

Chapter 5

READING ACTION RESEARCH

Like many other types of qualitative research approaches, action research means different things to different people. Most agree

- action research occurs in a school setting,
- it is often used when individuals look for solutions to common problems about which they can take some action,
- the problem being solved often relates to school improvement,
- action research is practitioner based, and
- it usually involves collaboration among key players.

Often it is a teacher who uses systematic and disciplined inquiry with the intent of changing and improving practice. What makes it a form of research is that the inquiry is disciplined. The topics are specific and current. The intent is for school improvement. At times the inquiry may go beyond one specific teacher; in fact, at times the inquiry can center on an entire school improvement project. What is important to keep in mind is that the intent is school improvement.

Action research fell into disfavor during the 1950s when the scientific movement in education was so strong. This type of research was seen as soft. While it has been in and out of favor, currently action research is on the upward cycle.

Action research does not have a philosophical basis, as does phenomenology. It does not follow specific strategies, as does grounded theory. Rather, it uses a general approach to identifying problems, gathering data, and interpreting the data. Its ultimate purpose should lead to some specific action. Since school personnel conduct this type of research, it tends to follow general qualitative strategies and avoids the use of complex research designs, hypothesis testing, and statistics.

There is considerable overlap between action research and teacher research. I do not discuss the latter in this book of readings.

KEY ELEMENTS OF ACTION RESEARCH

- Action research emphasizes decisions about educational programs;
- is closely associated with teacher research;
- tends to be straightforward; and
- involves key decision makers.
- Action research usually is used in schools to address a particular educational problem.

I have selected two articles for you to review. In the first article, Maya Miskovic and Katrina Hoop provide an example of two individuals (themselves) collaborating on two research projects. Both authors were students when the projects were conducted. They take a very strong position on the role of critical pedagogy (which they connect to action research) at the beginning of the article. I hope this is a study that relates to your own practice. The intent of their two projects was to get children involved in civic life and to raise awareness of social inequality—no small task, I would say. What are the special issues and flags that researchers need to be aware of when studying something in which they are intimately involved? You might ask yourself, can you be both objective and neutral? The very premise of action research is that the projects studied involve action.

Kath Fisher and Renata Phelps present their action research study in the form of a play. In this series of readings, my purpose has been to present to you a variety of research approaches as well as styles of writing. Here I take the opportunity to present a play. The authors explore the challenge of the principles of action research and the demands of the academy for more traditional writing. You will note that they are affiliated with a university in Australia.

ADVANCE PREPARATIONS

Begin by reading the title and the abstract, then flipping through the article and reading the major headings and subheadings. Once you have an idea of the article's structure, go back and read through the article carefully. When you finish reading, you will need to decide the extent to which the article is successful. To do so, ask yourself four questions:

- Does it provide new information and insights related to the topic?
- Is it engaging and written in a clear manner?
- Does it illustrate elements you would expect to find in action research?
- Do the positive aspects of the article outweigh the potential drawbacks?

Article 5.1. Action Research Meets Critical Pedagogy: Theory, Practice, and Reflection (2006)

Maya Miskovic and Katrina Hoop

My Expectations

You learn from reading the abstract that the authors examine participatory action research (PAR) and critical pedagogy. You need to anticipate what they might say about these two topics. A quick reading of the

headings reveals that the initial section deals with collaborative research as an educational practice. You might not be too familiar with the research on this topic. Be on the lookout for PAR. The literature review is several pages long and is academic in structure and writing. The topic critical pedagogy is also reviewed, in particular how it relates to PAR.

ABSTRACT

This study brings together several concepts: collaborative and action research with critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy and theory (concepts from Paulo Freire) are concerned with helping students to question and reflect.

We learn that the emphasis is on examining collaboration between a university and a community organization. We will have to look for how critical pedagogy is connected.

These ideas should be stimulating.

This article describes and critically examines the collaborative research process between an urban university's research center and its community partners. The authors link the theoretical framework of collaborative research, participatory action research, and critical pedagogy to their personal experiences involving two collaborative research projects in which they participated. The projects were designed to foster engagement of youth in civic life through social research and to raise awareness of social inequality and injustice. The authors critically examine various phases of research with a particular focus on the following challenges: recruitment and attendance issues, development, language and methods issues, and the university and funding agency-driven push for a "product." The authors point out the strengths and weaknesses of the collaborative approach and problematize issues not visible in the final research reports. Finally, strategies for enhancing the quality of the collaborative research involving youth are proposed.

This article is a description and critical examination of the collaborative research process between an urban university's research center and its community partners. We link the theoretical framework of collaborative research, participatory action research (PAR), and critical pedagogy to our personal experiences involving two collaborative research projects in which we participated. During these projects, we both worked as graduate research fellows at the university center and were involved in the research collaboration from the initial phase of designing the research to the end phase of writing the report. Both projects were designed to foster engagement of youth in civic life through social research and involved the university research center and different educational and political institutions and agencies in the greater Chicago metropolitan area. Drawing on experiences from community-university collaborative research projects, we critically examine different phases of collaborative research and our role in the process. We point out the strengths and setbacks of the collaborative approach involving youth and problematize issues not visible in the final research reports. Certainly, this article is written from our perspective and might not reflect the impressions of other actors involved. Finally, we propose strategies for enhancing the quality of the collaborative research process that involves youth.

COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH AS AN EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

Notions of collaborative research and PAR are used simultaneously in this article because a review of literature revealed great similarities in defining the terms (e.g., Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003; Greenwood & Levin, 2000; McTaggart, 1997). What those definitions have in common is the idea of university-trained researchers and community representatives working together on all the phases of the research process and generating knowledge that promotes social justice for groups that have been traditionally excluded from the process.

Here you see a political agenda.

In their fierce critique of university-based produced knowledge that bears little or no significance to the everyday activities of the communities in which the universities are embedded, Greenwood and Levin (2000) proposed praxis-oriented research that is not abstract, self-referential, and distributed within a narrow disciplinary circle; instead, such research is highly contextual and focused on “real problems” in the communities. By developing “cogenerative inquiry” (Greenwood & Levin, 2000, p. 86) where trained researchers and community stakeholders collaborate in all phases of research, the process becomes democratized, done “*with* the community, not *to* it” (Nyden, Figert, Shibley, & Burows, 1997, p. 7).

The idea just presented might appeal to many of you.

PAR as theorized in this article has six key features, adopted from Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998): PAR is a social process whereby actors in an educational and social setting learn how they are connected to social structures. PAR is participatory and practical because the actors involved are not passive subjects but rather, active agents working toward social action. PAR is emancipatory and critical as individuals examine and challenge the role of larger social, political, economical, and cultural conditions that shape their identities and actions. In this process, research inevitably touches on the issues of power, domination, and hegemony. Finally, PAR is reflexive because participants are encouraged to critically examine their own role in research.

Some of these concepts are appealing to those who find that research is remote from and irrelevant to their own work.

Collaborative research could have an empowering effect for those involved, such as community groups. By including community activists on a university-trained research team, the research process is demystified. In addition, community members acquire skills to conduct research pertinent to local issues. The idea of empowering the powerless by including them in the research process is not a novelty; the topic is well documented in research literature (Fine, Weiss, Weseen, & Wong, 2000; Greenwood & Levin, 2000; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Suarez-Balcazar & Orellana-Damacela, 1999), as well as on the World Wide Web (e.g., Aspen Institute Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Initiatives at <http://www.aspenroudttable.org>, Community Tool Box at <http://ctb.lsi.ukans.edu/>, United Way Outcomes Measurement

Do you think inclusion alone results in demystification?

Tools at <http://www.national.unitedway.org/outcomes/>). However, this process presents many challenges, especially when young people are included in the research process.

The idea of engaging students in classroom activities that stimulate the research process from formulating research questions to data collection and analysis is not a rarity, but situations that apply this newly acquired knowledge for solving problems in the community are rare (Atweh, Christiansen, & Dornan, 1998). Manuals, textbooks, and other written sources dedicated to PAR in schools are mostly aimed at teachers as researchers in the classroom (e.g., Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Mills, 2002; Tabachnick & Zeichner, 1991). In their comprehensive analysis of studies that involve teachers as researchers, Baumann and Duffy (2001) delineated a portrait of a “typical teacher researcher” as such:

A reflective elementary, secondary, or postsecondary classroom teacher identifies a persistent teaching problem or question and decides to initiate a classroom inquiry. This teacher reads theoretical and applied educational literature, including other teacher-research reports, and decides to work collaboratively with a colleague. Using primarily practical, efficient, qualitative methods recommended by other teacher researchers, with perhaps a quantitative tool added in, the researcher initiates a study. (p. 611)

School children involved in this type of research are usually recipients of research practices developed by their teachers, such as case studies of teachers assisting an English-as-a-second-language learner (Schoen & Schoen, 2003) or when fourth-grade students evaluated, through interviews and group discussions, materials studied in the classroom (McCall, 2002). In both cases, adult figures were initiators of classroom activities. In their study of teachers and autistic children interacting, Schoen and Bullard (2002) assessed teachers’ actions as successful, but when students themselves needed to initiate behavior that teachers introduced, only “modest accomplishments” (p. 39) were observed.

Another common type of PAR involving children depicts teachers and parents working together to develop strategies that support students with emotional and behavioral disorders (Cheney, 1998), to create a program for parents that enhances reading abilities in children with developmental disabilities (Kay & Fitzgerald, 1997), or to establish a school-family partnership with economically disadvantaged and racially and ethnically diverse families (Ho, 2002). A common feature of this type of PAR is the role of children and young adults in the process: Students are participants in research, but only indirectly—their role is limited to the receivers of some strategy, practice, or program that was created, implemented, and evaluated by adults.

Have you ever thought of including children in the research process?

They may not have the time or the skills to continue.

Why is it so difficult to involve school children as active agents in research? Discussing action research that takes place in schools, Feldman and Atkin (1995) argued that research is riddled with difficulties even when all the actors involved are adults. Research ideas usually originate from university researchers, whereas schoolteachers are assigned to “assistant” status. Such relationships could be successful and collegial, but the major intellectual impetus comes from the university. Furthermore, once the research is completed and the university researchers leave the school, teachers are rarely compelled to continue with further inquiry. In addition, researchers outside academia must rely on university insiders who understand academic jargon that often does not have sympathy for context-laden research but rather adheres to the post-positivist research paradigm; furthermore, researchers have to deal with institutional review board requirements or local school boards, all of which contribute in developing a dependent behavior in teachers (Zygouris-Coe, Pace, Malecki, & Weade, 2001).

Even when teachers feel confident enough to pursue their research agenda, they continue to face a power imbalance between themselves and university researchers (Zigo, 2001). Also, teachers report lack of time and interest for research among their colleagues, who can feel threatened by the research process that in turn can result in alienation and hostility toward the teacher researcher (Lloyd, 2002). These issues are mentioned to stress even greater challenges to PAR when on one side we have university researchers and on the other, school children or young adults. The PAR projects we participated in involved youth aged 13 to 15, with an aim to assist them in developing critical agency through participation in social research and active involvement in their communities. These goals resonate with the theoretical framework of critical pedagogy, a topic we address next.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND ITS LINK TO PAR

This discussion about democratic change has not occurred in the other articles you have read.

The theory of critical pedagogy has similar goals to PAR. Brydon-Miller et al. (2003) claimed that action research aspires to contribute to the well-being of individuals and communities, promoting large-scale democratic change. Like critical pedagogues, action researchers are critical of a positivistic view of knowledge that regards valid research as objective and value free. Brydon-Miller et al. continued,

Instead, we embrace the notion of knowledge as socially constructed, and recognizing that all research is embedded within a system of values and promotes some model of human interaction, we commit ourselves to a form of research which challenges unjust and undemocratic economic, social and political systems and practices. (p. 11)

Similar to PAR, critical pedagogy addresses the challenge of providing students with the capacity for critical judgment, social responsibility, and a sense of public commitment (Giroux, 2001). It has also been associated with critical literacy, “the capacity to decode, demystify, and deconstruct the taken-for-granted narratives, symbols, metaphors, and tropes that guide the production of truth within texts” (Carlson, 2003, pp. 46–47).

Having emerged in the 1980s in the United States, critical pedagogy has been inspired by various sources: Latin American philosophies of liberation (Freire, 2001), the Frankfurt school of critical theory (see Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000), feminist theory (Luke & Gore, 1992), and neo-Marxist cultural criticism (McLaren, 1998). It also encompasses the discussion of multiculturalism (Gay, 1995) and antiracist education (Ng, Staton, & Scane, 1995). Therefore, critical pedagogy is not a homogeneous concept but a broad tenet that includes sometimes-disparate discourses. Even its name is a source of debate; for instance, Gore (1998) used the term “radical pedagogy discourses” (p. 272), Lather (1992) wrote about “emancipatory pedagogy” (p. 122), and Rezai-Rashti (1995) employed the notion of “transformative theorists” (p. 5) to include theoretical approaches that, despite their differences, have a common goal: to practice the “teaching/learning intended to interrupt particular historical, situated systems of oppression” (Lather, 1992, p. 121).

Critical pedagogy has similar goals to PAR in that it is aimed at drawing on “indigenous knowledge” rather than knowledge rooted in those who have power to claim authority, such as academic scholars and university-based research sites (Greenwood & Levin, 2000; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). Both approaches have transformative potential, demanding equality, diversity, and social justice. Educators and researchers using PAR and critical pedagogy challenge the educational system on many fronts, such as policy-related issues, stereotyping, and oppressive practices within the school setting. In addition, teachers address educational content that reflects authoritarian positions, fostering individuality, critical empowerment, critical literacy, and instituting multicultural education materials and activities that reflect demographic shifts throughout the world. Although each student’s background experiences are respected and honored, they are also taught to critique and respond to the many texts and resources they are given.

These views reflect a philosophical position of critical theory or pedagogy.

Has critical pedagogy fulfilled its goals? Educators who have attempted to implement the principles of critical pedagogy in their classrooms have reported success on various fronts, such as developing students’ capacities to read, write, and use language to consider how they perceive themselves in the world and what choices they make (Ball, 2000); challenging university students’ beliefs about race and class, while simultaneously being attentive to their own role as multicultural educators (Obidah, 2000); or leading

students to use their imagination and critical thinking when addressing abstract social issues such as globalization and its effects on everyday life (Bigelow, 1998).

Still, reviewing some earlier critiques (Ellsworth, 1989; Lather, 1998) and the recent writings on critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2000, 2001, 2002; McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c; Wardekker & Miedema, 1997; Weiler, 2001), the impression is that critical pedagogy, once a promising and prominent paradigm, has been seriously flawed, if not completely failed. Apparently, critical pedagogy, along with its partner multiculturalism, has become rearticulated and domesticated by its ideological enemies, the politics of neoliberalism, and corporate global capitalism, prompting an explicit and vocal anticapitalism turn in the field, although offering different solutions (Giroux 2000, 2001, 2002; McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c). Because of the intellectual and moral paralysis of postmodernism, critical pedagogy has been redirected toward identity politics, in which social class lost its crucial place in the discussions on difference (Scatamburlo-D'Annibale & McLaren, 2003).

Rather than focusing on the postmodern equivalence among different forms of oppression, McLaren and Farahmandpur (2001c) proposed a “strategic integration of different yet equally important struggles . . . in which race and gender antagonisms can be addressed and overcome within the larger project of class struggle” (p. 143). Critical pedagogy, or what has been left of it, could be salvaged by a revolutionary Marxist pedagogy that

must be able to endorse the cultural struggles of workers and coordinate such struggle as part of a broader “cross-border” social movement unionism aimed at organizing and supporting the working-classes and marginalized cultural workers in their efforts to build new international anti-capitalist struggles. (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2001a, p. 12)

It is questionable, however, that critical pedagogy could be rescued by historical materialism and calling on a socialist revolution. We are not debating here the “end of history” or “end of ideology” ideas but are highly suspicious (one of the authors of this article experienced socialism, East European style) of most educators envisioning no less than socialist revolution when contemplating the possibilities of improving the educational system in the United States. McLaren and Farahmandpur (2001a) wrote,

A turn to socialism in no way diminishes the importance of industrial, postindustrial or technological development, which we believe must continue. However, in our socialist vision, *individuals would contribute labor according to ability, and the material means of life would be distributed according to need* [italics added]. Ideally, a redistributive socialism would be followed by the managed obsolescence of the money exchange. (p. 13)

The comments in these last several paragraphs are quite different from what you have previously read. Much of what you have read previously seems to adopt a stance of objectivism and neutrality. These authors reflect their own experience and viewpoint, however. While you may not agree with it, I want you to consider how it informs the authors' own design of research.

Despite McLaren and Farahmandpur's eloquent and poetic indictment of the exploitative nature of capitalism, those who have lived under East European socialism remember these sentences as empty slogans memorized and recited in classrooms and displayed on banners in factories. At the end, the revolution did eat its children and those who survived seem to have immersed themselves happily into mind-numbing consumerism. Regardless of the broken promises of a get-rich-easily capitalist mantra, one needs only to take a stroll through the streets of Moscow or Belgrade to see youth (who can afford it) enveloped, often to the grotesque extent, in designer clothes and accessories, which are supposed to symbolize high life à la Hollywood.

We do not accuse McLaren and Farahmandpur (2001a) of being "naive, impractical or hopelessly utopian" (p. 13). However, if the United States is ever to reach socialism, we hope this time it will be devoid of tactics so mercilessly employed by East European socialist ideologues for half of the previous century, namely, exploitation, manipulation, and outright inhumane treatment of its citizens. If the "metaphysical turn" of postmodern, postcolonial, and cultural studies has led to the abandonment of theory as a tool for concrete political action (De Lissovoy & McLaren, 2003), we think there is a danger that critical pedagogy as a Marxist project could fall into the same trap.

We believe that the idea of critical pedagogy is not superseded; and in searching for solutions toward its renewed relevance, we agree with Henry Giroux (2002), who asserted that "we need to reject both neoliberal and orthodox leftist positions, which dismiss the state as merely a tool of repression, to find ways to use the state to challenge, block, and regulate the devastating effects of capitalism" (p. 1154). Giroux went on to claim that we are missing a language and movement that does not equate democracy with consumerism and market relations. It is extremely difficult today for both youth and adults to articulate their private concerns within a public discourse, because the private has become the only space where we can imagine a sense of hope or possibility. In such an atmosphere, capitalism's very fuel is consumerism, where prosperity and safety are addressed by consumption. The key here is to teach youth how to become "skilled citizen[s]" (Giroux, 2002, p. 1153) who can use critical thinking skills to understand that the principles of democracy should not be coupled with corporatizations of private and public life. It seems more realistic that solutions be pursued within the system we live in, using all avenues where critical identities are created.

Because critical pedagogy is concerned with the social embeddedness of education and its inevitably political character (Wardekker & Miedema, 1997), its commitment to social justice remains a valuable platform from which educators and practitioners

You might think much of this is a diatribe and not relevant to the research of the study. I leave it for you, though, to consider how the views and beliefs of researchers strongly influence what they do. In this article, the views are made explicit. In many other articles that you have read and will read, the views are not mentioned.

Does this seem strange to you? These writers adopted the critical pedagogical stance even though it was not the overt premise of the study in which they were involved.

I really like the concept that youth can be community assets rather than community problems.

can speak and act. At the end of the 20th century, Carlson and Apple (1998) addressed the importance and urgency of critical education in “unsettling times.” Post-9/11 United States presents such times again with national homogenization, political and ideological divisiveness, subversion of civil liberties, and military expansion and imperialism. Patriotism is measured by the level of consensus, in which “symbolic capital and political power reinforce each other through a public pedagogy produced by a concentrated media” (Giroux, 2004, p. 207), and it is not surprising that youth, and many adults as well, have difficulties in breaking from this dictum. Not immune to these cultural shifts, the American Association of University Professors (2003), representing academic establishments, has extensively addressed the pressure and scrutiny to defend academic freedom.

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In such a climate, here and abroad, we deem the framework of critical pedagogy and practice of action research as crucial components of a democratic educational system to penetrate and challenge systems of control. Despite the differences between various critical discourses and their often-complicated relations with critical pedagogy, at this historical moment—when debate *in and of itself* is threatened—the right for critical voices to safely and rigorously be heard must be defended. Not to conclude on a pessimistic note, we take with hope the words of Darder, Baltodano, and Torres (2003), who “in the light of a long-standing historical tradition of progressive educational efforts in the United States,” asserted that the “underlying commitment and intent of critical pedagogy will continue as long as there are those who are forced to exit the conditions of suffering and alienation, and those who refuse to accept such conditions as natural evolution of humankind” (p. 21).

Two collaborative projects we participated in resonate with the main ideas of critical pedagogy. The creators of the projects did not evoke the philosophy of critical pedagogy—at least its name was never mentioned; however, as participants in these projects, we came to realize that our mission had a lot in common with its principles. Our projects enacted the framework of critical pedagogy in our desire to educate youth to question the principles of social and political life and equip them with strategies to shape and change social, political, and economic constraints in their environment. Equally important, both projects understood youth as community assets rather than problems to be dealt with. The projects illustrate the difficulties of implementing this framework of what happens when researchers are faced with a “reality check.” Our two projects were designed to assist youth in developing their capacities to become more active social agents, and although the process was riddled with challenges, it was a worthwhile attempt to involve youth in social research and foster their awareness.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT OF YOUTH:
TWO CASES OF COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH

In this section, we describe the collaborative research process between a university research center and its community partners. At the time of the projects, we were both graduate research fellows at a university research center and involved with everything from the implementation of the collaboration idea to the final phase of writing a research report. We are White middle-class women closely related to the university and its culture; our community partners and students that participated in research reflected the urban milieu of racial and economical diversity. Although we participated in these projects independently, our roles were common: to teach teenagers how to conceive, develop, research, and report on important social issues for them and their communities. The nature of collaboration in the two projects reflected the principles on which our university center works: Although the university and community partners collaborate closely during all phases of the research process, there is a “division of tasks” approach that shifts the element of activity toward one side as research unfolds.

It is not until almost halfway through the article that you finally encounter a description of the actual program with kids. I know: this makes it seem like it is a case study. This is an example where the approach to research taken by authors is by no means pure.

The first case involved a university research center, Chicago schools, and the City Educational Institute (CEI).¹ Faculty members of the five Chicago schools implemented a 16-week Empowerment Workshop—developed by CEI and evaluated by a university research center—to bring service learning and leadership development into the educational experiences of school children. As community partners, CEI developed a course curriculum and a method of evaluation, whereas teachers implemented the curriculum and distributed evaluation tools. University researchers helped the community partners refine their evaluation instruments and served as support when the teachers experienced difficulties. The majority of students who participated in this program were Latinas and African American females, aged 13 to 14. Teachers used the workshop both in and out of the classroom setting. The workshop was designed to allow students to explore their own leadership potential, build positive relationships with their peers, develop leadership skills, explore and understand community issues and strategies for action, and ultimately design and implement a service project based on their interests. These interests included racism, disabilities, homelessness, and violence, to name a few.

The second case involved collaborative research with a university research center and the For Safer Neighborhoods (FSN) organization. FSN is an organization in Chicago that works with neighborhoods on issues such as affordable housing, civic engagement projects for youth, judicial reform, and neighborhood safety policy. Youth from FSN, a year earlier, had challenged a Chicago-based

antiloitering law, deeming it unconstitutional, and won. University researchers established a connection with FSN after learning about its affiliated youth group that had been active in Chicago political and civic issues. The funding for this project was part of a larger grant on youth civic engagement and hoped to address and challenge the notion that young people are detached from and disinterested in civic and political issues. With the promise of critical pedagogy in mind, this project had the potential to challenge the image of disengaged youth and illustrate the importance of action research. The goals of this project were to (a) involve youth in policy research by helping them identify and research issues salient to them and their neighborhoods and (b) teach youth how to work with their host organization—FSN—so that they could independently conduct policy research in their communities. However, although the researcher going into this project was “equipped” with the goals listed above, there was no “step-by-step” handbook on how to deal with the challenges this project faced. All the participants in this program were 15-year-old African American females.

PROJECT CHALLENGES

In this section, a brief page and a half describe the two projects. The authors concentrate on several challenges they faced. If you have been involved in projects in such situations you might not be surprised that one issue they address is recruitment and attendance. I am less clear on what they mean by “development, language, and method issues,” but I hope to understand more after I read this section.

Although fully aware of the interrelated nature of various stages of a research process and the issues emerging from it, the challenges discussed in this section are separated for analytical reasons. The three areas we discuss include recruitment and attendance issues, development, language and methods issues, and the university and funding agency–driven push for a “product.” We faced challenges on both projects within these areas.

Recruitment and Attendance/Rapport Issues

As members of the university research center, we assumed that youth participation would be plentiful, as had been demonstrated with their past activism. From the start of the FSN project, however, the university staff failed to interest more youth than it was hoped for. Many of the older youth who had worked on projects did not attend the first meeting. A group of 15 youth—mostly junior high school students—attended the first meeting. At this meeting, our primary goal was to “hook” them into the idea of the project. We brainstormed ideas for project topics and explained how the process of research worked. From the beginning, we explained that this project would be *their* project; we were there to work with them. However, at the next meeting, 3 girls showed up; we did not “sell” the idea as affectively [sic] as we had hoped. Although 3 young women eventually continued with the project, we failed to gain more

youth participants at our first meeting. Many of the young teens were new to community work and viewed these gatherings as purely social in nature. Had we established a stronger rapport by spending more time with the youth and by fostering activities that would help capture their interest, our group would have been larger. In addition, the civic engagement process would have fostered and supported the heightening of critical consciousness. In retrospect, it is very likely that the youth perceived our initial meeting as too academic: dry and structured. At the second meeting, researchers were able to form a close rapport with the teens, which was crucial to the sustainability of the project. We talked to them without interruption, unlike the first meeting, where distractions cost us the chance to gain interest and connect with youth on a personal level. At this meeting, the researchers brought in academic articles about gangs and violence. We discussed whether the articles represented their experiences at school (in many ways, yes) and what other topics were of concern to them. We met in different places for 6 months—often because of scheduling difficulties—which also contributed to the “unpredictability” of the project. However, spending more time with the participants at our university would have helped them gain better research skills on topics of their interest. One of the goals of the FSN project was for youth to acquire technical skills, such as computer research, but this did not crystallize because of the limited time of the project and the challenge of transporting the participants to other parts of Chicago.

On the CEI project, student participants for the Empowerment Workshop were recruited by their teachers, who clearly sent a message to the students that their participation was a desirable outcome. In this way, all the actors involved on the project were satisfied: The students made a good impression on their teachers, the teachers satisfied the test makers, and the university center had enough data to conduct data analysis and write a final report.

The question remains whether the approaches employed in these projects—both involving civic engagement—truly reflect the theory of PAR and critical pedagogy. Although the FSN project failed to recruit more participants, those who stayed involved expressed some level of action and it is hoped, developed an insight into how research can make a change in their community. The young women learned interviewing skills, interviewed each other on topics related to their neighborhoods, and were later involved in planning and hosting a small youth conference. The CEI research project, on the other hand, operated on a mass scale (more than 200 students participated), and students’ gains from the research were more in accord with the business-as-usual school praxis. Adults proposed and organized the workshop that they believed would be useful to students and by choosing a quantitative approach to evaluate the workshop, failed to engage students in a more meaningful and active way.

Having completed the workshop, during which they could exercise some sort of personal involvement and activity through dialogue and class exercises, the testing situation returned students back to passivity. Students could have written a newsletter, organized an exhibition in their schools, or produced a video record of their activities.

Instead, the community partners wanted the university center to evaluate the course impact in a traditional way, namely, through testing. As program evaluators, we did not have insight into instructional material, nor did we have an opportunity to observe students and teachers in the classroom. From the evaluators' position, what was actually happening in the classroom remained a "black box." The effectiveness of this workshop was understood strictly as a test score. This is not a critique of the community partners' decision but, rather, a reflection of how in a new era of accountability, educators are forcefully pushed into the single direction of pursuing and justifying research with quantifiable results.

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Another challenge they address is a drive toward the product.

The authors reflect on some weaknesses in this type of collaborative research.

Drive Toward the "Product"

Another constraint common for both projects was the drive to end with a "product." The fact that a research study is funded adds "a spin on the issues" (Cheek, 2000, p. 409). Receiving funds for the study is not a neutral act, it implies a certain relationship between the funder and researchers in terms of obligations, responsibilities, and expectations. In the FSN project, all our meetings needed to be accounted for with a finished result, such as a paper or a research piece. We were constantly cognizant of this requirement and wondered who should write these weekly pieces: Did the authorship belong to the university researchers only or should the youth have some impact on the shape and content of the texts? This constraint was compounded by the fact that the youth involved in the project had weak writing and researching skills. Although they were interested and eager to carry out interviews in their community and discuss the results, we, as university-trained researchers, had the impression that they enjoyed the meetings more for the social aspect than the strictly research-learning component. This experience pointed to the assumption that PAR often has an empowering effect on the participants. We forget, however, that participants may not share our assumptions. Because research within universities is a "product-oriented" process, we often tend to neglect the aspects of research that might seem successful to participants. In this case, it was more social gathering and doing activities different from everyday school tasks.

A related issue to a research "product" is that of offering financial rewards to participants. University researchers may view an intellectual discovery or published article as an intrinsic reward in

itself, but for the youth on the FSN project, their highly anticipated reward would come in the form of Old Navy clothing gift certificates. However, a university research center could not offer them this prize for participating and instead, offered coupons for either a grocery store or a bookstore. The youth reluctantly took the coupons for a grocery store, deemed by the FSN project funders as a “reasonable expenditure.” This situation illustrates yet another reality check in the work of community-university researchers: differing notions of participation and rewards within a capitalistic economic system. What represented a reward for the university center staff meant little to the participants.

The issue of rewards for earning grades is very much in the news as of this writing in 2009.

Are you surprised that the authors take such a strong position here?

Regardless of how much students are aware of societal injustices and inequalities, which they themselves experience on an everyday basis, these young women inevitably contribute to and are a part of this exploitive process. Growing up in capitalism socializes young people to desire and enjoy the products of capitalist exploitation, so the wish of our participants to be rewarded with Old Navy clothes instead of books or social research itself is not surprising. After all,

exploitation through the capitalist marketplace has been so naturalized and the pauperization of the state so dehistoricized and depoliticized that we have learned to accept a certain amount of exploitation and . . . feel that it is an inevitable part of living in a developed capitalist democracy. (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2001a, p. 6)

The perceived failure of critical pedagogy to engage more educators in applying its principles to their teaching and research practices lies partly in this disconnect between echoing socialist and communist icons and attempting to make them attractive to youth in today’s consumerist United States. Regardless of all the injustices and inhumanities that capitalism (Whose capitalism?) brings to human lives, it is questionable whether its alternative lies in socialism (Whose socialism?) and even more, whether that alternative resonates with the lives of North American youth. Various and complex types of capitalism exist (Esping-Andersen, 1990), which makes a valid debate about whether capitalism is necessarily evil and if so, whether the idea of its abolishment is empirically unrealistic.

Do you think the authors were naïve to think the students would write the project results? And, if they attempted to write them, do you think the authors and university community would have accepted the work? Most often in any kind of qualitative research, those being studied have little voice in what is said about them. Of course, some authors use quotations from participants, but do not put them in the role of co-researchers or coauthors.

In the completion of the projects, our university center’s staff took control of the research by being the sole author of the research reports. It seems that this role was expected and welcomed by the community partners, because the writing phase may be seen as less “active,” more analytical and, therefore, less interesting. The underlying message from the community partners was “After all, you are trained to write, and we’ll gladly let you do it.” The question, then, is, what should be the research product and who owns it?

McTaggart’s (1997) writings bridge the gap in our dilemmas of full collaboration and of research report ownership. He differentiated

“authentic participation” from “mere involvement.” Although the former implies ownership, or “responsible agency in the production of knowledge and improvement of practice” (McTaggart, 1997, p. 28), the latter denotes a mere co-option and further exploitation of people for the sake of others. McTaggart argued that this is a common practice in community programs that are proclaimed as collaborative but instead, are just another oppressive implementation of some policy. According to Tandon (as quoted in McTaggart, 1997, p. 29), characteristics of authentic collaboration are

- people’s role in setting the agenda of inquiry;
- people’s participation in the data collection and analysis; and
- people’s control of the use of outcomes and the whole process.

Our research experiences do not fit neatly into these determinants. Neither the institutions nor the agencies outside the university were the ultimate research product owners; nor was the university research center just another oppressive body in knowledge production. Again, our experiences are more a reflection of a “task division-of-labor” approach, where community partners proposed the research agenda with minimal interference by the university and where the university was responsible for analyzing the results (especially if the analysis requires knowledge of statistical package) and writing the report. The realization of the research agenda itself fell in the middle: What was actually happening in the classroom or within the youth group was a true collaboration. We fully agree with Kemmis and McTaggart’s (2000) assertion that in most action and collaborative research, methodological rigor is exchanged for answering the question whether the data collected make sense to participants in their, not our, context. PAR sometimes “sacrifices methodological sophistication in order to generate timely evidence that can be used and further developed in a real-time process of transformation (of practices, practitioners, and practice settings)” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000, p. 591). In our case, a trade-off between technical and “reality check” issues for the purpose of solving people’s real problems was a worthwhile experience.

Do you think this compromise is reasonable?

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

When the two university-community collaborative research projects we participated in were designed, their goals were clear: to include youth in social research. It was believed that participation in the research process could benefit youth in raising their awareness of

social issues and prompt them to take action in their communities. Both projects were concerned with students' development of critical thinking on the issues of social justice and equality and their empowerment that would crystallize in taking action. We also have realized that the opportunity to conduct collaborative research with the school children was a rarity for us and that fact also influenced our choice to place a theoretical framework of critical pedagogy within an examination of the research process and our role in it.

Here the researchers recognize a disconnect between what was planned and what actually happened.

Despite the well-defined goals, the research process itself became “muddied” as a result of various dynamics that different people brought to the research table. Thus, our initial goal was to establish a dialogue across class and race. The university researchers failed to attract more youth to one of the projects; however, close rapport with those who stayed was developed. After the bumpy start and searching for language that could bridge the gap across age, social status, and race, we developed a mutual and friendly bond that made our time spent together worthwhile.

Do you accept the statement that “their impression” proves that the students were more cognizant? Most researchers would want better evidence than that.

The involvement in collaborative research with youth led us to question whether we managed to provide an authentic voice for the youth, and whether our students made a link between the personal and political. Our impression is that students were conscious about their race, class, and gender and that their participation in the research process made them even more cognizant. But they felt inapt (sic) to take action, at least on the scale that was suggested during the research. It seems that the adults, who designed and implemented the ideas of what it means to feel empowered and confident to take social action, did not take enough into account the difficulties that 13- and 14-year-olds might experience when dealing with abstract ideas of difference and social change. It is not that students did not have a chance to link their everyday life with broader societal forces; rather, they missed the opportunity to do something in their communities that was meaningful for them, not the adults.

It seems then that the authority of adult figures—equally university researchers, school teachers, and community partners—was not decentered (Trent, 2003), in the sense that we did not question our pedagogical authority enough during the research process itself. That realization came later, once the research reports were filed in the cabinets of the university center and community organizations. This was especially prominent in the Empowerment Workshop project, where the opportunity for the students to express further involvement ended with the completion of the workshop. Given that a chosen method for the workshop evaluation was survey, it asked the students to merely express their level of agreement or disagreement with the statement adults constructed. It is not a surprise that the results were indiscriminative and uniformly positive. Accustomed to testing, students knew what was expected from them.

The power imbalance between students and adults was mirrored by the power imbalance between university researchers and community partners. Both projects reflected a task division-of-labor approach to collaborative research, where university researchers or agencies' research associates still had more power in the process—by having the power to make important decisions—than those who should feel empowered the most: the students.

Although we faced methodological and theoretical challenges that transformed and complicated the research, findings, and reports in unexpected ways, there are a number of important lessons we learned from our experiences. We encourage researchers involved in community-university collaborative research to heed these lessons on future projects so that the process is feasible, equitable, and productive. We offer the following suggestions for future research:

- Find a congruence between the developmental stage of the students and the research goals. Researchers should be particularly sensitive to language and youth culture. We can unintentionally alienate youth by using language that is appropriate in the university setting but not in the social environment of our participants. As our experiences have taught us, this is especially pertinent in working with nondominant and underrepresented groups, where researchers must confront their own power, both as usually White, middle-class, educated persons and institutionally as representatives from university settings. Terms such as *hegemony*, *social construction of race*, or *gender inequality* are all a part of everyday vocabulary within a university. The real challenge is to translate these abstractions and connect them with the everyday experiences of youth so that they can make sense out of them and realize how these abstractions shape their lives.
- Find appropriate ways to research the problems that are important to youth. Sometimes university researchers assume agency where there is none, such as when middle school children are expected to critically examine social issues and independently take action in their communities. Youth are rarely, if ever, equipped with money, institutional power, and formal connections in their neighborhoods that would assist them in solving major problems. This is not a claim that such projects should be abandoned completely but, instead, is a cautious note for those in collaborative research to understand and adapt to youth's ability to participate in research in a meaningful way. Otherwise, we are in danger of romanticizing collaborative research (Zygouris-Coe et al., 2001) and overlooking the instances where youth's abilities can be better used. Instead of expecting 14-year-olds to grapple with complex social issues on a grand scale—both abstract and practical—it is more useful to focus on smaller projects that would revolve around students' own classrooms, streets, and neighborhood blocks. Although the research topic might appear trivial to adults, it could be meaningful to

teenagers. It is important that in working toward social justice, educators find a way to address the issues of race, power, and ideology that reflect the age and interest of the participants. Otherwise, the impression that youth are going to form about social research will reflect the very attributes we are fighting to shed: a highly abstract, ponderous, and technical endeavor that bears no meaning to youth's lives.

- Invest more time and organize more meetings with participants to form a strong rapport. To achieve true collaboration, it is crucial to establish connections with organizations that have the capacity to be fully involved in all the phases of research. In addition to fostering a close and mutual relationship between the university and organization, participants should gather frequently at convenient and comfortable locations, chosen by all who attend. Although it might sound obvious, it is crucial to plan ahead to prevent transportation and meeting place problems. We experienced firsthand these constraints that seriously limited full collaboration. When these problems appeared, it looked only “natural” for the university staff to take responsibility in shaping and redirecting the project the way we thought appropriate. Only in the process of dedicated collaboration can the community partner truly challenge the dominant role of university-trained researchers.
- We join with the researchers who critically address this era of “accountability” in which we live (De Lissovoy & McLaren, 2003; Eisenhart & Towne, 2003; Lincoln & Cannella, 2004). As Lincoln and Cannella (2004) noted, “The language of education has shifted from a discourse of equality of opportunity to one of blame and punishment of those who do not perform appropriately” (p. 9). Randomized clinical trials, testing, and experiments are proclaimed scientific, leaving out contextually rich research. As critics have pointed out, this trend of being academically accountable has turned the process of learning into a cutthroat competitive capitalistic marketplace, pitting school districts and all those involved against each other. Gaining knowledge should remain inherently good, as it stands, and various strands within critical pedagogy can help. Raising the issue of how knowledge becomes marketed should be a part of future research with youth so that youth can become truly engaged in challenging and changing the status quo.

Source: Miskovic, M., & Hoop, K. (2006). Action research meets critical pedagogy: Theory, practice, and reflection. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(2), 269–291. Used with permission from SAGE.

Summary and Review

This article is quite different from any you have read earlier in this book. It begins with a strong review of the issues regarding action research, participatory research, and critical

pedagogy. The authors state their position quite clearly and use related literature to support their viewpoint. It does not include elements you expect to find in a research article. Information on the type of data they actually collected and how they analyzed it are omitted. It strongly reflects their own viewpoint about power, politics, and global issues of democracy, socialism, and communism. I included it so you can see how some are moved with passion to write about their studies.

Finally, if you return to the four questions you can see the extent to which this article was successful. This is a very interesting example of an action research study. It is written with passion. However, the authors do not give you any details about the process of conducting a participatory action research study. Overall, I found this article very engaging.

- Does it provide new information and insights related to the topic?
- Is it engaging and written in a clear manner?
- Does it integrate ideas from critical pedagogy with participatory action research?
- Do the positive aspects of the article outweigh the potential drawbacks?

The next article is also nontraditional. In fact, it is written as a play. Because I do not want to interrupt the flow of the play, I have included only a few comments in the text. You will see my thoughts at the end.

Article 5.2. Recipe or Performing Art? Challenging Conventions for Writing Action Research Theses (2006)

Kath Fisher and Renata Phelps

My Expectations

I am not really sure I know what to expect when I read an article written in a nontraditional manner such as a play or a poem. Several questions concern me. If the authors chose this format in order to engage the audience, do I find it effective? I also want to know to what extent the information is fact or fiction. I recall that Watts wrote about literary devices when he commented on case study. I also want to know what type of action research was done. How does it compare with the article I just read regarding participatory action research? Do I think the work is somehow “lesser” because it doesn’t follow a usual style? Or perhaps I think it might be more successful. I also wonder whether my institution would be sufficiently open to permit a piece of written scholarship in this form and also one that is collaborative. All these ideas run through my mind before I begin to read the play.

ABSTRACT

This article explores the tensions and incongruities between conventional thesis presentation and the principles of action research. Through the experiences of the authors' alternative approaches to thesis structure are proposed which are argued to be more congruent with the epistemological, methodological and ethical aspects of action research. Consistent with our arguments, the article is presented as a play. Act I considers the tensions facing research students wishing to write up their action research in the context of conventional thesis writing requirements; Act II consists of four "scenes," each of which illustrates a key learning arising from our own stories: writing in the researcher as central to the research; staying true to the unfolding research story; using metaphor; and finally, weaving literature throughout the thesis. Act III considers the challenges of examination in the face of breaking with tradition. We conclude with a "curtain call" from the narrator that offers a reflexive engagement with the main themes of the article.

This abstract says it so well. You can see how the authors tried to deal with traditional requirements of presenting research. I suspect Miskovic and Hoop faced similar challenges when writing up their research in the Chicago schools.

What do you think of when you hear the term "action research"? How important is the term "participatory"? Are you surprised that they state, "there is no single way of doing action research"? By now, you should be familiar with that mantra. It seems as though there is variation within research approaches just as there is between research approaches. The point that Fisher and Phelps make is that action research could range from a technical focus on organizational change to emancipatory processes that look at radical social changes in which participants actually become co-researchers. These two ends of the spectrum are discussed later in the paper by one of the protagonists.

INTRODUCTION

As action research and practitioner-based inquiry is increasingly adopted as a basis of doctoral study, issues arise for students, supervisors and examiners alike as to what it means to produce and judge an action research thesis in relation to traditional thesis presentation criteria (Winter, Griffiths & Green, 2000). Indeed, the question of what constitutes "quality" action research has resulted in important paradigmatic debates across the humanities and social science disciplines, debates that problematize the nature of "knowledge" and question the need for uniform criteria of validity (Bradbury & Reason, 2001; Winter et al., 2000). Furthermore, "one of the great problems with all qualitative research is the constant need to seek its justification within someone else's language game and in relation to someone else's definition of suitable criteria" (Green, cited in Winter et al., 2000, p. 30).

The quality of PhD or Masters level research is ultimately judged by the dissertation or thesis; the primary mode of exposition, even in the creative arts. It is this writing task that is our focus in this article. Most research candidates seek advice in relation to this task, to ensure they are meeting the all-important examination requirements.

Have you come across the term “performing art” related to research? You will not find many references to it, I am sure.

I want you to keep your minds open as you think about presenting information in this manner. I recognize it is not traditional. As you read, you might ask yourself these questions: Does it engage the audience? Does it get the message across? What makes this type of writing so interesting is that there is no recipe to follow. These authors are breaking out of the tradition and need to find their own way.

Traditional approaches to structuring theses, especially in the sciences and social sciences, have resulted in the familiar “five-chapter model,” comprising introduction, literature review, methodology, analysis and conclusions. To borrow Bob Dick’s (2002) terminology, this is writing by “recipe” and, as a rule, supervisors will be anxious to ensure their students are following accepted approaches to reduce the risk of alienating examiners. But what of the student who has undertaken action research? Do these conventions apply? Can their less conventional research process be made to “fit” the five-chapter recipe and still be true to its practice? Do they take an unacceptable risk by straying outside the mainstream? Or can they write their thesis more in keeping with the “performing art” that is action research (Dick, 2002)?

In this article we contemplate these questions through the stories of our own experiences as doctoral action researchers. We present some insights which may be of interest to other students undertaking action research who are considering challenging the conventions of the academy. As academics now supervising students undertaking action research and remaining committed to improving our own and our students’ research and writing practice, we propose that these insights might also contribute to the ongoing debate about the quality, authenticity and integrity of action research.

In keeping with the spirit of viewing research (and in our case, writing) as performing art rather than recipe, we have adopted the metaphor of a play to structure our article, playing with the notion of presenting research as a form of performance text. We see our approach in this article as an example of “presentational knowing” (Heron, 1996; Heron & Reason, 2001), which, while rarely seen in academic journal writing, allows the text to “speak out” and challenge convention. A good performance text “must be more than cathartic, it must be political, moving people to action and reflection” (Denzin, 2000, p. 905). It is our hope that our “performance” produces this effect through a deeper and more active reflective engagement with our audience than a more conventional exposition may offer.

A Tale of Two Theses (A play in three acts)

*Prologue: In Which the Audience Is Revealed
and We Meet the Main Characters*

A single spotlight shines on the middle of the closed curtain as the narrator, a figure in top hat and tails, emerges onto the stage.

NARRATOR: Ladies and gentlemen, we invite you to take your seats as we prepare to take you on a journey of intrigue and adventure—some might even say foolishness! Let me assure you, this is not a voyage for the fainthearted. Before we get under way, though, how many of you here tonight are research candidates? . . .

Wonderful! We think there might be some important lessons for you here, if not cautionary tales. What about students doing action research? . . . Excellent! You may find that some of the dilemmas you are facing in the writing of your thesis will be echoed in the stories you hear tonight. Any supervisors in the audience? . . . Aha! If you have been challenged to consider how your students might best structure their action research theses, then this play may provide some inspiration and, perhaps, reassurance.

Now, I'm wondering if there mightn't be an examiner or two out there as well? . . . It's great to see you here! Action research candidates will no doubt be pleased to know that you are interested in being challenged regarding the conventions of thesis presentation. Finally, there might be some action research practitioners out there who are reporting on their research outside the formal academic examination process . . . would you raise your hands? Ah, good. You are most welcome. While this play is more about writing theses than research reports, I'm sure you will find relevance to your own writing context.

Some of you will be fortunate enough to be studying and researching from innovative academic faculties with strong traditions of participatory inquiry and action research. Such places may well already promote creativity and breaking with convention in theses presentation. For you, some of the messages in this play may not be all that new, however, we are glad to have you here with us, and we welcome your participation. I suspect, however, that a good proportion of you will be from contexts where action research is little understood or reluctantly tolerated. We hope our play will offer some alternative strategies as you embark on the significant undertaking of writing your thesis.

In this play we will not be reiterating the foundational tenets of action research, as we are assuming that you have come here tonight with some background already in this area. In any case, action research is discussed extensively in various seminal and current works (for instance, Altrichter, Kemmis, McTaggart & Zuber-Skerritt, 1991; Carr & Kemmis, 1990; Grundy, 1982; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Passfield, 2001; Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Wadsworth, 1998; Zuber-Skerritt, 1996). In producing this play we do acknowledge that there are a range of approaches to action research, from the more technical focus on organizational or educational change (where the researcher is "expert") to emancipatory and participatory processes that aim to engender radical social change, and where all participants are equal as co-researchers. The characters who will be performing here for you tonight each have their own understanding of action research practice and appreciate that there is no one "correct way" to do action research.

The time has now come to introduce the characters and allow them to speak for themselves. The two protagonists in this play are researchers who found that conventional social science thesis

presentation constrained the way they wanted to present the complex and non-linear nature of their research. Our protagonists, MCR and CRK, are both higher-education teachers who conducted their (quite different) research projects in the course of their professional work. They will now introduce themselves, describing their research projects and their values and perspectives on action research. Our first is Dr. MCR, currently a teacher of learning technologies to pre-service teachers:

MCR: Thank you and good evening to you all. My thesis is the story of an action research initiative underpinned by my strong belief in the importance of approaches to computer education which foster lifelong computer learning. In my thesis I trace the journey of a reflexive process of change and iterative development in the teaching of an information computer technology (ICT) unit to pre-service teacher education students. Over a period of three years I pursued a central research question, namely: “How can I develop my teaching practice to better facilitate the development of capable computer users?” My research explored the distinction between a “competent” and a “capable” computer user and trialled a range of teaching and learning approaches to facilitate the development of capable computer users (Phelps, 2002; Phelps & Ellis, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c). From the research I developed a metacognitive approach to computer education; an approach which is founded on the premise that adoption of ICT is influenced by an individual’s attitudes, beliefs, motivation, confidence and learning strategies and which promotes learners’ active engagement in directing the learning process.

In my approach to action research, I concur with Bob Dick (2002) who refers to action research as “meta-methodology.” Like Lau (1999, p. 2), I equate doing action research with a “commitment to an underlying philosophy of social science” and deeply relate to the view of action research as a “living practice” (Carson, 1997). While my research certainly represented a process of critiquing, informing and developing my own teaching practice (the “first person” focus), it also represented a significant opportunity for students to self-examine and redefine their relationships with technology (the “second person” focus). A “third person” focus inevitably emerged as we collectively challenged the traditions of directive-style computer training, and ultimately provided a more complex understanding of the computer-learning context.

While my unconventional writing approach was somewhat challenging to my supervisors, they were willing to support it given my fairly persuasive justification of the approach in the introduction to my thesis.

NARRATOR: Our second main character is Dr. CRK, who currently supervises and mentors postgraduate students within the same institution as MCR.

CRK: Thank you—and great to see such an enthusiastic audience here tonight. My PhD explored how economics could be taught

within an emancipatory framework to students in two different institutions—those studying welfare at TAFE (Technical and Further Education) and those undertaking social science at university. The TAFE students became collaborators with me (the “second person” focus of the research) in developing an empowering curriculum that demystified conventional economics and introduced students to a range of alternative economic theories. The process of critical reflection emerged as a key research interest for me, which I explored in detail with the university students who were encouraged to reflect critically on how economics impacted on their lives as well as on the wider society and ecological systems (the “third person” focus). One of the outcomes of my personal reflection was to critically examine the role of activism in the face of globalization and how I personally constructed my own activism (my “first person” work), drawing on critiques of critical social science put forward by postmodern writers (Fisher, 2000, 2003a, 2003b).

My philosophy in relation to action research is located in the emancipatory and critical tradition. In my view, critical action research involves a commitment to political action. I concur with Kemmis (Kemmis, 1996; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000) that a criterion of “success” of an action research process is the politicization of the participants. Thus I perceive the role of the action researcher as an activist who must be critically reflective of her own activist position, being careful not to impose her own “liberatory” agenda (Lather, 1991) on those with whom she researches and works.

I undertook my research in a university department which supported the paradigm of “action inquiry,” exemplified in the work of Reason (1988), Reason & Bradbury (2001) and Torbert (1991). My supervisor supported unconventional thesis presentation, particularly emphasising the importance of the subjective presence of the researcher.

The characters and the narrator leave the stage.

–Curtain–

Act I: In Which the Narrator and Protagonists Set the Scene and Describe the “Existential Choices” Faced by Action Research Candidates

As the curtain rises, the audience sees a set on two levels. Towering over the stage, but in the background, is a series of five large symmetrical grey blocks lined up in a row. In the foreground, and at stage level, is a colourful montage of moving and interacting spirals. The narrator walks on, gazing up at the towers and moving in and out of the spirals. MCR and CRK follow, taking up their positions on the opposite side of the stage.

NARRATOR: This is a play about challenging orthodoxy; in particular the orthodoxy of writing up research. Many of you will have

consulted, at some stage, the wealth of literature available for research students on how to write a thesis (for example, Rudestam & Newton, 1992; Van Wagenen, 1991). Such “self-help” manuals generally offer what has come to be an accepted approach to writing a thesis; the standard, formulaic “five-chapter” structure—introduction, literature review, methodology, analysis of data, and conclusions and implementations, followed by the bibliography and appendices. While this model undoubtedly provides a valuable resource for post-graduate students learning the research writing process, it tends to be considered by novice researchers as the *only* approach to thesis writing.

But what if the straight-edged, linear blocks of orthodoxy restrict and impair the authenticity and integrity of a research process that is dynamic, non-linear and emergent? How does the PhD student doing action research proceed? Although alternative approaches have been considered by some researchers (for example, Creswell, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Koro-Ljungberg, 2004), candidates submitting the culmination of several years’ research for examination by an unknown academic often consider it “safer” to follow established convention. Supervisors, who are likely to have structured their own theses in the conventional way, may feel hesitant in recommending or supporting alternative approaches. Indeed, some action research candidates have run afoul of the examination process (Hughes, Denley & Whitehead, 1998), and one of our main characters, CRK, had a challenging experience of examination in this regard, as we shall see in Act III. Our focus tonight is to present the story of how our two researchers tackled the challenge of presenting action-based research in the context of a still-conservative academy.

MCR: When I was seeking guidance in structuring my PhD, I found little had been written on how to present action research theses. Those papers that did consider it tended to argue that action research be treated like any other methodology and accommodated within conventional structures and university presentation guidelines (Zuber-Skerritt & Perry, 2002). Perry (1994), for instance, noted that sticking with the five-chapter model can allay concerns regarding the “messy” and “inconclusive” impression provided by action research and he recommended including reflections on the action research study in the body and restricting discussion of practical and experiential aspects of the research to appendices.

Within my institution, action research had a strong profile, however, the conventional thesis structure had been widely adopted by action researchers and adherence to convention seemed to be preferred by my own and other action research candidates’ supervisors.

CRK: That could be because much action research within our institution was predominantly focused on organizational change, and was technical rather than emancipatory.

MCR: You could be right, CRK. I did find some papers presenting an alternative perspective. Bob Dick (1993, 2000, 2002), for instance, notes that universities often structure higher degrees on the assumption that “good” research is “theory-driven” rather than “data-driven.” Acknowledging that some examiners “may be surprised by data-driven research because it does not fit their notion of legitimate higher degree research” (Dick, 2002, p. 160), he provides justification and motivation for action researchers to be creative, arguing that conventional thesis structures do not do justice to action research. Bob’s articulation of the “existential choice” that needs to be made by research candidates left a particularly strong impression on me:

“Do you want to be an apprentice who will learn thoroughly, from your supervisor, committee and literature, a particular approach to research? That is, will your learning be primarily propositional? At the conclusion of such a research program you can expect to know how to do one form of research. To overstate the situation, this is research by recipe. Or do you expect to engage in research with whatever resources and understandings you can bring to bear, learning from your experiences? That is, will your learning be primarily through questioning inquiry, with supervisor and committee functioning as mentors rather than as teachers? Such an approach will engage you in examining your assumptions about the nature of knowledge and of methodologies. This is research as performing art” (Dick, 2002, pp. 161–162).

CRK: This is certainly a pertinent quote for our purposes, but I wouldn’t want to give the impression that research or even thesis writing falls neatly into one of these two categories. The “academic norm” for research reports is only one possible format and conventions and expectations regarding writing structure have been, and are, continually changing (Winter, 1989). Since action research emerges from a different context and different relationships (collaborative and action-oriented rather than authoritative and observation-oriented), Winter argues that there is good cause for reports of action research also to be different. He proposes two specific variations: a “case study” of the process of the work, in narrative form; and a “plural text” where the voice of a single author is partially replaced by an interplay between the voices of participants in the research. Winter goes further by stating that some stylistic features of academic writing can be seen to be “inappropriate” for action research, particularly where style, tone and vocabulary express an “expert” role or a withdrawal from personal involvement or sustained abstraction from concrete detail.

MCR: Like Winter (1989) I would argue that the ideological aspects of action research cannot be separated from the perceived “necessities” of thesis structure and presentation. To do so would undermine the very foundations of action research and hence the

integrity of the thesis which depicts and conveys the research. If action research is truly seen by the researcher as a “living practice” (Carson, 1997) then the life and practice of the research cannot, and should not, simply be “appendicized.”

NARRATOR: This sets the scene for our play. Let’s watch while our protagonists tell their stories of how they attempted to write their theses more in keeping with the moving montage of cycles and spirals than the fixed and immovable blocks of convention.

—Curtain—

Act II: Scene 1: In Which the Writer/Researcher Takes Centre Stage

The curtain rises to the same backdrop as in Act I, but in the front of the stage MCR and CRK, dressed in plain black, are seated on a comfortable garden seat that overlooks a pond reflecting the surrounding trees and sky. The narrator stands to one side of the stage, in front of the curtain.

CRK: One of the conventions of academic thesis writing that has come under sustained challenge from a number of disciplines is the use of the third person, often in passive voice, which renders the researcher invisible, giving the impression of an “objective,” dispassionate stance. The use of a first person active voice in research presentation is now supported by ample precedent and theoretical debate (Onn, 1998), and the contribution of postpositivist and post-structuralist analysis, particularly feminist epistemology, has meant that the “objective” researcher has been revealed to be a myth (Alcott & Potter, 1993; Guba, 1990; Lather, 1991; Reason, 1988; Schwandt, 1990).

In action research the researcher is also “the researched” (Wadsworth, 1998). This requires the researcher to account for the way in which the research both shapes and is shaped by them, not just because they conduct it, but because they *are* it (Sumara & Carson, 1997). Epistemologically it is simply not consistent to write a text which does not bear the traces of its author (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000). How did you confront this challenge, MCR?

MCR: I found it quite artificial to separate my voice as writer and researcher from the action research process and the findings. The centrality of reflection itself made this separation impossible. While some action researchers revert to the use of third person in some chapters, such as the introduction or conclusions, I maintained first person throughout. I’ll read from my thesis conclusion to illustrate:

“For me, as teacher, the research has evoked significant growth. Aside from the tangible changes in teaching approach . . . a number of more subtle changes have occurred. The research has necessitated my conscious ‘letting go’ of teacher control and centrality in the learning

process . . . to step back and recognise the importance of explicitly acknowledging the breadth of authentic support structures which are important for lifelong and non-institutionally-based learning and fostering students' help-seeking strategies."

CRK: I also made my presence as researcher explicit from the outset of my thesis. As action research (and, indeed, any research) is inevitably formed and influenced by the researcher's values, attitudes and beliefs, I saw it as important to articulate these. After all, situations do not just happen, they are historically and temporally directed by the intentionality of the participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 417). In the second chapter of my thesis, titled "Positioning the researcher: The constructing of an activist identity," I made my subjective position explicit and articulated the influences that led to my chosen research:

"Embarking on research within the paradigm of humanistic inquiry in which social ecology is embedded meant that from the outset I was required to reflect on personal sources of my passion for my chosen research area. This process itself was revealing as it allowed me to take a particular perspective on my life and identify a "path" that had led me to my (activist) interest in demystifying economics and making a difference in the world. . . . This chapter tracks the sources of my framing of such an activist intention, identifying major family and cultural influences as well as the influence of discourses of adult education, co-counselling, living on an intentional community and Heart Politics."

Such exploration would seem to be an essential aspect of reflexivity (Gergen & Gergen, 2000), as the researcher/writer exposes their own historical and geographical situation, their personal investment in the research and the biases they bring to the project.

MCR: Yes, and I'm sure you'd agree that action research theses can successfully draw on the research traditions of personal narrative (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) and self-research (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001), within which subjectivity is "the basis of researchers making a distinctive contribution, one that results from the unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data they have collected" (Peshkin, 1988, p. 18). In fact, personal narrative can enhance the relevance and impact of the research, allowing readers "to feel the moral dilemmas, think with our story instead of about it, join actively in the decision points . . . and consider how their own lives can be made a story worth telling" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000: 735).

CRK: This idea of using reflexivity within personal narrative is illustrated in this excerpt from the second chapter from my thesis:

"When I reflect on that time in my life [dropping out of a prestigious coursework Masters of Economics at the age of 24], it is clear to me now that I was subjected first-hand to the very same alienating

experience of that dehumanised, mechanistic, value-absent ideology that has provided the core motivation for this thesis. Despite my inexperience, my lack of training in critical analysis, my devotion to fulfilling my father's (and others') expectations, I wonder if at some level I recognised that there was something seriously wrong with a social science that seemed so devoid of humanity, spirit, ethics and justice."

MCR: I too defined my position as both researcher and teacher up front in my introduction, and made my values and beliefs very explicit. This helped set the tone of reflexivity throughout my thesis:

"In my approach to both my research and my teaching I firmly identify as a constructivist. I believe that we can only 'know' through interaction with the world. . . . I have a strong passion for learning and change. I tend to challenge existing practices and to strive constantly towards improvement. . . . I view our social existence in the world as highly complex and . . . challenge the capacity of traditional research to adequately address many social problems."

I also structured reflexivity into my thesis through the device of a brief section at the end of each chapter titled "Stepping back and looking forward" which enabled me to reflect on the chapter and outline how this drove the research forward into the following research cycle.

CRK: I presented my iterative reflexive process through the use of different "voices," similar to Winter's (1989) concept of the "plural text," as explained in the following extract from Chapter 6 of my thesis:

"The three voices are: first, a relatively 'neutral' reporting voice that relays the 'facts' of what happened; second, the 'reflective practitioner,' the voice I used in conversation with the students demonstrating my reflective practice at the time, informed by the requirements of critical action research and supported by a critical community of peers; and the third voice, the 'critical reflector,' offers a 'commentary' on the sometimes naïve voice of the reflective practitioner from a vantage point that names the assumptions made and reflects on some of the silences and absences in the narrative."

NARRATOR: This connection between reflexivity and narrative leads us into the next scene, which highlights the importance of representing the unfolding research story within the writing process.

—Curtain—

Scene 2: In Which the Thesis Stays True to the Narrative

The curtain rises. The backdrop of grey blocks and garden seat remain, but the reflective pond has been replaced by a semi-circle of listeners seated on the ground at the feet of the characters.

NARRATOR: All research is a form of storytelling (House, 1994), although traditionally researchers shy away from using the term “story” given its connotations of unreliability or lack of rigour. Let us see what our protagonists have to say on this subject.

CRK: I would argue that there is no more appropriate approach to understanding action research than to see it as an unfolding narrative. An action research endeavour *is* the story of individual and/or group change: change in practices, beliefs and assumptions. Personal narrative, and the notion of research as story repositions the reader as an active and vicarious co-participant in the research (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

MCR: Yes, I agree. Winter et al. (2000, p. 36) has, in fact, stated that one of the important criteria for a “quality” PhD is to “tell a compelling story.”

CRK: I would suggest that documenting the cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting should be done iteratively since each cycle of the research is only understandable in terms of the systematic and self-critical learning gained through previous cycles.

MCR: Wanting to remain true to the story of my research, I presented the chapters of my thesis in the same chronological order as the research itself. I did not have separate chapters covering the literature review, the methodology or the data analysis. Instead I allowed the research process to unfold for the reader, reinforcing the notion of research as personal, professional, methodological and theoretical “journey.” What was your experience, CRK?

CRK: I also utilized a chronological format, finding that without staying true to the changes that I experienced during the research process, I could not demonstrate the emergent nature of that process, which cycle after cycle of reflection produced. I reflected at the conclusion of my thesis:

“The very nature of action research is an unfolding and emergent process, inevitably because of the reflection that is embedded within it. The thesis is therefore framed in a way that mirrors the unfolding research journey. . . . Reflection has permeated every stage and has emerged as a primary focus of the research itself. It seems to me that action research itself invites this—what emerges is what needs to be researched. In a way, this reflects a direct antidote to positivism and its ontology of prediction and control. Engaging the spirit of action research almost demands a letting go of having things go a particular way.”

MCR: I believe that this narrative approach also supports validity since it consciously works against camouflaging or failing to acknowledge pragmatic realities, iterative learning and the inevitable weaknesses that frequently remain unacknowledged in traditional research presentation. In my research I explicitly acknowledged that action research represents a journey down many roads, some of which inevitably prove to be dead ends. Sometimes

these mistaken paths have been taken for justifiable reasons, while others may be traversed through simple error or mistaken assumptions and beliefs.

CRK: I agree. In conventional research there is a culture of leaving these dead ends unacknowledged—we don't hear about the mistakes that often lead to significant rethinking or insight. In action research, however, these apparent "dead ends" are a critical part of the learning, change and theory development process. As highlighted in Scene 1, reflexivity permits us to reveal such weaknesses or "untruths" and requires us to "own up" to our responsibility in the knowledge construction process (Hall, 1996). Mellor (2001), for instance, refers to his "messy project" (p. 465) as an "honesty trail" (p. 479).

MCR: So for us, a chronological approach to thesis presentation supports the researcher's acknowledgment of this iterative and unfolding learning process and represents a more rigorous and truthful presentation of how the research proceeds.

NARRATOR: This reference to research as a journey is an example of how metaphor can be used productively and imaginatively to enhance understanding. This leads us nicely into the next scene.

—Curtain—

Scene 3: In Which Metaphor Dresses Up the Thesis

The scene is identical, but the characters have changed from their plain clothes into travellers' costumes, complete with suitcases, cameras, binoculars, maps, guidebooks, hats and walking boots.

NARRATOR: As Mason Cooley once said "Clothes make a statement. Costumes tell a story" (Cooley, 1993). The use of metaphors in a thesis is like the wearing of costumes in a play—they bring meaning to the story, meaning that is generated through the image with more efficiency than the literal relaying of information.

CRK: Various writers have explored the use of metaphor and its integral role in the generation of meaning and the construction of social and political reality (for instance, Hovelynck, 1998; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Ortony, 1979; Taylor, 1984). In fact, metaphors are among our principal vehicles for understanding, permeating communication and perception at individual, cultural and societal levels (Mignot, 2000). Yet metaphor is often perceived as "unscientific, untrustworthy, a linguistic embellishment" (Mignot, 2000, p. 518), arguments which Lakoff & Johnson (1980) refers to as the "myths of objectivism and subjectivism." Metaphor can provide not only a richer description of research as experienced by the researcher(s) but also allows a deeper exploration of the meanings generated by collaborating participants. You used metaphor to good effect in your thesis, MCR.

MCR: Yes, I found that metaphor provided a powerful vehicle for portraying the “journey,” the “adventure,” the “saga” that was my action research process. For me the cycles of personal engagement over time represented a personal and professional pilgrimage through both familiar and unfamiliar terrain. The title of my thesis, “Mapping the complexity of computer learning: Journeying beyond teaching for computer competency to facilitating computer capability,” established the metaphor from the beginning. I also used my chapter headings to demonstrate the unfolding research journey:

- Charting the context of research and practice (Chapter 1);
- Journey origins and point of departure (Chapter 2);
- Embracing reflection as navigation: Postcards from cycle 1 (Chapter 3);
- Encountering a theoretical bridge: Crossing to a metacognitive approach (Chapter 4);
- Integrating metacognition: Planning for cycle 2 (Chapter 5);
- The journey continues: Postcards from cycle 2 (Chapter 6);
- Encountering turbulence: Postcards from cycle 3 (Chapter 7);
- Complexity as window on the research (Chapter 8); and
- Journey ending as journey beginning (Chapter 9).

I continued to use the journeying metaphor as part of my reflexivity, exemplified by the following extract from my final chapter:

“My research has involved me challenging my expectations and re-designing the maps which I brought to my initially envisaged itinerary. My thesis charts my “discoveries” and individual and cultural encounters. It provides a “diary” of my changes in direction and the influence of my travels on my own assumptions.”

CRK: While I described my research as a journey I did not use metaphor explicitly to frame my thesis structure. I wish I had! I wonder if, for many academics, constructing research as “journey” would be considered unacceptable, since the thesis is generally perceived primarily as an “argument”?

MCR: This is likely to be the case for many supervisors. However, I believe such a perception is inconsistent with the epistemic foundations of action research. Action research is *not* about testing preconceived hypotheses or generalizing about research “findings.” It is about depicting the context, change processes, resultant learning and theorizing of individuals or groups in a process of mutual change and inquiry. Metaphor is like a costume—it enhances meaning through imagery and colour. The author (actor) can dress her argument in a way that indicates the meaning of the process to her. Using the play metaphor has clothed this otherwise conventional

journal article in a way that (we hope) brings the arguments we are making alive to our imagined audience.

NARRATOR: Let's move now to the final scene of this act, a scene in which our protagonists make a case for presenting the literature throughout the thesis, rather than in the single "literature review" chapter, as demanded by the conventional five chapter structure.

—Curtain—

Scene 4: In Which Literature Is Woven Throughout the Thesis

The curtain rises to a scene of movement. The hitherto passive listeners, who have been seated at the feet of the storytellers, join together with MCR and CRK in a process of dismantling the five large blocks (which are now revealed to be made up of smaller blocks), taking the ribbons that make up the spirals and interweaving them among the blocks to produce an impression of flow and harmony.

CRK: Taking a chronological or narrative approach to thesis writing has implications for the presentation of literature and theory. In conventional research the literature review aims to build a theoretical foundation upon which issues are identified as worth researching (Perry, 1994). However, in action research the issues pursued are those which arise from a cluster of problems of mutual concern and consequence to the researcher(s) and collaborators (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

MCR: This means that in an action research thesis, the explanation of the origin of the research and the justification for its need lie not in the literature but in the personal narrative of the participant researchers. Literature is more important in shaping the ongoing *development* of action research (Green, 1999) than informing its initial foundation or relating its findings to other research.

CRK: In conventional thesis formats, the literature review is presented up front in its entirety, implying that all the literature was familiar to the researcher at the beginning of the research. This is usually a misrepresentation of the research process. The requirement to present an up-to-date literature review at the time of submission itself necessitates that the review is in constant flux until submission. Moreover, it is not humanly possible to expect that a researcher, no matter how familiar they are with their disciplinary context, will have covered all relevant literature *before* they begin their research.

MCR: Action researchers seek theory to partially answer their questions, to challenge their assumptions, to widen their perspectives and to inform their practice. Green (cited in Winter et al., 2000)

argues that relevant literature cannot be “predetermined” and that quality action research will show how the writer has engaged with the literature and how this has challenged their views. For this reason there is a good case for presenting the literature as part of the cyclical structure of the research and thesis, situating it temporally in the action research cycles themselves. A similar recommendation has been made by Dick (1993, 2000) who recommended that literature be reported adjacent to the relevant findings. In another paper, Green (1999) notes the value of sharing with the reader the excitement experienced by the researcher in encountering new and challenging literature.

CRK: It is also relevant to note that literature encountered throughout the research will either support the researcher’s current actions or challenge their perspectives, assumptions or approaches. As Brewer and Hunter (1989, p. 18) note, “evidence from two sources is intuitively more persuasive than evidence from one.” If “evidence” is interpreted as encompassing prior research, then the discovery of research which supports one’s own interpretations might be seen as “triangulating” the data, but only where such research was not known to the researcher beforehand. Thus it can be valuable to explicitly acknowledge any literature that has influenced the research process or its interpretation *as it is encountered* in the process. How did you tackle this issue of literature presentation, MCR?

MCR: I consciously presented literature iteratively and chronologically throughout my thesis. For instance, in Chapter 4, I describe a transition that occurred in the research, prompted by encountering a body of literature which acted as a new “road map.” I not only outline this literature at that point in the thesis, but I include reflections on the literature, its relationship to the first cycle and how, as a researcher, I perceived its value in shaping my second cycle. Towards the end of my candidature, I embraced a fresh body of literature, complexity theory (Waldrop, 1992), that assisted me in “making sense” of my data and experiences. I chose not to present this literature until Chapter 8; to do otherwise would have detracted from the integrity of my research presentation, implying a theoretical window on the research I did not hold at the time. How did you justify your literature approach, CRK?

CRK: I’ll quote from my introduction where I argued for this approach to literature in terms of honouring the unfolding nature of my research:

“The thesis is framed in a way that reflects the emergent process that was produced through conducting action research. . . . Literature is woven through the developing argument, reflecting how my reading informed different stages of the research process. . . . Th[e] unfolding process of research, reflection and insight leading to further research and reflection provides the framework for structuring the thesis.”

NARRATOR: Our protagonists have now finished presenting their case for a different sort of thesis presentation consistent with the spirit and epistemology of action research. Please give them a big round of applause as they leave the stage.

In our final act we will hear how their approaches to thesis writing were greeted by their examiners.

–Curtain–

Act III: Enter the Critics!

The curtain rises to darkness. The narrator enters stage left, illuminated by a spotlight.

NARRATOR: One of the objections supervisors are likely to raise against adopting these less conventional approaches to thesis writing is the negative response of examiners, especially those unfamiliar with action research. Let's find out from the examiners of these two theses what their responses were.

Tell me, Dr. A., what do you think of the format adopted by MCR?

Another spotlight lights up Dr. A., MCR's first examiner, standing stage right.

Dr. A.: The candidate makes a persuasive argument for the format of the report and then follows this with a superb demonstration of why her initial decision was appropriate.

NARRATOR: And you, Dr. B.?

Spotlight on Dr. A. fades and Dr. B. is lit by a spotlight centre stage.

Dr. B.: The metaphor of a journey integrates the parts of the thesis in a complete story. This structure avoids an artificially neat intellectual edifice, which would disguise the messy and brilliant process of research.

NARRATOR: Overall, MCR's examiners were well satisfied with her thesis, recommending it for an outstanding thesis award. CRK's thesis, however, received a more mixed reception. Dr. C., how did you find the structure of this thesis?

Dr. C.: The thesis had a linear quality to it while capturing the dynamic dialectic of critical reflection. . . . I kept reading to find the research questions, and realized they were truly emergent . . . the research questions, placed where they were, was like an "aha experience."

NARRATOR: And you Dr. D., how do you respond to its weaving and dynamic quality?

Dr. D.: . . . it is striking in the way the thesis exemplifies the critical reflexivity it sets out to explore. . . . It continually weaves together its analytic threads in a most convincing way. . . . [There] is a good, progressive unfolding of the research, first opening up themes and then deepening the analysis.

NARRATOR: So now to you, Dr. E. I believe you were irritated by the method, interpreting it as sloppy and lacking in rigour.

Dr. E.: I found the way literature was treated in the thesis to be most unsatisfactory. For instance, there was no definition or discussion of the nature of ideology until Chapter 3, and only a superficial discussion of reflection in that chapter.

NARRATOR: And yet, the candidate returned to a more detailed discussion of critical reflection in Chapter 8, in keeping with the emergent nature of the research process, which she foreshadowed in her introduction. The candidate responded in her defence that “[Dr. E.’s] reading of . . . the whole thesis seemed partial and fragmented rather than integrated and holistic. He did not seem to be aware of the connections that were being made throughout and the way the thesis was crafted as a whole integrated entity.” Now let us take an example where your perceptions were very different from those of Dr. D.—the use of the different “voices” in Chapter 6 (described in Act II, Scene 1).

Dr. E.: I found this device problematic and thought that the voices were used inconsistently and selectively with no explanation for the choices made.

Dr. D.: I beg to differ, Dr. E. The candidate made her rationale very clear at the beginning of the chapter. I thought her use of this strategy was impressive, very effective and a creative and practical resolution of a key difficulty of practitioner-based research.

The light fades on all examiners.

NARRATOR: Ultimately CRK was able to mount a successful defence against Dr. E.’s criticisms, using the comments from the other two examiners and the support of her supervisor to substantiate her claims.

Our protagonists would argue that the most effective ways to overcome potential examiner resistance are to make strong justification for the presentation format from the outset *and* to choose examiners sympathetic to action research and unconventional formats. Many examiners *do* appreciate freshness and originality, not only in thought and expression, but also in presentation. While there is always the risk of an unsympathetic examiner, by explicitly structuring the thesis consistent with the epistemological, methodological and ethical aspects of action research, postgraduate students can provide a clear and rigorous justification for their choices.

–Curtain–

Curtain Call

The narrator comes to the front of the stage in front of the curtain to converse with the audience.

NARRATOR: Now that we have come to the end of our performance, it is time to take stock and reflect on what has arisen here

tonight, in the spirit of a reflexive engagement with our practice. How might these different writing approaches contribute to improved action research practice? Our protagonists would suggest that they contribute to greater honesty and authenticity in the research process; honour the reflective and iterative processes at the heart of action research; demonstrate heightened awareness of self for both researcher and collaborators; highlight the importance of contextual influences; and support increased engagement with complexity at personal, interpersonal and global levels. Furthermore, they would argue that encouraging honest reporting of research and the deep reflection it engenders, builds competencies for all those engaging in research.

However, as our play has shown, flying in the face of academic convention is not for the fainthearted. If you are a PhD student, you may wish to reflect on whether you would consider taking an alternative approach to writing up your research. Is your writing practice consistent with the way your research proceeded? Have you been able to incorporate your own reflective process and that of your collaborators? To what extent has your perspective changed throughout your research process and can you represent that in your writing? How important is it to you to record the research *process* as much as the outcomes or results? How open is your supervisor to a different writing format? Does your research context lend itself to this sort of writing? What would be the main constraints for you in adopting such an approach? How might conforming to convention deaden your creativity? And are the risks worth taking in terms of what you might receive at the hands of power?

Those of you who supervise action research students will be aware of the problems of exposing students' work to unsympathetic examiners. One possible risk is that the thesis becomes too "wordy," with too much narrative detail at the expense of clarity and strong theoretical argument. Examiners may not appreciate the "suspense format"; feeling that they are labouring up an incline to reach the punch-line (Brown, 1994) or they may be surprised by the introduction of new ideas late in the thesis. Another risk is that students overidentify with their own stories and indulge in too much "confessional narrative." As supervisors you might consider: how can I help my student(s) recognize what is worth reporting in their dissertations? How can I help them distinguish authentic inquiry and understanding from indulgent navel gazing? How can I assist in identifying key turning points in the narrative rather than giving "blow by blow" descriptions?

CRK and MCR enter and stand beside the narrator.

To conclude, we are not suggesting that the approaches outlined here are essential for students writing action research theses. We certainly do not want to give the impression that this presentational

form becomes a “new potential orthodoxy” (to quote one of our reviewers). We would, however, wholeheartedly encourage you as students and supervisors to experiment with any form that seems analogically appropriate to your research material, being always careful to be aware of how the form you use might preclude certain perspectives and how the form itself may constrain your interpretations. For instance, attempting to maintain coherence within a particular chosen metaphor may lead to being too identified with the metaphor itself and prevent disconfirming “truths” being voiced. We found this an interesting dilemma in re-presenting our article as performance. Did we sacrifice too much by being too enamoured with the form in which we presented our arguments? We found ourselves debating and considering the balance required to walk such a tightrope. Ultimately, we leave it to you, our audience, to judge how well we have achieved this balance.

As a parting word, in the true spirit of action research, we would encourage a “meta-reflection” on the form of presentation as well as the substance of the research itself. Above all, strive to be simultaneously playful and rigorously reflective. Farewell for now, and we hope to meet some of you on your own adventurous journeying.

All bow. Applause.

—Curtain—

Source: Fisher, K., & Phelps, R. (2006). Recipe or performing art?: Challenging conventions for writing action research theses. *Action Research*, 4(2), 143–164. Used with permission from SAGE.

How successful were the authors in communicating their ideas? Do you think you would find this presentation acceptable at your institution?

Summary and Review

I am not quite sure how to summarize this play. Using such an unusual vehicle for presentation, the authors weave their thoughts about action research in the fabric of the three acts. You are not to take the text as a literal presentation of actual conversations or interactions. They use the play as a vehicle to hold the interest of the readers. I think they have been successful in doing so.

FINAL COMMENTS

You have read two very different articles. Miskovic and Hoop present a very strong argument about doing action research with children and how critical pedagogy informs every decision. At times as I read the article I was struck with how idealistic and naïve I thought the researchers

were when they expected students to buy into an agenda that really was not connected to their own lives. But I appreciated their thoughtful account about the issues and lessons they learned from the research.

Fisher and Phelps also want to present lessons learned; they do it in the form of a play. Representations of this sort are challenging; some institutions welcome alternative modes while others would not. But you should have been challenged by what you read.

You can access the complete articles at www.sagepub.com/lichtmanreadings.