

## Researching Your Teaching: The Case for Action Research

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*This article puts forward a case for all who are involved in teaching psychology in higher education to reflect on and improve their teaching by engaging in action research. Drawing on her own experiences as a psychology lecturer, the author shows how the process works by using an example of a research study on the effects of written feedback to help students improve their essay writing. The article ends with a consideration of why psychology lecturers are particularly well qualified to undertake pedagogical action research.*

### INTRODUCTION

One of the fundamental characteristics of action research is its ongoing nature, which is why it is appropriate in a pedagogical context. In action research, there is no objective truth or answer to be found, only an acknowledgement of the rich complexity and wholeness of the educational situation and the willing acceptance to embrace that complexity and be ready to re-evaluate and change in the light of the available evidence. In this way, action research draws on an existential and phenomenological philosophy such as that explicated by Spinelli (1989). This places human experience in a relativistic realm where whatever meaning we find for ourselves has no completely independent and external basis. Yet at the same time the possibilities of human experience, although open-ended, are still bound and limited by a number of factors such as socio-cultural constraints through which each individual interprets experience in a unique way. This means that existence and experience of it can never be fully shared with another individual - we are alone in our experience of reality. In terms of educational research, the existential approach questions assumed truths, facts and inferences and encourages a healthy scepticism. In action research specifically, it is a useful perspective as it captures the essence of the process as a journey rather than as a destination.

### THEORY, RATIONALE AND PROCEDURES OF ACTION RESEARCH

Zuber-Skerritt's (1992a, 1992b) two texts are probably the most widely cited by all who carry out action research in higher education. They are companion volumes although each can be read on its own. In the theoretical volume, Zuber-Skerritt (1992b) puts forward a framework for action research using the acronym CRASP which stands for *Critical attitude, Research into teaching, Accountability and Self-evaluation leading to Professionalism*. In constructing her model she draws on theory, practice and educational research in higher education and in so doing cites the work of Esland (1971) who makes the distinction between traditional and dialectic epistemology. In psychology, these two epistemologies stand side by

side where the traditional encompasses empiricism and objectivity and the dialectical is concerned with negotiating meaning and constructivism. Zuber-Skerritt argues for a more holistic and dialectical model of knowing and learning where the learner is seen as an active construer of her or his own knowledge, a position derived from Kelly's (1955) personal construct theory. Applying a constructivist theory of knowledge to education immediately calls into question the model which, according to Biggs (1996), is still prevalent in higher education today where teaching is seen as effectively transmitting up to date knowledge about a subject and learning is seen as the accurate receiving of this knowledge to be stored and used appropriately at a later date. Accepting the view that learning is a process of constructing knowledge, however, assumes that it is the world of the learner which is crucial. Everything a learner receives is filtered through her or his own personal construct system and made sense of in terms of what is important to her or him. A group of students listening to a lecture on the principles of classical conditioning will all hear the same words that the lecturer is saying but each individual will interpret what is said very differently. How they interpret what is said and what they decide to do with it will depend on many inter-related factors such as their understanding of the subject, past experience, own personal beliefs, interests and so on. A constructivist perspective means a model of learning that puts both teacher and student at the centre of creating meaning. In this context, it is argued that experiential learning and collaborative enquiry are more effective in improving practice than the mere application of theory to the teaching process. Action research is carried out by academics themselves into their own practice with a focus not only on how and what their students are learning but also on what they are doing when they teach. This is research which directly impacts on practice rather than pure or theoretical research, which often takes a long time to actually affect teaching.

In her companion volume, which presents a series of case studies in developing student learning in higher education, Zuber-Skerritt (1992a) defines action research as:

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*'...collaborative, critical enquiry by the academics themselves (rather than expert educational researchers) into their own teaching practice, into problems of student learning and into curriculum problems. It is professional development through academic course development, group reflection, action, evaluation and improved practice.'* (pp 1-2).

The emphasis here is on action research being carried out by lecturers, as a collaborative venture and as a means of continuing professional development. Carr and Kemmis (1987) earlier argued that this collaborative and inclusive nature of action research is fundamental because, as an action research project develops, it will affect the practice of a widening circle of colleagues who themselves then become involved in the research process. If this does not happen, then it cannot really be called action research as the purpose of it is to inform and enhance pedagogical practice. Typically, this happens in a series of inter-related cycles of observation, implementation, modification, evaluation, reflection and further modification, similar to Kolb's (1984) learning cycles, but originally described by Lewin (1946) as a spiral process of planning, fact-finding and execution. The commonality in these descriptions of the action research process is its ongoing cyclical nature, as highlighted in a more recent definition:

*'a form of research carried out by practitioners into their own practice. It is a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken in order to improve practice... Action research needs a focus and should then be based on a cyclical process of planning - acting - observing - evaluating - planning etc.'* (Latham and Gilbert, 1995, p. 107).

A useful way of remembering the essential stages of this process is to use the acronym of ITDEM (see figure 1).

Although each action research project will be very different, the ITDEM steps are a simple way of illustrating how a typical study might work. Using an action research project on the effects of written feedback on psychology students' essay writing (Norton, 1997; Norton and Norton, 2001), the five ITDEM stages are now described in more detail.

**Identifying a problem in your practice**

The 'problem' that was identified came from an earlier research study by Norton, Horn and Thomas (1997) which used an alternative method of student evaluation called the Learning Objectives Questionnaire to seek students' perceptions of two new optional modules for third-year psychology undergraduates (Crime and Psychology, and

Counselling Psychology). One of the findings to come out of this research was that in the Counselling Psychology module students found the written tutor comments on their coursework essays confusing rather than helpful. This was an unwelcome surprise to the author who had conducted several research studies on essay writing, gave study skills advice and had been instrumental in designing and running two learning to learn programmes both of which heavily featured essay writing skills (Norton and Crowley, 1995; Norton, Scantlebury and Dickins, 1999).

**Thinking of ways to tackle the problem**

There were several options available to the author to tackle this problem, such as giving the students more feedback, spoken as well as written, or altering the style and type of feedback given. Reviewing the research literature revealed little in the way of previous empirical research in this area. Hounsell (1987) put it succinctly when he stated that feedback on coursework essays appears to be a *central assessment activity but a peripheral pedagogical one*. It was decided therefore to conduct a research study looking at the effects of three different types of written feedback in motivating a class of third-year counselling psychology students to improve their essays. Bearing in mind the previous research finding that students had been confused by the feedback given, the central research question for this stage of the action research was: 'How useful will the students find the lecturer's written feedback?'

**Doing it**

The research was carried out in two stages relating to two coursework essays. Forty-seven out of a total of fifty-one students agreed to take part in the first stage of this questionnaire study. In stage 1, the students were given detailed written comments on their first coursework essay. When they received the marked essay back, they were asked to immediately complete a short questionnaire on the usefulness of the feedback. Students were asked the following questions:

- Grade expected and grade obtained?
- Has the written feedback been useful to you?
- Has the written feedback motivated you to improve certain areas in your next counselling psychology essay?
- Has the written feedback increased your self-esteem as a student?

The last three questions asked students to respond by circling one of four categories: 'Yes, definitely', 'Yes, a little', 'No, not much' and 'No, not at all'. These were scored respectively as 3, 2, 1 and 0. Therefore the higher the score the more useful the feedback, the more motivated the student and the higher his or her academic self-esteem. An open-ended section after each of these three questions asked the students to explain in what way the feedback had affected them. Thus it was possible to collect both quantitative and qualitative measures of the effectiveness of the written feedback on the first essay.

• Identifying a problem in your practice	↘↘
• Thinking of ways to tackle the problem	↘↘
• Doing it	→→ <b>ITDEM</b>
• Evaluating it	↗↗
• Modifying your practice	↗↗

Figure 1. The ITDEM stages of action research

In stage 2 of the study, the author assigned each of the 47 students who had taken part in the first stage to one of three different feedback conditions for their second coursework essay. This was done systematically, on the basis of the grade that they had received in the first essay. Since the coursework counted towards their final degree marks, students were asked if they were willing to take part in the second stage, which would be to compare the effectiveness of different types of written feedback. The author assured the students that they did not have to take part if they did not want to and that everyone, no matter which condition of feedback they had been assigned, could ask for additional verbal feedback on an individual basis, after the study if they wanted it. In this way, no student taking part in the study would be particularly disadvantaged.

The feedback was one of the following three types:

1. *Follow-on feedback.* This consisted of two sections. Section 1 commented on the improvements the student had made from their first essay and section 2 suggested future improvements for their next essay.
2. *Student-request feedback.* Students were asked to write down what aspects of their essay they would like written feedback on.
3. *Departmental feedback.* This was using the feedback sheet that the psychology department used for all first-year students to encourage them to take a deep approach in their essays. Some lecturers go on and use this same sheet with their second and their third-year students, so it is a widely used method of giving quality feedback to students in this particular department. The sheet consists of six criteria which measure a deep approach. Lecturers can give marks for each of these criteria which range from 5 which is excellent, to 1 which is very poor, or they can write comments under each criteria heading, or they can do both. The criteria headings are: Addresses the question throughout the essay; Clearly organised with structure appropriate to question; Quality and relevance of argument; Synthesis of a range of material into a coherent whole; Depth of understanding in relation to underlying psychological issues; Evaluation of theoretical concepts and research evidence.

The same procedure was carried out in stage 2, whereby students were handed back their marked essays and then asked to complete the same questionnaire evaluating how effective they thought the feedback had been. Forty students took part in this second stage. Again the data obtained were both qualitative and quantitative measures of the effectiveness of written feedback.

### Evaluating it

The findings from this study were presented at a SEDA conference on student motivation (Norton, 1997). Briefly, the results indicated that the greatest influence on academic self-esteem and on the

perceived usefulness of the tutor feedback was the essay grade given (see Table 1).

However, a simple frequency count of the number of positive and negative responses to the question 'Has the written feedback motivated you to improve certain areas of your next counselling psychology essay?' showed 97% responded yes in the first stage and 95% in the second stage. Taken together these findings suggest that although the grade was not related to motivation on its own, the written feedback did appear to have a positively motivating effect. When the types of feedback were examined there were no significant differences on motivation, self-esteem or usefulness.

**Table 1**

Correlations between obtained grade and effects of written feedback

<i>Grade for essay 1</i>		<i>N=47</i>
and:	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Motivation	0.18	NS
Self-esteem	0.69	0.0001
Usefulness	0.35	0.01

  

<i>Grade for essay 2</i>		<i>N=40</i>
and:	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Motivation	-0.11	NS
Self-esteem	0.52	0.001
Usefulness	0.26	0.05

### Modifying your practice

The results of this research were used in two main ways to modify the author's own assessment practice and to continue the cycle of action research. Firstly, she became very conscious of the effects of negative and positive written feedback on students' motivation and now adopts the policy used by lecturers in the Open University of writing something positive first, followed by suggestions for improvement and then concluding with a positive pointer. There is a difficulty here in that ending with a positive comment and then awarding a low mark, might seem to give out contradictory messages to the student, a problem that was pithily encapsulated in the title of Higgins' (2000) paper: '59% - excellent!' Clearly, more research is needed here to tease out further the interaction of comments and mark and so another 'problem' is identified and the action research cycle continues...

The second major modification has involved other psychology colleagues (the collaborative aspect of action research). Given evidence in the research literature that written feedback may be misinterpreted or may not be as useful as lecturers would hope (Macdonald, 1991; Merry, Orsmond and Reiling, 1998; Smith, Campbell and Brooker, 1998; Weedon, 2000), a further research study has been carried out to see if using an essay feedback checklist would more effectively target lecturers' advice and feedback. This has involved several stages. Firstly, the proposal was discussed at a team meeting with psychology

colleagues, some of whom expressed reservations about its usefulness. This resulted in minor modifications to the checklist and a decision to undertake a research study with volunteer students and volunteer lecturers. Sixty-one first-year students (about 25% of the total cohort) and five first-year lecturers took part. In addition, sixty-five third-year students taking Counselling Psychology agreed to take part (75% of the students taking this module) together with the two lecturers who delivered that module, one of whom was the author.

Detailed results of this research will be presented elsewhere but briefly it was found that both first and third-year students over-estimated the extent to which their essays met the given criteria in comparison to their lecturers' judgements. Worryingly, the discrepancy appears to increase by the third-year which is not what we would hope. Interviews with the participating lecturers about the usefulness of the checklist as a way of more effectively targeting written feedback showed a moderate interest in further developing it but with the sensible reservation that students' views should be sought. This is action research in practice.

### Summary

The above example using the ITDEM stages has been used to illustrate the inter-related cycles of observation, implementation, modification, evaluation, reflection and further modification. It also illustrates how such research is used to inform practice and how it ultimately affects other colleagues in a collaborative endeavour, which might well translate across to other disciplines in an ever-increasing circle. In doing this, it is distinct from curriculum development as its influences are potentially far more wide-ranging and could be used to determine policy making (Hartley and Norton, in submission).

### WHY SHOULD LECTURERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION UNDERTAKE ACTION RESEARCH?

Carr and Kemmis (1986) have made a convincing case for the teacher as researcher in the field of school education. Part of their argument is based on the characteristics of a profession which is predicated on the following assumptions:

1. The over-riding commitment of professionals is to the well-being of their clients and the interest of their clients is always the predominant concern.
2. To ensure they can always act in the interest of their clients, members of a profession reserve the right to make autonomous judgements free from external non-professional controls and constraints – a professional autonomy that operates at individual and collective level.
3. The methods and procedures employed by members of a profession are based on a body of theoretical knowledge and research.

While these assumptions are all inter-related, for the sake of clarity they will be considered separately.

### The interests of our students

In higher education, the 'client' is the student. Improving student learning and the student experience should be at the centre of our professional practice. This was the underlying rationale for the annual Improving Student Learning Symposium which started under the aegis of Graham Gibbs in 1993. In the proceedings from that first conference, Gibbs (1994) commented on how most of the papers reported were by lecturers using research frameworks and research tools to make sense of their own teaching practices. Over the years this trend has continued and the Symposia continue to be widely influential by drawing together practitioners and researchers from all over the world. An example has been how the Symposia have consistently featured one of the most compelling influences on practitioners researching their own practice which has come from the alternative research paradigm of phenomenology. This approach originated in Sweden with the phenomenographic work of Ferenc Marton and his colleagues which focuses on the student as learner rather than on teaching *per se* (Marton and Saljo, 1976, 1997; Marton, Dall'Alba and Beatty, 1993). In a keynote presentation at a recent action research event at Liverpool Hope, Erik Meyer noted that one of the most important actions that lecturers could take to change their teaching would be to find out what their students' conceptions of learning were (Meyer, 2001).

Combined with this activity in the arena of higher education research has been context of rapid change of the higher education system in the UK, which imposes great challenges for the curriculum. Barnett (2000) coins the term 'supercomplexity' to signal the need for a policy perspective to take account of the curricula changes which are moving but not in any clear or deliberate direction. Two of the key changes have been widening participation with the concomitant diversity in the student profile and the effect of using communications and information technology (C and IT) in all aspects of higher education. Increasing staff-student ratios, differences in students and the tendency for C and IT to outstrip pedagogical decision-making all make it vital that lecturers should be able to ascertain which teaching changes work and which do not. Laurillard (1993) suggests that rather than offer prescriptive advice on what methods work, it is preferable to encourage a way of thinking about using C and IT which is informed by a more elaborated understanding of what students do when they learn. Action research with its use of progressive loops of cyclical enquiry and its emphasis on the practical is well-placed to deal with both the speed of change and the need for lecturers to be engaged in an ongoing learning process about their own teaching.

### Autonomy

Professionalism in schools is most seriously limited according to Carr and Kemmis (1986) in respect of autonomy. While teachers can make autonomous judgements about their everyday classroom practice, they operate within hierarchically arranged institutions so have relatively little influence in making decisions

about overall education and policy, selection and training of new members, accountability and quality procedures and general structures. Until recently it could be argued that the same situation existed in higher education in several different countries (see for example Sheehan and Welch, 1996). In the UK with the establishing of the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILT) this is changing very rapidly. There is an opportunity for members at grass roots level to take part in the decision-making processes about the broader higher education context in which we all operate:

*The establishment of the ILT as a professional body organised by and responsible to, those who teach and support learning in higher education offers a unique opportunity for the membership to influence the ways in which this concept of professionalism develops. (Bucklow and Clark, 2000, p.11).*

It is important therefore that such influence should come from within and be informed by academic values which can be established in part through action research.

### **Theoretical knowledge and research**

There has always been a temptation for educationalists to adopt innovations, however without such practices being firmly grounded in theory and in research. Unfortunately, the current drive for quality procedures intended to improve the standard of teaching have paradoxically meant that academic staff actually have less time to prepare teaching and to reflect on practice informed by educational theory and research evidence. Action research, by transcending the traditional dichotomy between theory and practice, is one way of practically dealing with these pressures, while at the same time meeting the need to deliver quality teaching and publish research. Adams (2000) in a report on a longitudinal study looking at academics' views of their work in an Australian university found that both new and experienced lecturers were not driven by university policy or regulations, but by a commitment to their students and to their subjects. Developing our own practice is for most of us intrinsically motivating and a satisfying aspect of the work we do and may well redress some of the strains imposed by the administrative load we are currently asked to carry.

### **WHY ARE PSYCHOLOGY LECTURERS PARTICULARLY WELL PLACED TO DO PEDAGOGICAL ACTION RESEARCH?**

#### **Psychologists have specialist knowledge about learning and teaching.**

In a special issue of Psychology Teaching Review on the role of research in improving teaching in psychology, George Brown (1997) wrote a target paper entitled 'Teaching Psychology: A Vade Mecum' to which leading experts in the field of higher education research were invited to respond. In his article Brown made the following assertion:

*'To the question why should research on teaching have the same status as other research in psychology, there are two responses. First every academic subject has, at least, an implicit pedagogy that needs explicating, if only to improve the quality of its teaching, let alone the quality of the thinking of its undergraduates. Secondly, psychology, more than most subjects needs to do it, if only because learning, teaching and assessment are part of the very stuff of psychology. To be experts on the subject matter of learning and assessment but not to apply that expertise to the learning and assessment of one's own students is to send conflicting, perhaps hypocritical, messages to them. And those that then become teachers of psychology will probably perpetuate the same approaches.'* (p.122)

As psychologists, colleagues take to the style of reflective practice that underpins action research very readily and can give psychology students the additional benefit of actively witnessing real life applications of psychology research in the area of teaching and learning.

#### **Psychology is a discipline which both encourages critical thinking and has relevant methodological tools of enquiry**

Psychology also enjoys a very special position as a discipline as it embraces both scientific and arts-based ways of thinking about the world. It is thus well placed to encourage students to challenge epistemic conceptions of knowledge, described by Perry (1970) as relativistic thinking and King and Kitchener (1994) as reflective judgement. American research suggests that psychology students do, in fact, show such gains and this may well be due psychology teachers emphasising thinking and problem-solving strategies as well as how to critically and scientifically evaluate the ideas that are taught to them (Gadzella and Masten, 1998; Lawson, 1999). It is not surprising, therefore, given this philosophical understanding of the nature of knowledge together with the armoury and expertise of research techniques, that psychologists have been at the forefront of much of the research in teaching and learning in higher education.

### **IN CONCLUSION**

In this paper it has been argued that action research is an important part of thinking about and improving our own pedagogical practice. It is also an effective and enjoyable way of helping us to reflect and act to improve our teaching and assessment activities. This paper was written to communicate the author's enthusiasm for researching our own teaching, but at the same time she did not feel comfortable exhorting fellow lecturers to engage in yet another task in their role as academics. This is an important issue that faces all of us who work in higher education. What are academics supposed to be doing: researching or teaching? Following the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (1997) on university teaching in the UK chaired by Lord Dearing, there has been an increasing expectation that university lecturers are able to teach effectively. At the same time there is a

pressure on the same academics to produce high quality research. In this article the author has attempted to demonstrate that active involvement in pedagogical action research is one way of helping to resolve these competing demands. It engages lecturers with real teaching issues and at the same time it can be used to enhance their research output, particularly now that pedagogical research publications are RAE-assessable. Perhaps, though, even more satisfying is the opportunity that action research can give lecturers to disseminate the results of their improved practice to other interested colleagues, a sharing process which is stimulating, exciting and enjoyable.

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