particularities of practice to the theories of interpretation, in which, as he puts it, 'Action initiates reflection' (Elliott, 1991, p. 23). For Elliott teaching is 'a moral practice' in the Aristotelian sense of 'a practical (ethical) endeavour' (Elliott, 1991, p. 124).

Action Research across the Professions: a methodology sensitive to context

One of the most powerful learning experiences in my own continuing action research over recent years has been my developing work with other professional groups. I was a teacher for many years and all my early research took place in the context of the school. My encounters with nurses, occupational therapists, police officers, social workers, and latterly managers and personnel managers in business and industry have been revelatory. First, they have demonstrated the commonality of the problems arising from change initiatives within any organised social practice, and the way in which those problems are shaped by the current ideology of the social market. Second, an exploration of action research methodology in each of these different professional settings demonstrates very well how strongly action research methodology is determined by the culture of the participants and their institutions. Grounded in the values of the participant researchers, couched in their discourse, and controlled by their understanding of their colleagues' needs and expectations, action research in the setting of a police training centre is one thing, action research in an acute hospital ward is another, and action research in a civil service agency yet another. It has taken me back to the work of Lewin with new understanding.

Kurt Lewin, the psychologist who pioneered action research in the USA during the 1940s, worked with a wide range of groups, including factory workers and disadvantaged immigrants (Lewin, 1939, 1952, 1982). For Lewin, action research was carried out by professional researchers who involved members of the group in the research and decision-making process. His methods were quasi-experimental. His aim was to bring about tangible improvements, e.g. by reducing the effects of malnutrition resulting from a restricted diet among immigrants. The Tavistock Institute in Britain worked closely with Lewin during his lifetime, and over the past 40 years has continued to use action research as a methodology for bringing about change and improvement in industrial and commercial companies. The functionality of Lewin's work has been criticised as

technicist and positivistic by some recent writers within what might be called the schooling-focused tradition of action research (e.g. Hopkins, 1984, p. 97; Winter, 1989, p. 31). But, Lewin's work needs to be understood in relation to his background as both a psychologist at a time when the discipline was manoeuvring to establish itself in the academic world, and a Jewish immigrant to the USA at the time of the Holocaust. He was an outsider. When he was invited to work at the Tavistock Institute in London in the late 1940s his application for a visa was turned down. Against this background, Lewin's methodology can be seen as highly expressive of democratic values and, at the same time, politically astute. He was an outsider who refused to be marginalised, and gained sufficient support from the academic and business communities to establish a new tradition of action-oriented research into the processes of social groups.

The tradition of action research in industrial settings is well represented in a collection of articles edited by the US sociologist, William Foote Whyte (1991). It is characterised by a strong involvement of outside consultants and by careful research designs linked to fairly large-scale strategic planning leading to development. The work of my students who are managers in commercial companies is subjected to a functional logic and financial imperative which moves it firmly in this direction. To interpret this as a subversion of action research and its reduction to a merely technicist endeavour would be not only naive, it would be a demonstration of cultural imperialism on the part of a schooling-focused 'school' of educational action research. The methodological issues are of the greatest interest. Not least, there is a need for me to re-examine my own values in my role as facilitator of their work. For my students there are a series of revelations about the tensions between individual values and those expressed in the company mission statement and adopted unquestioningly by 'the company man'. There is a moral imperative to make things function better for the good of colleagues, but this can only be achieved by understanding the pressures they are working under and planning strategic action which will challenge company culture without generating unhelpful confrontation. Action research in commercial companies is highly political—hence there is an obvious role for a client-centred outside consultant who can give the practitioner researchers some leverage on the internal power structures.

Similar effects of occupational cultures upon action research methodology are observable in the work of other groups. For example, nurse action researchers need to demonstrate that their research is methodologically rigorous in order to establish credibility with the medical profession (Titchen & Binnie, 1993; Meyer, 1993); and action researchers working for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in developing countries need to emphasise the participatory and grass roots aspects of their projects to give them political credibility (Maclure & Bassey, 1991).

A common factor in all of these action research practices is that the kind of relationship between practitioners and 'outsiders' which is most likely to support the democratic values of action research varies considerably in different cultural settings. A shortcoming of the tradition of 'schooling-focused' action research in Britain, which may in part result from its strong links with higher education, is that the practitioner researcher is expected to be superwoman or superman and do everything. There is a difference between giving practitioners control and burdening them with work that someone else could do more easily on their behalf. Given the inevitable differences of status and the different kinds of expertise which each partner brings to the research, it is difficult to get the balance right, but mutual respect, self-awareness and honesty make good starting points (Somekh, 1994a). Participatory action research, such as that which builds upon the work of Paulo Freire in South America (see Dinan & Garcia,

1991), or the 'education outside the schooling system' emanating from Highlander which contributed so substantially to the civil rights movement in the USA (Horton & Freire, 1990, pp. 199–214), or the work documented in Whyte's book (1991) provides us with patterns for new kinds of relationships based upon principles of sharing and equity.

Action Research in a Modernist Age

Action research is a radical research methodology which challenges the assumptions and status of traditional research. Not surprisingly it inspires loyalty among those who benefit from its democratic inclusiveness and practical relevance, and is subject to attack by those who value the modernist certainties of traditional research grounded in experimental design. The pioneering action research work with teachers in the USA, led by Stephen Corey in the 1940s and 1950s (see Corey, 1949) following the work of Kurt Lewin himself, was attacked and ridiculed, notably in a devastating article which likened action research to 'easy hobby games for little engineers' (Hodgkinson, 1957), until it was no longer possible to get funding to continue. Altrichter & Gstettner (1993) describe a similar sustained attack which destroyed the developing action research tradition in German-speaking countries during the 1970s. The latter make it clear that the value which action research places upon critical reflection made it particularly vulnerable to attacks upon its methodological rigour from traditional researchers—they needed to do little more than quote the shortcomings in the methodology described by the authors of action research reports.

Inevitably, action research has developed in the shadow of modernism, with a latent awareness, particularly during the period 1950–1985, of the overwhelming status of the experimental, scientific method. Winter (1989, pp. 31–34), while arguing that action research methodology needs to be grounded in critical debate and dialectical enquiry, notes how the discourse of action research incorporates genuflections to the positivist paradigm, e.g. in the use of terms like 'hypothesis', 'empirical' and 'findings'.

The rise of interest in post-modernism in the late 1980s, together with the development of feminist research methodologies, has made it much easier to present action research as a serious research methodology, without apology (see, for example, Griffiths, 1994; Hollingsworth, 1994). Action research concerns itself primarily with processes of development and change in social situations, and these can never be amenable to the demand for certainty.

The Role of Self in Action Research

Action research reports are nearly always written in the first person. To do otherwise is difficult to defend methodologically. The practitioner researcher examines his or her own role, behaviour and relationships in a particular social situation as part of the investigation. At the core of action research lies the process of reflection in which research data is used to inform an ever-deepening understanding of the complexities and richness of social interaction in groups.

For Elliott (1993a, pp. 68–70 and 196–197) the practitioner develops this capacity for reflection—the essential component in developing 'situational understanding'—through action research. Action research is something that you learn to do through its practice rather than by following a set of prescribed methods or techniques. At the deepest level, reflection in action research is a complex, holistic process, interdependent with decision-making. But Elliott suggests it can be better understood by thinking of it as comprising

three distinct kinds of reflection: 'personal', 'problematic' and 'critical', which focus respectively on: the self as a *de facto* component of the situation under study; the self as an actor who evokes responses and reactions within it; and the self as an unconscious exponent of 'taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions' (Elliott, 1993a, p. 69). Reflection is an active process of self-scrutiny and self-challenge.

Action research reports need to document some aspects, at least, of the researcher's reflection in order to establish the validity of the research. In all forms of qualitative research, interpretations, judgements and decisions are made *by the researcher* through a process which Strauss & Corbin (1990, pp. 41–47) call 'theoretical sensitivity'. In action research the involvement of the self as a full participant in the situation under study adds to the complexity of this process. The self is a research instrument and the practitioner researcher must demonstrate reflexive awareness of the many factors which may have influenced his/her interpretations, judgements and decisions.

However, all research is essentially an enquiry into phenomena, practices or concepts, and its focus is outward-looking. Too much emphasis on the importance of the self in action research can distract the practitioner researcher from the substantive focus of the study. There is a tendency for some action research to become ingrown and 'content-less', so that self-exploration and personal growth seem to become the *whole* focus and purpose of the research. This may be effective as a form of therapy, but it is difficult to justify calling it research.

The notion of the self as a research instrument is, nevertheless, a fascinating one. It poses the question, 'Who am I, the researcher?' We all have different answers to that question. For many practitioners the self has a fairly stable identity and the process of reflection is a matter of exploration of the experiences, assumptions and motivations which demarcate its existence. For many others the self is a much more fragile concept, made up of multiple selves who respond differently to different people in different situations. These multiple selves hold conflicting values and beliefs and speak different languages in the sense of employing different discourses dependent upon context and relationships—yet they are wrapped up in a single body, in tension with one another, sometimes in strife like cats in a bag. Whitehead (1989) calls this 'the living contradiction of the I', in a way which suggests that for him action research is in large part the struggle to reconstruct and reconcile the one true self. For me, a concept of multiple selves, based on my understanding of the work of George Herbert Mead (1934, p. 155), Freud (1986) and Foucault (1972, p. 131), enables me to understand the tensions of conflicting motives, to celebrate my political awareness as an action researcher, and to value my role as a strategist in working with colleagues to bring about change (Somekh, 1994b). Tensions and conflicts in the workplace—all manner of people who disagree with my views—are part of the situation I am action researching. So-called 'mistakes'—of my own or others—are part of the research data. Action research has become a methodology for my own practice which often enables me to avoid entrenching myself and others in oppositional posturing. Whoever I am, action research has become a way of life.

Action Research and the Structure–Agency Debate

Those who emphasise personal growth as an outcome of action research often speak of it in terms of 'empowerment of the individual'. This is rooted in the ideas of critical theory, which posit that the exercise of critical analysis and rational debate can free the individual from some of the constraints of institutional power structures. It is grounded

in a deterministic concept of the self, who is seen as incapable of functioning adequately as a researcher without first being emancipated from the 'false consciousness' arising from confining ideologies. The arguments for this point of view are put forward in Carr & Kemmis's seminal book, *Becoming Critical: knowing through action research* (1983), based upon the Habermasian distinction between technical, practical and critical reasoning. Carr & Kemmis stress the importance of establishing collaborative groups of action researchers who can support each other in 'becoming critical'. Without this special preparation they argue that individuals are not capable of undertaking action research because their judgement is contaminated by uncritical assumptions which are culturally determined. Such action research would be ineffective in bringing about change because it could do little more than collude with the existing power structures to reinforce the status quo. The main message of the Carr & Kemmis book is that action research, if properly organised as a collaborative critical endeavour, provides an effective means of empowering the self and bringing about radical change in our society. I find its definition of action research too narrow and the recommended procedures for carrying it out too prescriptive. Paradoxically, it has led many to see action research primarily as a means of personal empowerment.

Elliott has developed an alternative view of the operation of social change. Drawing on the Gadamer-Hegel concept of 'experience as scepticism in action' (Gadamer, 1975, p. 317), he refutes the determinism of the post-Marxian notion of 'false consciousness': 'I cannot see why practical reflection, which is interested in how to act consistently with the values embedded in our social traditions, need not require us to think critically about values' (Elliott, 1993a, p. 197). Drawing on the work of Foucault and Giroux, Elliott argues that power is productive as well as constraining: 'Power expressed as domination is countered by power expressed as resistance' (Elliott, 1991, pp. 112-113). Practitioners do not need to be emancipated before they can be effective as action researchers, because they are already an integral part of the power structures of their research setting. Building on Giddens's theory of structuration, Elliott (1993c, p. 183) argues that 'The structural properties of social systems are constituted and reconstituted in the actions of individual agents. Structure is "internal" rather than "external" to the consciousness of individual agents and is not to be equated with "constraints"'. Elliott is aware that practitioners' routinised behaviour and unquestioned assumptions are a serious barrier to change, but he argues that through reflection practitioners have access to their tacit understandings and are capable of strategic action to transform their institutional setting. He grounds his arguments in a practical setting in a critique of an early article by James & Ebbutt (1980) which he uses to analyse the constraints of teachers' 'traditional craft culture' and to suggest practical ways of overcoming them (Elliott, 1991, pp. 57-68).

In my own work, I have drawn consciously upon the power of agency within institutions to develop a kind of multilevel action research. Individuals at different levels in the formal structures of the institution, whose involvement in the micropolitics of the institution is of different kinds, work together collaboratively. Through dialogue based on principles of honesty and equity they develop shared understandings of the need for change, and continue to interact supportively while carrying out action research with colleagues to shape and effect change. At the same time, they each carry out action research into their own roles in managing change within an ethical framework underpinned by democratic values. The process is intentionally political and strategic (Somekh *et al.*, 1992; Somekh, 1992b).

Working in a national rather than an institutional frame, Elliott has grappled with the problem of change within conflicting ideological structures. When faced with

behaviourist definitions of teaching practice underpinned by the ideology of the 'social market', he argues that exponents like himself of the 'teacher as researcher' ideology are *not* forced to adopt a confrontational and oppositional stance. (Drawing on Geertz [1973, pp. 218–219], I am using the word ideology here to describe a coherent set of values and beliefs which are shared by a recognisable group and form a power base.) Elliott promotes the value of negotiation through dialogue. Starting from a recognition that those who promote both of these ideologies share the same concern to improve the quality of schooling, he argues that 'a degree of mutual understanding, tolerance, and accommodation of the different perspectives at stake is possible' (1993b, p. 66). In a number of articles (most notably Elliott, 1993a, ch. 6) he has developed a theory of teaching as 'a practical educational science' grounded in a redefinition of some key elements of the discourse of the social market (e.g. the concepts of competence and quality).

Elliott uses Dreyfus's model of the development of situational understanding in the field of business management (from 'novice' through 'advanced beginners', 'competent', 'proficient' to 'expert') to refine his understanding of educational action research and distinguish its characteristic features from the concepts of 'reflective practice' (Schön, 1983) and 'teacher as researcher' (Stenhouse, 1975). The detailed demarcation of constituent features of professional practice provided in the Dreyfus model enables Elliott to provide a much more systematic account of professional development in teacher education (or the education of other professionals, notably police officers). He argues that educational action research is the best means of achieving the situational understanding characteristic of the expert practitioner. Further, he adopts and redefines the concept of 'competence' from 'social market' discourse. Using the methodology of job-competence assessment involving 'behavioural event interviewing' developed by McBer *et al.* (see Klemp, 1977), in conjunction with the Dreyfus stages of development, Elliott has produced a systematic and holistic procedure for professional education and the assessment of professional competence. In the process of so doing, he demonstrates how he has responded to the challenge currently facing those who promote practitioner research: 'The task of educational action research is not so much to resist as to transform [government reforms] by reinterpreting the democratic values which underpin them, albeit in distorted form' (Elliott, 1993b, p. 43):

John Elliott's Contribution to Our Understanding of the Nature of Practitioners' Knowledge

Elliott's major contribution to action research theory lies in his detailed exploration of the nature of practitioner knowledge and its interrelationship with practical action and competence. Many writers have carried out research into 'teachers' thinking' (see for example, collections edited by Day *et al.* 1990 and 1993) but this has almost always constructed the teacher as 'the other'. Elliott's writing is grounded in his own experience as a practitioner as well as his experience as a facilitator of the research of other practitioners. Despite the authoritative style of his discourse (e.g. he draws heavily on the work of well-known philosophers and theorists), he continually reminds himself and his readers of the way in which the structures of our society spuriously privilege the knowledge of university-based researchers—and he refuses to accept this (see for example, Elliott, 1993a, ch. 13, 1993c, 1994b). Through his analysis of the nature of practitioner knowledge, he identifies the unique contribution which practitioner researchers can make to our understanding of practice.

Elliott's exploration of the nature of practitioner knowledge is difficult to summarise since it has been his continuing preoccupation over a period of 20 years. In his earlier work in the Ford Teaching Project he drew on Polanyi's ideas of 'tacit knowledge' to explore the differing meanings which teachers applied to conceptual labels such as 'formal' and 'informal' when applied to teaching. This led to his recognition that; 'There are some kinds of human action which can only be described from a phenomenological perspective, i.e. by adopting the point of view of the agent' (Elliott, 1980, p. 315). Thus, research into practice which does not include the practitioner's analysis of his/her tacit understandings is necessarily incomplete.

Rejecting the cultural determinism of post-Marxian critical theory, Elliott continued his exploration of the nature of practitioner knowledge in the light of his reading of Gadamer. Practitioners' reflections on their field of social endeavour, and the development of their unique knowledge of that social endeavour, are similar to the ever-deepening understanding of 'texts' in the process of interpretative hermeneutics. The institutional constraints on the development of practitioners' knowledge, in particular the extent to which their understandings are socially and culturally constructed, do not invalidate practitioners' action research, but simply become a component part of the investigation:

For Gadamer, insights are developed in the space between the objective text, or artefact, and the subjective frame of reference the interpreter brings to it. ... The prejudices must be brought into play, rather than attempt a bias-free stance, because the creative interaction between text and interpreter stems from the experience of being unable to fit the evidence of the text into the framework imposed on it. ... The initial interpretation is tested against the evidence of the text in the context of a discussion about the validity of alternative interpretations. (Elliott, 1985, pp. 233-234)

The other essential element of practitioner knowledge, for Elliott, is its moral nature. He builds upon Aristotle's notion of *phronesis* or 'practical wisdom' in which action incorporates a moral purpose as well as principled and rational purposes (Aristotle, 1955, p. 209). Our practice is a continual construction and reconstruction of our values in action. Thus:

Everyday understandings of educational processes, which are embedded in educational practices and articulations of practical problems and proposed solutions ... originate in the holistic and undifferentiated thinking of educational practitioners as they attempt to realise their educational values in complex practical situations. (Elliott, 1989, pp. 83-85)

The fullest statement of Elliott's continuing exploration of the nature of practitioner knowledge is contained in his coherent account of nine principles of 'a practical educational science' (Elliott, 1993a, ch. 6). It is significant that this article also sets out his current thinking on the nature of educational action research and its contribution to the development and assessment of professional practice, redefined in the light of the work of Dreyfus and McBer *et al.* (see the previous section of this paper). Although I have dealt with them separately for the purposes of this paper, Elliott's exploration of practitioner knowledge is part of his holistic enquiry into the nature of practice in social settings and the nature of educational action research as a means of bringing about improvements in that practice.

Action Research and Writing

Elliott's work on the nature of practitioner knowledge clarifies the need to report action research projects as fully as possible. Their contribution is unique and, therefore, essential to our developing understanding of practice in intentional social endeavours. There is a methodological problem, however, in reporting action research. Briefly, it can be summarised as follows. Action research knowledge is generated by the individual through detailed examination of, and reflection upon, particular experiences and events; and it is different from 'propositional' knowledge which claims generalisability across situations. However, once this knowledge is written up in a report it becomes, *de facto*, more like propositional knowledge for prospective readers. Some argue that it does not matter if action research is written up in a report, since the important thing is the learning of the individual and the development of his or her own practice. These people tend to argue that oral reporting should be substituted for writing. However, although the majority of practitioners find oral reporting much less stressful than writing, it may not get round the methodological problem.

In my own work I have placed importance on both oral and written reporting as an integral part of action research (Somekh, 1993b, 1994c). Writing makes a special contribution to the learning of the action researcher because of the precision of thought required to construct a written text—there is much truth in the old adage: 'How can I tell what I think till I see what I say?' (Forster, 1962, p. 108). The problem lies in the status accorded to the outcomes of research, and in the attitudes which readers in the modernist world bring to written texts (in this sense those who claim that oral reporting raises fewer problems are right). Reading is part of our experience, and as such should be the subject of the same kind of critical enquiry as the rest of our experience. As readers we need to divest the text of its spurious authority, and as writers we need to dispense with the stylistic tricks which invest texts with this authority (see Geertz, 1988). Action researchers who do not read will inevitably engage in unproductive re-invention of the wheel (there may be benefits in re-inventing the wheel, but not unless you have some idea that that is what you are doing). Action researchers who read are enriching their experience, and a productive part of that reading will be the work of other action researchers. Such reading will be creative, questioning and productive, rather than passive and accepting. At best the action researcher–reader begins by accepting the text on its own terms, in a manner similar to the English poet Wordsworth's concept of 'willing suspension of disbelief'; and on a closer rereading engages in productive, rather than destructive, critical questioning.

There are other problems arising from the need to disseminate action research through writing. For example, practitioner researchers are nearly always writing for two different audiences—an academic audience of researchers (who may have responsibility for awarding them accreditation) and a practitioner audience in their own workplace. This means that there are inevitable problems of discordant discourses. Only with difficulty will the credibility of the research be accepted by more than one discourse group on the basis of a single text. To disseminate action research effectively, it is often best to produce one long report and a number of short discussion documents targeted at specific groups. Winter (1989) writes particularly interestingly about many of these problems in relation to his concept of action research as a form of dialectical critique.

Ultimately, the problems of reporting action research reside in the provisional nature of knowledge. Definitive statements are not easy to make in a world where knowledge is personally and socially constructed. This is where post-modern writers illuminate the

problem interestingly by destabilising our felt need to find answers. I hang on to this idea from Steven Connor's useful book, *Postmodernist Culture*:

We are in and of the moment that we are attempting to analyse, in and of the structures we employ to analyse it. (Connor, 1989, p. 5)

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NOTES

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