



## Kurt Lewin and the Origins of Action Research

Clem Adelman

To cite this article: Clem Adelman (1993) Kurt Lewin and the Origins of Action Research, Educational Action Research, 1:1, 7-24, DOI: [10.1080/0965079930010102](https://doi.org/10.1080/0965079930010102)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0965079930010102>



Published online: 11 Aug 2006.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 67656



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 167 View citing articles [↗](#)

---

## Kurt Lewin and the Origins of Action Research

CLEM ADELMAN

*University of Reading, United Kingdom*

Kurt Lewin is often referred to as the originator of action research although he is probably better known as the social psychologist who devised the 'field theory' of concepts otherwise known as topographical psychology. He and his early associates in the USA promulgated most of the conceptual structure of interactive theories of organisational behaviour and enlivened social psychology. Lewin's many outstanding PhD students were prepared on the grounds of their knowledge of psychology and social psychology, and action research was one way to apply some of the psychological ideas to a practical endeavour. Of the many former students and associates, those who made a contribution to the testing and development of action research include Argyris, Bennis, Benne, Cory, Jacques, Lippitt, Marrow and White.

In the late 1930s Kurt Lewin and his students conducted quasi-experimental tests in factory and neighbourhood settings to demonstrate, respectively, the greater gains in productivity and in law and order through democratic participation rather than autocratic coercion. Lewin not only showed that there was an effective alternative to Taylor's 'scientific management' but through his action research provided the details of how to develop social relationships of groups and between groups to sustain communication and co-operation. To achieve such conditions and relationships required forms of leadership quite different from those purveyed by the literal followers of Taylor and the misinterpretation of Tyler which led to a link with Watsonian behaviourism and thus 'behavioural objectives'. One of the best known summaries of the forms of leadership is by two of Lewin's former students Cartwright & Zander (1953). Action research was the means of systematic enquiry for all participants in the quest for greater effectiveness through democratic participation.

Lewin was particularly concerned to raise the self-esteem of minority groups, to help them seek "independence, equality, and co-operation" through action research and other means (Lewin, 1946). He wanted

minority groups to overcome the forces of 'exploitation' and colonialisation that had been prominent in their modern histories. He espoused the use of social science as a means to help solve social conflicts and considered that the clarification of hypothetical, 'if so', questions was fundamental to all social science research which for Lewin included action research (Lewin, 1946).

Action research gives credence to the development of powers of reflective thought, discussion, decision and action by ordinary people participating in collective research on "private troubles" (Wright Mills, 1959) that they have in common. That was how Kurt Lewin (1890-1947), whose first ideas on what he called 'action research' were set out in about 1934 (Marrow, 1969), came to describe its characteristics after a series of practical experiences in the early 1940s. "No action without research; no research without action", Lewin concluded.

Lewin had fled Berlin in 1933 taking up a temporary position in the home economics department at Cornell University and then moving to psychology at the University of Iowa. His initial attempt to establish a programme of action research was to propose a Psychological Institute of the Hebrew University to seek "the wisest solutions and the best practical administrative alternatives" (Marrow, p. 81), in order to develop better communities by helping the new immigrants to Palestine to adjust and thrive in their new environment. His efforts in this regard did not come to fruition, notwithstanding that his sponsorship included Eleanor Roosevelt, John Dewey, Edward Thorndike, Frank Boas, and other outstanding American academics and philanthropists.[1]

The immediate concern of Jewish philanthropy was to help Jews escape from Nazi-occupied Europe. Ideas like the Psychological Institute were given little priority at that time; sufficient funding was not forthcoming. However, opportunities to explore the possibilities of community action research did arise subsequently in the USA

Whilst at the University of Iowa, Lewin was invited to work as a consultant to the Harwood factory in Virginia; Marrow was the managing director. The factory was newly opened and it was found to be difficult to recruit skilled workers. Three hundred unskilled trainees, mainly local women, had been employed. There was considerable prejudice amongst the predominantly female managers towards the view that the trainees would not be able to do the tasks fast enough or to the same standard. After 12 weeks of training the new employees produced only half as much as apprentices doing similar tasks in northern US factories. In addition, morale within the factory was low.

Lewin and his principal co-worker, Alec Barvelas, took part of the new workforce and divided it into two groups. The first received direct training given didactically with little opportunity to raise questions. The second group was encouraged to discuss and decide on the division of tasks and comment on the training that was given. Over several months the productivity of the second group was consistently higher than that of the first. The staff of the second group learnt the tasks faster and their morale

remained high, whereas in the first group morale remained low. This initial field experiment seemed to vindicate Lewin's observations and belief in democratic rather than autocratic workplaces. The problem of social relationships and efficiency in industry has been troubling Lewin since the early 1920s, marked by a critical paper on Taylorism (Lewin, 1920). The influence of Lewin's work on industrial relations has been enormous throughout the world as several of those interviewed by Marrow for the biographical volume attested. It was part of Lewin's insight that he could take contentious social issues and refute the taken-for-granted, often pessimistic assumptions about 'human nature', and replace these with what has become a new 'common sense'.

Action research for Lewin was exemplified by the discussion of problems followed by group decisions on how to proceed. Action research must include the active participation by those who have to carry out the work in the exploration of problems that they identify and anticipate. After investigation of these problems the group makes decisions, monitoring and keeping note of the consequences. Regular reviews of progress follow. The group would decide on when a particular plan or strategy had been exhausted and fulfilled, come to nothing, and would bring to these discussions newly perceived problems.

The experiment at the Harwood plant was inspired by earlier work on the relationships between autocracy and democracy in the workplace conducted with Lewin's students, Lippitt & White (1939). However, it was not until just after Lewin's death in 1947 that the opportunity arose at the Harwood plant for what seems the definitive action research on the efficacy of democratic group decision-making in industry. I quote from Marrow:

*French aided by Lester Coch, the personnel manager, was able to carry out the experiment as planned. The investigation called for introducing the required changes in jobs in three different ways, each involving a different degree of employee collaboration in working out details of the proposed new job assignments.*

*The first group did not participate in any way: the workers were told to the changes in their jobs, and the production department explained the new piece [wage] rate. The second group was asked to appoint representatives to meet with management to consider methods, piece rates and other problems created by the job changes. The third group consisted of every member of the unit – not just the representatives. They met with management, took an active part in detailed discussions about all aspects of the change, made a number of recommendations and even helped plan the most efficient methods for doing the new job.*

*The differences in outcome of the three procedures were clear-cut and dramatic. Average production in the non-participation group dropped 20 per cent immediately and did not regain the*

*pre-change level. None per cent of the group quit. Morale fell sharply, as evidenced by marked hostility toward the supervisor, by slowdowns by complaints to the union and by other instances of aggressive behaviour.*

*The group which participated through representatives required two weeks to recover its pre-change output. Their attitude was co-operative and none of the members of the group were in sharp contrast to those in the non-participating group. It regained the pre-change output after only two days and then climbed steadily until it reached a level about 14 per cent above the earlier average. No one quit; all members of the group worked well with their supervisors and there were no signs of aggression.*

French concluded that:

*The experiment showed that the rate of recovery is directly proportional to the amount of participation and that the rates of turnover and aggression are inversely proportional to the amount of participation.*

Lewin had said that the constancy of the level of production at Harwood or at any similar plant could be viewed as a quasi-stationary process in which two types of forces are in gear: those component forces pushing production in a downward direction and those pushing production up. The difference in the strength of these forces makes the difference of production level between the participating and the non-participating groups.

To those expecting accounts of action research to emulate a case study, this exemplification of Lewin's work does not leave the interpretation to the reader. Indeed Lewin and his colleagues framed their interpretations in the form of scientific axioms. Although Lewin's understanding of science was strongly informed by his professor, Ernst Cassirer, the onus on empirically testable propositions as the vindication of expenditure on research whatever the paradigm, was strongly evidence in his and his colleagues' reports and in their valuing of 'experimental' action research above the three other approaches they identified (see below). This does not detract from Lewin's principles and procedures for co-operative action research as a means of enquiry specially suited to democratic participation. However, Lewin's ideas on democratic participation in the workplace did not include any critique of the wider society, particularly the range of economic relations between worker and employer, capital and labour. Indeed a fair observation would be that although Lewin and his co-workers demonstrated the efficacy of action research for improving productivity, they did not develop conceptual structures that took explicit account of the power bases that define social roles and strongly influence the process of any change in the modes of production. In the context of industrial management the criticisms of Landsberger (1958) are precise and pertinent:

*Equally astonishing in the freedom from attack enjoyed so far by the followers of Lewin and the group dynamics approach. Coch and French's action research: 'Overcoming Resistance to Change' is far more blatant in accepting management's goal of efficiency, and the desirability of manipulating workers than any study ever undertaken by the follower of the late Elton Mayo.*

In the context of progressive education, as espoused by John Dewey and George Counts, Lewin had developed the methods and principles to enable the school to act as the agency of democratic change within its community. Lewin and Dewey met and corresponded briefly on a few occasions. I have yet to locate any record of Lewin knowing of the contemporaneous work of Ralph Tyler at Ohio University during the eight-year study (1932-40). However, the resemblance between action research and the 'service' studies by groups of teachers into their own practices that Tyler developed is uncannily close (Madaus & Stufflebeam, 1989). Tyler had studied Dewey and they were subsequently colleagues at Chicago University. Myles Horton (Kohl & Kohl 1990), a major figure in education for adult empowerment, corresponded with Lewin and Dewey but did not, at that time, know of Tyler. Horton contended that action research was too esoteric for working people (Kohl & Kohl, 1990).

The context for understanding Horton's reluctance is to be found in Lewin's frank admittance that 'community councils' did not discriminate between the democratic aims of social science as advocated by Lewin from the social science of the 'technocracy' of which they had prior experience; the latter as an autocratic arm of central government informed by university researchers.

*The community workers failed to realise that lawfulness in social as in physical science means an 'if so' relation, a linkage between hypothetical conditions and hypothetical effects. These laws do not tell what conditions exist locally, at a given place at a given time. In other words the laws don't do the job of diagnosis which has to be done locally. Neither do laws prescribe the strategy for change. (Lewin, 1946)*

Of course Lewin is correct in all respects to object to the widespread generalisation being applied in particular cases, but as I understand his writing, he did not resolve this conceptual and value conflict in a way that was appreciated by the minority groups and community councils that he wanted to help through his insights and research.

These problems persist, indeed they are even more confounded today in the plethora of interest networks and the rapidity of turnover of information, from research to hype. Those that have the power to make public definitions to realities have a far greater influence on social policy than the sceptical, slow to judge researcher! Action research is not for the impatient. When asked why he had not waited for the evaluation of the participative Technical and Vocational Education Initiative the minister, Sir

David Young, replied to the reporter that "one has to have faith in what one does". Another 90 million pounds was then allocated. Both Lewin and Young could be called pragmatists as they are both concerned with action and consequences but Lewin seeks an empirical basis for his arguments whereas Young appeals to 'faith'.

Lewin is not a scientific positivist but a scientific pragmatist. His methodology derives from C. S. Peirce, being a dialectical process seeking best fit or concordance and an interpretative (of many social perspectives) epistemology melded to a quasi-experimental orientation. Lewin did not work by hypothetical induction and objected to deduction in social science. Nor was he a scientific realist obsessed with the promulgation of and evidence for underlying laws. However, Lewin stressed the essential need to formulate the hypothesis. Readers might wish to refer to recent articles in *Educational Researcher* (Cherryholmes, 1992; House, 1992).

Argyris et al (1985) evaluate the contribution of Lewin and Dewey to the founding of what they term "action science". In the quotes that follow it is worth noting that the radical ideas of Lewin and Dewey remained largely untried until the late 1960s.

*Action science is an outgrowth of the traditions of John Dewey and Kurt Lewin. Dewey was eloquent in his criticism of the traditional separation of knowledge and action, and he articulated a theory of inquiry that was a model both for scientific method and for social practice. He hoped that the extension of experimental inquiry to social practice would lead to an integration of science and practice. He based this hope on the observation that 'science in becoming experimental has itself become a mode of directed practical doing'.*

*This observation, that experimentation in science is but a special case of human beings testing their conceptions in action, is at the core of the pragmatist epistemology. For the most part, however, the modern social sciences have appropriated the model of the natural sciences in ways that have maintained the separation of science and practice that Dewey deplored. Mainstream social science is related to social practice in much the same way that the natural sciences are related to engineering. This contrasts sharply with Dewey's vision of using scientific methods in social practice.*

*One tradition that has pursued the integration of science and practice is that exemplified by Lewin, a pioneer in group dynamics and action research. Lewin is considered the founder of the cognitive tradition within social psychology in America. Citing the classic Lewinian studies of democratic and authoritarian group climates, Festinger suggests that it is because Lewin showed how complex social phenomena could be studied experimentally that*

*many regard him as the founder of modern experimental social psychology. This is not to say, however, that each of the many research programmes that can trace their core ideas to some aspect of Lewin's work are also consistence with action science. We consider Lewin himself to have been an action scientist.*

*But since his time there has been a tendency to divorce his contributions to science from those to practice. Research in social psychology has relied on experimental methods for testing hypothesized relationships among a few variables, and it has become distant from practice. Practitioners in the applied behavioural sciences, with some exceptions, have focused on helping clients and have given little attention to testing scientific generalizations.*

*The Lewinian tradition of action science, in contrast, is that of scholar-practitioners in group dynamics and organizational science who have sought to integrate science and practice. Members of this tradition have emphasized the continuities between the activities of science and the activities of learning in the action context, the mutually reinforcing values of science, democracy and education and the benefits of combining science and social practice. (Argyris et al, 1985)*

*Whatever the details of these important histories the 'American Dream' of diversity and equal opportunity for all was considered to be in need of protection from the influence of the rising totalitarian regimes of Europe. All means of research and development were encouraged in the 1930s to the 1960s to foster the 'democratic' rather than the 'autocratic' mentality in the home, school and workplace. That is a long and in the main, yet to be told, story of conflicting interests, finite resources and crumbling theories.*

Lewin and his workers classified their work into four types of action research:

- 1. Diagnostic action research designed to produce a needed plan of action. The change agents would intervene in an already existing situation (for example, a race riot or anti-Semitic vandalism), diagnose the problem, and recommend remedial measures. Unless the proposed cures were feasible, effective, and acceptable to the people involved, however, this design of action was often wasted.*
- 2. Participant action research in which it is assumed that the residents of the affected community who were to help effect a cure*



*must be involved in the research process from the beginning. They would thereby realise more keenly the need for the particular steps finally decided upon; at the same time their 'ego investment' would support the remedial program. This type of action research – an example would be a community of self-survey – seemed to be most effective for a limited range of problems. If was useful in disclosing particular and local facts (not general principles) which could provide examples for other communities.*

*3. Empirical action research was primarily a matter of record keeping and accumulating experiences in day-to-day work, ideally with a succession of similar groups, such as boys' clubs. An inherent weakness of this procedure was that conclusions were drawn from experience with a single group, or with several groups differing in numerous ways, without test controls. Despite this handicap empirical action research could lead to the gradual development of generally valid principles as clinical medicine had already demonstrated.*

*4. Experimental action research called for a controlled study of the relative effectiveness of various techniques in nearly identical social situations. Of all the varieties of action research, the experimental had the greatest potential for the advancement of scientific knowledge. Under favourable circumstances it could definitively test specific hypotheses. It was, however, the most difficult form of action research to carry out successfully. (Marrow, 1969, p. 198)*

Given Lewin's emphasis on participation we might expect this classification to give emphasis to processes more than outcomes. As it is expressed the classification is consistent with Lewin's search for axiomatic empirical relationships. An argument for emphasis on process rather than outcomes in participatory research may be found in Adelman & Fletcher (1982).

Lewin was unequivocal that action research could inform social planning and action. Some recent UK authors have labelled the whole process 'a cycle of action research', whereas Lewin states that action research may be only part of a process of social planning, reconnaissance (evaluation of the action giving the planners a chance to learn the strengths and weakness, so informing the next step and contributing to a basis for overall modification of the planned change, or what has been latterly identified with a cycle of action research), followed by review and iteration of this overall cycle (Lewin, 1946).

By the time Lewin had established, in 1945, the Centre for Group Dynamics Institute at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology his colleagues included former students from Iowa, Festinger and Cartwright. The chief methodological approach was to develop group experiments, especially experiments of change to be carried on in the laboratory or in the

field. The Centre was to concern itself not only with the gathering of data but with theorising that Lewin hoped would steadily keep ahead of the data gathering. Lewin would wait until he perceived that the critical conditions for a field experiment pertained before engaging in that work. He wanted his 'experiments' to be naturalistic yet interventive. The fundamental tenet was studying things by changing them – in 'natural' situations.

Lewin could not rest on his successes but was in constant pursuit of further funds for contracts and funding for research staff. He had reluctantly acknowledged (*pace* Sanford, 1970) that action research was an onerous and risky business, and that sponsorship for action research was difficult to find. Eric Trist asked Lewin to act as consultant to a new institute for the study of human relations in London; founded in part to develop the discoveries about group conflict and cohesion, leadership and influence for change, made during the Second World War by UK and North American researchers in close co-operation. Lewin and Trist saw the parallels in their ideas but to Lewin's regret he could not take up the offer. Instead, one of his postdoctoral students, Eliot Jacques, went to help establish the Tavistock Institute.

When Lewin died of heart failure in 1947, the Centre for Group Dynamics, under the direction of Lewin's close associate Ronald Lippitt (formerly a Director of Research with the American Boy Scouts), moved to Michigan University at Ann Arbor. Lippitt's previous work in collaboration with Lewin included the establishment, in 1945, of the National Training Laboratories in Connecticut, which focussed particularly on sensitivity training to combat radical and religious prejudice and racism. The Training Laboratories drew upon the work of the Commission on Community Inter-relationships established through Lewin's persistence in 1944, with sponsorship from the American Jewish Congress.

The pioneering action research of Lewin and his associates showed that through discussion, decision, action, evaluation and revision in participatory democratic research, work became meaningful and alienation was reduced. Although power relations became more equitable in the workplace this reconstructionist research made little difference to the ownership of capital. Lewin and Dewey had similar ideas on participatory democratic workplaces and schools but the institutionalisation of these relationships has only been possible in parts of nations where wealth is more evenly distributed, such as Norway (Wirth, 1983). This has become known as the 'quality of life' approach.

### After Lewin

I will now consider some subsequent UK action research that has acknowledged its debt to Lewin and his associates' pioneering work. The perceived merit of action research as a means to help solve social problems by participative intervention has risen and fallen since the 1950s. Currently, under the title of 'participative research' it is alive and well in the UK, the USA and many other parts of the world, however, unlike the

cautious public approach of Lewin, some present advocates are making inflated claims for its impact on practice and policy and some are reifying individual development whilst neglecting the group and organisation. Lewin had anticipated and criticised this tendency:

*Recent research findings have indicated that the ideologies and stereotypes which govern inter-group relations should not be viewed as individual character traits but that they are anchored in cultural standards, that their stability and their change depend largely on happenings in groups as groups. (Lewin, 1946)*

During the 1960s UK and US social policy provided exceptionally large budgets for intervention programmes in education, health and housing. These programmes were intended to raise the life chances, achievement and expectations of the poor, otherwise called the 'disadvantaged' (Coates & Silburn, 1970). At that time sociologists and psychometricians were confident enough in their knowledge of learning, social change and organisation to eagerly suggest and participate in social engineering and re-education programmes. The details of this history are to be found in Silver & Silver (1991). Suffice to say here that the pioneering work of Tyler in the assessment of learning and Lewin in the principles of co-operative action research became urgently relevant and available through their respective former students Benjamin Bloom and Martin Deutsch. In education these interventions were termed 'compensatory' or 'enrichment'. Although they were prone to justified criticisms then and subsequently (for instance, Baratz & Baratz, 1970; Bernstein, 1970), at least those initiatives went beyond the previously dominant determinist notions that the poor could do little for themselves or were to be blamed for their faults and even made to feel guilty for what was ascribed as their inadequacies.

British educationalists, HMI, senior civil servants and politicians made many study visits to the USA during the decade. Some were seeking methodologies for systematic social development and new means of evaluating the impact of public policy expenditure. Under the banner of social action experiments the government funded Educational Priority Area (EPA) and Community Development Projects (CDP) in England and Wales (Halsey, 1972; Midwinter, 1972, 1975). Social reform was to be constructed rationally using information coming out of the dialogue between social science researchers and policy-makers. For the most part neither the EPA or CDP projects proceeded by co-operative action research.

By the time the EPA project had begun in 1968, action research as a means to cohesive social development had lost its coherence in the USA. Instead of empowering ordinary people in their own communities, action research had become incorporated as part of the armoury of managerial development for "corporate excellence" (Blake & Mouton, 1968). Lewin's ideas were so thoroughly digested and reformed as axioms, rather than critically assimilated for further testing, that there is no reference to his work in that and many other similar volumes of then and now. Lewin's work on the understanding of intergroup conflict by means of the

community self-study was said by Rowan (1974) to be defunct while Sanford (1970) claimed that action research was never accepted as bona fide research in the USA.

*It never really got off the ground, it never was widely influential in psychology or social science. By the time the federal funding agencies were set up after World War II, action research was already condemned to a sort of orphan's role in social science – for the separation of science and practice was now institutionalised, and it has been basic to the federal bureaucracies ever since. This truth was obscured for a time by the fact that old timers in action research were still able to get their projects funded; this after younger researchers had discovered to their sorrow that action research proposals per se received a cool reception from the funding agencies and were, indeed, likely to win for their authors the reputation of being 'confused'.*

The Humanities Curriculum Project (HCP; Stenhouse, 1975, 1980) engaged participating teachers in the discussion of issues they identified from classroom practice: the problems of implementing a humanities curriculum which was itself based on pupil discussion, with the teacher acting as a provider of resources and procedural chairperson. Although the project was successful in many ways, teachers did not get the opportunity, as recognised at the time, to make group decisions on change and implement these and evaluate the process and outcomes. However, the process of introduction of the HCP strategies was evaluated under the rubric of innovation by the HCP evaluation team led by Barry MacDonald (1978).

John Elliott had been a member of the HCP curriculum team and in his subsequent draft proposal to the Ford Foundation in 1971 highlighted the need to follow through the problems of innovation and the realising of pedagogies of enquiry and discovery in classrooms. The approach proposed was that of action research. Elliott was quite clear about the need to engage teachers in active participation and discussion but less clear about whether decisions regarding further developments should be followed through by individuals or by groups. It is worth a reminder that Lewin insisted that action research was a group commitment. As well as focussing on enquiry/discovery methods, Elliott at the outset suggested some of the problems in curriculum areas and the methods by which these would be researched.

I joined the Ford Teaching Project central team in March 1972. With Rob Walker I had been working at the Centre for Science Education, Chelsea College, on a Social Science Research Council project grant. We found a few people who shared our developing ideas about school and curriculum change. One of these was Barry MacDonald whom I heard on an Open University broadcast talking about the problems of evaluation. I wrote to MacDonald and invited him to visit Walker and myself to see samples of our work before our contracts concluded. In his reply he asked if

he could bring his colleagues John Elliott. Subsequently Elliott sent me a copy of his draft proposal to the Ford Foundation. In this it was contended that although stimulating and challenging curriculum materials had been devised, no such major change had been achieved in teachers' pedagogic practices. The curriculum may be designed to foster enquiry through independent reasoning but teachers were not articulating the means to communicate these desired processes to students. There was an alarming gap between the aspirations of education policy-makers, who decided on expenditure for curriculum development, and the implementation of programmes of curriculum change in classrooms. What Elliott, out of his work with HCP, proposed was a project to enable teachers, through collaborative action research on their own teaching, to make plain the impediments to pedagogic change. The Humanities Curriculum Project had begun this line of teacher based enquiry; the long-term observations of Walker and I had raised similar questions about pedagogy; but neither had the devotion to teachers' theorising and research as in what became known as the Ford Teaching Project (Ford T).

I found then and subsequently (Adelman et al, 1983) that the most difficult phase of action research was the preliminaries. To move from felt 'troubles' and 'anxieties' to a statement of an issue, teachers have to engage in persistent reflexive thought about their own and others' practices. At which point, often with help from the 'change agent', appropriate methods for investigation of an issue can be suggested and constructed by participants. It is at this point that the action research process begins to come with the grasp of the participant researcher. However, prior to the clarification there is a period of between a week to 3-4 months of awkward talking around anecdotes and images trying to locate key actions and acceptable terminology.

I found that participants' attempts to write down accounts of their thoughts were of value in the process of reflective participant research. The problem of initial incoherence had nothing to do with the literacy or intelligence of the Ford T or subsequently of other teachers. It seems to be more to do with the gap between the ability of most people to perform appropriate actions in an accomplished way and their ability to provide descriptions of their own performances. This is a well-known problem in psycholinguistics and ethnography, and it is also central to the work of Donald Schon (1983).[2]

In the literature on educational action research, however, this vital phase has been given far less attention than it deserves. The issue is often presented as easily arrived at when the reality is quite the contrary. When we asked groups of Ford T teachers to decide on which issue to explore in their research there were various forms of consternation such as "we thought you would tell us what we would research". Subsequent to initial discussions about what was meant amongst the teachers about enquiry/discovery teaching, 2 of the 40 teachers said they could no longer be involved in the project because they no longer held the aspiration to teach in that way.

Although teachers entered the project voluntarily and were supposed to be aspiring to enquiry/discovery pedagogies, four teachers withdrew very soon after the commencement of the project. Having received the first documents from the central team they realised that the enquiry/discovery pedagogies were not possible to implement in their schools. One withdrew because the school was oriented to preparing children to pass formal examinations, another thought that what he was doing was not enquiry/discovery pedagogy but some form of guided instruction. A few teachers voiced strong scepticism of the aims of the project in its initial formulation. However, these sceptical teachers remained within the project and were extremely valuable as critics and contributed a considerable number of documents about their researchers. They became committed to the project's aims, whilst reserving a detachment from drawing any firm conclusions.

The teachers who had most difficulty in facing feedback from pupils, from documents written by the project teachers or from discussions, were those whose personal identity was inextricably bound up with particular views of the professional role of a teacher. These teachers underwent considerable stress, reported nightmares and insomnia and required extra support from the central team. They stayed within the project, did write documents, but developed much more slowly than the teachers who could reflect on their own practices more readily.

The Ford T Project had sought democratic participation but found that most of the 40 teachers were slow to participate actively; they waited to see what developed with those teachers who were more ready to take the risk of dissonance between their claims and their practices and the expression of these in a public form. Although 'issues' from teachers were expected to arise from their reflection of their 'troubles', the issues were often difficult to express. At those junctures the participating teachers were vulnerable to interventions by their colleagues, particularly those in a formal position of a higher status, especially the headteacher. The central team could not be sure that the issue was personal to the teacher and could not ensure, in spite of numerous documents giving guidance meetings for discussion and decision, that democratic, rather than autocratic, procedures would ensue. Elliott and I could not monitor every meeting and the process of arrival at the issues and their analysis. The teachers' case studies were intended to provide such detail and the teachers' own research the systematic record.

We realised that Ford T had been successful in demonstrating that teachers are able to research and theorise about their own practices. The long reviews of Cook (1975 a, b) attracted even more attention to the Ford T project. However, Elliott and I knew that a more pervasive and lasting influence would come through explicit support of HMI. After their invited visit to Norwich the response was that "It is not the policy of HMI to provide funds for projects which they themselves have not initiated". It should be noted that at about that time funds for dissemination were made available to at least three DES/HMI projects in the areas of in-service education for teachers (INSET) and school management.

However, there was considerable interest in the project, particularly from those in INSET and in local authority school advisory services. Some chief education officers sent their representatives to conferences but HMI did not ask Elliott to attend any of their national or regional conferences. Further dissemination of the Project was mainly via the voluminous writings of its participants. Productively, Elliott wrote overviews of these and earlier Ford documents (see, for instance, Elliott, 1976) and these writings attracted particular attention in North America (where three Ford teachers, Elliott and myself gave seminars in New York, Chicago, Ohio and Toronto in 1976). The late Schools Council of England and Wales began to fund action research in the two years before its demise in 1983. Steven Kemmis, a former colleague at the Centre for Applied Research in Education, University of East Anglia (CARE), took educational action research to Australia some four years after Rae Munro (1974) had begun similar work in New Zealand.

This was the beginning of the Classroom Action Research Network (CARN), which now has international membership (Adams, 1980; Somekh, 1990). Other regional initiatives in the UK include the Teacher Research Network of Northern Ireland based at the University of Ulster and the Avon Curriculum Review and Evaluation Programme. Like most programmes these are small-scale and brief, with transitory funding. In an attempt to further establish action research Jack Whitehead at the University of Bath, Pamela Lomax at Kingston University and Richard Winter at Anglia Polytechnic University supervise Master's courses which can include dissertations based upon teachers' research into their own practice. These studies are within the constraints of academic time and do not allow for the risk associated with group participatory research. However, Colin Fletcher at Cranfield Institute of Technology has since the 1970s developed alternative ways of approaching the supervision of participatory research.

Sustained participatory research continues under the heading of mutual support and observation (MSO) at Stantonbury Schools in Milton Keynes (Fielding, 1989; Gates, 1989). In MSO three or more teachers observe an issue in their mutual teaching and feed back this information to each other. The observation, reporting and changes made are discussed within the whole school amongst those who take part in MSO. These comprise about 15% of the teachers in any one year. MSO has continued since 1985.

In the UK a few places in England have sustained action research through incorporating it into higher degree courses, as mentioned above, and I have criticised this framing of the risky in the structure and 'progression' of academic courses (Adelman, 1989). CARN continues under the guidance of Bridget Somekh at CARE. An annual international conference and a bulletin are regular features. There are none of the original group of Ford T teachers remaining in a membership of approximately 400. CARN keeps the most complete list of the small projects and dissertations in the UK.

The tendency to individual reflexivity using selective work of Schon as the exemplar [4] rather than group research will not promote democratic participation. Nor will the explicit yet convoluted distrust in teachers' accounts as ideologically distorted misrepresentations of reality. As Elliott (1991) argues, if claims are made to a distinction between 'practical' and 'emancipatory' action research, as is done by Carr & Kemmis (1986), they should not deny the possibility of critical reflexive practices arising out of the struggle by practitioners with their action research self-understandings. The problem of participation is in the main who is to define the issue under investigation, theorising about it and relationships in the process and in whose name is the research publicised, if at all.

The lack of articulation with regional or national educational policy formation has been commented on elsewhere (Carr, 1989). The means of sharing vocabulary and meanings – the antidote to alienation – may be through participatory research but the conditions for participation in that research are hard won and harder to sustain. We in the UK may learn from John Goodlad (Sirotnik & Goodlad, 1988), Herb Kohl (Kohl & Kohl, 1990), Colin Fletcher (1988) and the PALM project in these respects.

I do believe action research, or rather participatory research, could be a means to reconstruction (Simey, 1985) and productive work (Wirth, 1983). One of the urgent tasks is to bring together those who concentrated on individual reflective practice such as Schon, those who try to carry on Lewin's group discussion and decision and those that have worked with large communities following the examples of Horton and Freire. Participatory research may empower by raising the consciousness of teachers about the social context in which they work, but participatory research in its own right is still weak, lacking the sort of support that the EPA and CDP projects briefly attracted. Currently, planning and decisions over educational policy and practice are more and more being removed from the local authorities to central government. Teachers are seen as operatives in a system of line management; their work assessed and appraised, yet all this without the local democratic politics of the North American School Boards.

In this article I have argued that two deficient rhetorics have arisen since Lewin: action research for greater effectiveness with, but more often without, the link to democratic practice without sufficient or adequate action research to demonstrate these claims. What has also been lost sight of in the more recent emphasis on individual reflection has been the essential inclusion of group and institutional relationships. Much of this individual emphasis is attributed to the person-to-person consultant work of Schon whilst his former co-author, Argyris, continues to investigate organisation and group development in the Lewin tradition. The fruits of reflexive thought, if they are claimed to have potential for improving practice against stated criteria, have to be tested in joint and reciprocal social action in the context of constraints and conflicts.

It remains to be seen whether participatory research can influence social and educational policy in technocratic bureaucracies. There is every



indication that in the UK the National Curriculum and assessment have in no way been informed by participatory research.

### Acknowledgements

My thanks to Professor Colin Fletcher, Dr Derek Purdy and Professor Harold Silver for constructive criticism of the penultimate draft of this paper. The author remains culpable.

### Correspondence

Professor Clem Adelman, Faculty of Education and Community Studies, University of Reading, Bulmershe Court, Earley, Reading RG6 1HY, United Kingdom.

### Notes

- [1] Alfred J. Marrow, his biographer, was the secretary to the American committee.
- [2] Whose individualistic rather than group approach to development comprises but one of the differences between his work and participatory research. This may be a reason why Carr & Kemmis (1986) do not mention his work, albeit this absence is reciprocal.

### Bibliography

- Adams, E. (1980) Ford Teaching Project, in L. Stenhouse (Ed.) *Curriculum Research and Development in Action*. London: Heinemann.
- Adelman, C. (1989) The practical ethic takes priority over methodology, in W. Carr (Ed.) *Quality in Teaching: arguments for a reflective profession*. Brighton: Falmer Press.
- Adelman, C. & Fletcher, C. (1982) Collaboration as a research process, *Quarterly Journal of Community Education*, 1, pp. 15-24.
- Adelman, C., Boxall, W., Parson, I., Thebault, Y., Treacher, T. & Richardson, R. (1983) *A Fair Hearing for All: relationships between teaching and racial equality*. University of Reading, Bulmershe Research Publication No. 2.
- Argyris, C. & Schon, D.A. (1978) *Organizational Learning*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Argyris, C., Putnam, R. & McLain Smith, D. (1985) *Action Science*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Baratz, S.S. & Baratz, J.C. (1970) Early childhood intervention: the social science base of institutional racism, *Harvard Educational Review*, 40, pp. 29-50.
- Bernstein, B. (1970) Education cannot compensate for society, in *Language in Education*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul (in association with the Open University Press).
- Blake, R.R. & Mouton, J.S. (1968) *Corporate Excellence through Grid Organization Development: a systems approach*. Texas: Gulf Publishing Co.
- Carr, W. (1989) Understanding quality in teaching, in W. Carr (Ed.) *Quality in Teaching: arguments for a reflective profession*. Brighton: Falmer Press.

- Carr, W. & Kemmis, S. (1986) *Becoming Critical: education, knowledge and action research*. Geelong: Deakin University Press.
- Cartwright, D. & Zander, A. (1953) *Group Dynamics*. London: Tavistock.
- Cherryholmes, C.H. (1992) Notes on pragmatism and scientific realism, *Educational Researcher*, 21(6), pp. 13-17.
- Coates, K. & Silburn, R. (1970) *Poverty – the forgotten Englishman*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Cook, M. (1975a) Where the action research is – a look at the innovatory work arising out of the Ford Teaching Project, *The Times Education Supplement*, 11 July.
- Cook, M. (1975b) Bridging the gap between theory and practice – a review of Ford Teaching Project publications, *The Times Educational Supplement*, 18 July.
- Corey, S.M. (1953) *Action Research to Improve School Practices*. New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers' College, Columbia University Press.
- Elliott, J. (1976) Developing hypotheses about classrooms from teachers' practical constructs, *Interchange*, 7(2), pp. 2-22.
- Elliott, J. (1991) *Action Research for Educational Change*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Elliott, J. & Adelman, C. (1975) Teacher education for curriculum reform: an interim report on the work of the Ford Teaching Project, *British Journal of Teacher Education*, 1, pp. 105-114.
- Fielding, M. (1989) The fraternal foundations of democracy: towards emancipatory practice in school-based INSET, in C. Harber & R. Meighan (Eds) *The Democratic School*. Ticknall: Education Now Publishing Co-operative.
- Fletcher, C. (1988) Issues for participatory research in Europe, *Community Development Journal*, 23, pp. 44-46.
- Gates, P. (1989) Developing consciousness and pedagogical knowledge through mutual observation, in P. Woods (Ed.) *Working for Teacher Development*. Derham: Peter Francis.
- Halsey, A. (1972) *Educational Priority*, Vol. 1. London: HMSO.
- House, E. (1992) Response to 'Notes on pragmatism and scientific realism', *Educational Researcher*, 21(6), pp. 18-19.
- Kohl, H. & Kohl, S. (1990) *The Long Haul – an autobiography of Myles Horton*. New York: Doubleday.
- Landsberger, H.A. (1958) *Hawthorne Revisited: management and the worker, its critics and developments in human relations in industry*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Lewin, K. (1920) Die Sozialisierung des Taylorsystems, *Praktischer Sozialismus*, No. 4.
- Lewin, K. (1946) Action research and minority problems, in G.W. Lewin (Ed.) *Resolving Social Conflicts*. New York: Harper & Row (1948).
- Lewin, K., Lippett, R. & White, R.K. (1939) Patterns of aggressive behaviour in experimentally created social climates, *Journal of Social Psychology*, 10, pp. 271-301.
- MacDonald, B. (1978) *The Experience of Innovation*. Norwich: CARE, University of East Anglia.
- Madaus, G.F. & Stufflebeam, D. (1989) *Educational Evaluation: classic works of Ralph W. Tyler*. Boston: Kluwer.
- Marrow, A.J. (1969) *The Practical Theorist: the life and work of Kurt Lewin*. New York: Basic Books.

- Midwinter, E.C. (1972) *Priority Education*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Midwinter, E.C. (1975) *Education and Community*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Munro, R.G. (1974) Self-monitoring teachers, *The Times Educational Supplement*, June.
- Rowan, J. (1974) Research as an intervention, in N. Armistead (Ed.) *Reconstructing Social Psychology*. London: Penguin.
- Sanford, N. (1970) Whatever happened to action research? *Journal of Social Issues*, 26(3).
- Schon, D.A. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner*. New York: Basic Books.
- Silver, H. & Silver, P. (1991) *An Educational War on Poverty: American and British policy-making, 1960-1980*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Simey, M. (1985) *Government by Consent: the principle and practice of accountability in local government*. London: Bedford Square Press.
- Simons, H. & Elliott, J. (1989) *Rethinking Appraisal and Assessment*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Sirotnik, K.A. & Goodlad, J.I. (1988) *School - University Partnerships in Action*. New York: Teachers' College Press.
- Smith, G. (1987) Whatever happened to educational priority areas?, *Oxford Review of Education*, 13, pp. 23-39.
- Somekh, B. (1991) *Pupil Autonomy in Learning with Microcomputers: rhetoric or reality? An Action Research Study*. Norwich: PALM Publications.
- Stenhouse, L. (Ed.) (1975) *An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development*. London: Heinemann.
- Stenhouse, L. (Ed.) (1980) *Curriculum Research and Development in Action*. London: Heinemann Educational.
- Wirth, A.G. (1983) *Productive Work in Industry and Schools*. New York: Universities Press of America.
- Wright Mills, C. (1959) *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.