

UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE
FACULTY OF EDUCATION

AN ACTIVITY - BASED APPROACH
TOWARD DEVELOPING
CRITICAL THINKING
IN THE
GEOGRAPHY CLASSROOM

A mini-thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION

by

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November 1990

ABSTRACT

This thesis deals with an attempt to employ the research methodology of action research to focus on classroom strategies involving a range of resources, including indigenously generated ones, as a way of enhancing critical understanding and thinking. This necessarily also involves an examination of what critical thinking might be.

Each of these areas of concern arose from an initial concern about the need for the creation and effective use of indigenous resources to maximise Senior Secondary students' ability to relate to Geography curriculum content and to interrogate it for its own assumptions. By using a systematic action research methodology of planning, action, observation and reflection, I realised that I needed to be more focused and thorough regarding my understanding of critical thinking, and that I needed to extend my understanding of resources that can enhance accessibility and the problematizing of material.

My readings and reflection in critical thinking made me realise not only the complex and contested nature of critical thinking, but also that in order to move toward critical thinking, my emphasis would need to be on adopting a critical pedagogy. The type of process, rather than a particular paradigm, needed to be the emphasis. The focus needed to be on how knowledge is produced, internalised and disorganised. I thus attempted to highlight aspects that need to be included in an activity-based approach that may facilitate a critical pedagogy.

With this shift of emphasis, my second project acknowledged that indigenous materials are only one way of enhancing accessibility to the student's world and the South African socio-political context. I then explored more fully styles and strategies of problematizing the course work to contribute toward an eventual changing of student consciousness.

Out of the many elements that had emerged in the second project, I chose to examine the strategy of conflict as a resource, to engage students in the underlying issues rather than to accept the syllabus content at face value. A deeper and far more nuanced understanding of the different dimensions of conflict arose and therefore the potential use of conflict in a transformative educational context.

Finally, the thesis highlights and reflects upon the value of an action research approach towards deepening one's understanding of classroom processes and the issues that arise.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my appreciation to Owen van den Berg and Zubeida Desai for their insight, guidance and painstaking perusal of this work.

I also wish to thank Sue Davidoff for her participation in my projects, her wisdom and enormous encouragement and fresh perspectives, and Ruth Versfeld for her enthusiasm and ideas shared during the first project.

And finally, thank you to my students who embarked on these projects with such spirit and offered so many new directions and possibilities.

CHAPTER ONETHE EMERGENCE OF AND RATIONALE FOR AN ACTION RESEARCH APPROACH**1.1 Introduction**

I have been teaching Standard (Std.) 8, 9 and 10 Geography for the past thirteen years at the same school. On many occasions I have been part of organising and contributing toward resource workshops and have continually found a severe lack of creative, experiential and indigenous resources in the Geography field. This is particularly true of resources that begin to promote critical and diverse thinking in the South African context.

I teach with a variety of teaching styles and methods that are characterized by a focus on the interaction of students with one another and with the curriculum, but struggle to find ideas, worksheets and simulation exercises that are related to or contextualized in the South African context. It is for this reason that when two action research projects were assigned as part of the Masters course in Action Research at the University of the Western Cape, I began my first project by focusing on the use of indigenous Geography resources as a way of shifting consciousness. My understanding of 'indigenous resources' at that point, was those resources that are related to the students' world, but preferably with a South African content and context.

My understanding of 'shifting consciousness' was to develop thinking more deeply and laterally about all issues and that students needed to participate more actively in their learning process to have a growing sense of themselves as located within a community/country and their role therein.

There are probably many ways in which this kind of movement of consciousness to a more enquiring, lateral thinking is achieved, but this study began by choosing to focus on indigenous material as a way of making the content more accessible, thereby allowing a process of involvement to occur. Without that process of involvement, I believed that empowerment to integrate and understand issues would remain at a limited level.

I believed that Geography teaching needs to move away from compartmentalized views of 'knowledge' and begin to make links between various fields, e.g. the relationship between urban Geography and climate, ecology and population Geography, etc. Through an understanding of these links, Geography as a subject would continually be related to and placed within the 'real' world, rather than being confined within a limited theoretical study. For instance, in studying the factors affecting an industrial location, I would need to focus the classroom study on a factory in an area familiar to students. This would serve as a basis from which to begin to make meaning of the theories regarding industrial location.

Therefore, to evaluate the first project, it was necessary for me to assess the nature of the material used and to ascertain whether it

encouraged the students to think in a broader inter-connected framework. The students' insight, questioning and/or understanding of the material covered would facilitate evaluating whether the material had enabled students to link the topic with other issues adequately. It would also be necessary to assess whether links with a known or real situation have emerged. This was, therefore, my task in the first project - to promote a particular kind of consciousness.

In attempting the first project, it was also necessary to establish some sense of the action research process and how I would be adopting it in my own classroom. Action research is understood and practised differently by different people. My understanding and consideration of various aspects of action research has developed over the past two years, but the following description outlines the basic understanding of the action research process and its characteristics that I employed in planning my first project.

1.2 Understanding of and rationale for an action research approach

Broadly, action research focuses on our own educational practices and our understanding of those practices, of the situations in which they are practised and of the potential for transformation of those contexts. It will be necessary for me to outline the process of action research, before I outline some of the key characteristics and concepts that would inform my own action research projects. Lastly, I will look at some of the possible risks and problems that can arise in an action research approach. Many of the characteristics overlap

with each other and so they should not be interpreted as existing independently and separately from one another.

Action research is an approach to encourage teachers to be aware of and reflective about their own practice, to be critical of that practice, to understand the situations in which their practices are carried out, and to be open to changing their practice and the situation. The following type of approach by McNiff (1988:5-6) governed my own research:

Action research is not just teaching. It is being aware and critical of that teaching, and using this self-critical awareness to be open to a process of change and improvement of practice. It encourages teachers to become adventurous and critical in their thinking, to develop theories and rationales for their practice, and to give reasoned justification for their public claims to professional knowledge. It is this systematic ENQUIRY MADE PUBLIC which distinguishes the activity as research.

The approach involves a spiral of planning, acting, observing, reflecting and re-planning. These moments are retrospective and prospective, retrospective in making meaning from the past and prospective in future action. Planning involves collaborating with the participants, which involves being focused on their problems, needs and the broader realities. It also means clarifying and diagnosing a problem situation for practice and formulating action strategies for resolving the problem. Planning also entails consideration of the current practice, the rules and the principles it actually embodies and the knowledge, beliefs and principles that the teacher employs in characterising that practice and deciding what shall be done. It is only from these descriptions and principles that critical planning, action and reflection are possible. Concrete

experiences form a basis for implementing action strategies, observation and reflection. 'Acting' needs to move beyond experiential learning in and of itself, but should be 'interwoven' as part of the emancipatory process, i.e. taking control, critiquing distortions, etc. Action feeds back to influence and amend decisions previously made about the overall plan.

Reflection is not limited to the participants' self-reflection, as our understandings are distorted by ideological constraints. Action Research argues that reflection provides an opportunity for learners to reflect on their ideological constraints and to generate critical theories, and that this can stand in the service of the development of a critical understanding of their context, and thus of emancipation. Reflection occurs within the context of its particular social and historical framework, and "The knowledge gained is reflectively assimilated and tested for authenticity by the participants." (Lazarus 1988:13)

1.3 Characteristics that I have attempted to incorporate in my own action research projects

I wanted the project to be PARTICIPATORY, in that it involves me, the teacher, and not an 'outsider', in my own enquiry. Action research provides an opportunity for teachers to be involved with their own practice and to view themselves as researchers, so that they can begin to understand and transform that practice. This will involve research with the group, rather than on the group. I as the researcher/teacher, need to be theorizing my practice within a

critical framework of understanding which facilitates appropriate action. This also involves bringing theories about the social construction of the participants' realities to the notice of the group for the purposes of reflection. In so doing, I am more likely to promote critical skills.

Disagreements between the interpretations of the teacher and of the groups will be a particularly rich source in ascertaining what the disagreement underscores and how it could be resolved. As Mathison (1988:15) puts it, "We do, in fact, utilize not only convergent findings but also inconsistent and contradictory findings in our efforts to understand the social phenomena that we study."

I, as teacher, should not be an external agent who is needed to stimulate development, but rather a facilitator who helps encourage the action research process so that it takes place in a coherent manner. This leads to a second dimension with which I would want to characterize my action research projects, that the research is not an individual exercise by the teacher, but a joint enterprise of the whole group/class.

Action research should be COLLABORATIVE in that it needs to involve other people as part of a shared enquiry. Transformations of social reality cannot be achieved without engaging the understanding of the group involved. Action research demands sanction for the investigation and an accountability to the students. There is the imperative of feeding back to, and clarifying research findings with, the participants of the research. Because people can be unconscious

of, and therefore mistaken about their perceptions, intentions and motives, it is necessary to establish collaborative research in order to minimize errors of this type and to develop understanding, critiques and explanations. We also understand only certain aspects of our reality, while others understand other aspects. This also emphasises the need to share our knowledge collectively. McNiff (1988:7) argues that

It is this conjoint experiencing, this mutually supportive dialogue, that is the action of research that brings people together as explorers of their own destiny, rather than alienates them as operators and puppets.

This will involve creating an atmosphere in which people believe that everyone has a contribution to make, thus promoting the broadest and most active participation of people in order to facilitate and promote collective control of the action research processes. This is well illustrated by Carr (1986:200) when he states that

The collaborative nature of action research thus offers a first step to overcoming aspects of the existing social order which frustrate rational change: it organizes practitioners into collaborative groups for the purposes of their own enlightenment, and in doing so, it creates a model for a rational and democratic social order.

Therefore in action research, dialogue and the active participation of all the members of the group are indispensable. Rather than focusing on the 'individual good', it is a means of realising the 'common good': it strengthens and sustains a sense of community. This leads to a further feature I would want to incorporate in an action research process: the social/historical context in which the process occurs.

Action research helps participants understand how their PRACTICES ARE SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED AND HISTORICALLY EMBEDDED. Action Research in education needs to be understood in a social, cultural, political and economic context. The research focus either arises out of, or is directly related to, particular community needs. It attempts to make sense of the reality of immediate situations in order to grasp their patterns as manifestations of the broader context. It pitches the study at the micro-level to understand the macro-level of the society. Critical reflection aims to expose dominant-group interests and ideological distortions, and highlights contradictions within understandings, practices and situations. In this way we can, therefore, begin to become aware of what shapes and informs practice, and so can begin to look at the possibilities of alternatives, of how things might be different. The appropriateness of ideas and knowledge drawn from various disciplines will depend on the extent to which they are viewed by the teacher/researcher and the group as speaking to the concrete practical reality. We are researchers of our own reality because we live this reality and to some extent we understand it.

This means that action research cannot be separated from real life. By becoming more aware of our situation, we can go about transforming it to meet the needs of the community so that our action is socially useful. Through the action research process, participants can then be more than simply products, but rather attempt to be transformers and agents of history. Action research, focused in an actual context, can aim at being socially useful as well as theoretically meaningful. Foster and Whitehead (1984:41) say that

... to bring together theory and practice it is necessary to view educational theory as a "critical and systematic reflection on practice" ... and that such theory must be developed using procedures which hold educational practice as a unity. We suggest that this can be achieved by basing the research upon the conscious lived experiences of individual teachers and their attempts to develop valid and objective explanations for the part they play in sustaining or improving a process of education with their pupils.

THEORY provides some form of criterion against which, or in relation to which, insights and interpretations can be viewed and critiqued. Action research needs to encourage participants to develop theories and rationales for testing and improving their practice, and for providing a sound rationale for what they are doing. The focus is therefore on developing theories, rather than consistently or mechanically applying general theories. Theory offers the possibility of extending us beyond our existing practice. It also has the potential to be generative and organic insofar as new understandings arise that can be applied in differing situations.

However, reflections also benefit from the meanings derived from a variety of sources, which might include various disciplines. For example, a particular teaching method could be reflected on in terms of its ecological, social, economic and political ramifications. As Shor (1980:114) states

The problematic study of social practice stretches out not only in time and space but also across the boundaries separating academic departments.

Freire (1978:117-118) elaborates a series of contexts that may arise from dealing with a theme in everyday life. By making these connections, we connect and extend a specific item or curricula

material to its broader cultural milieu. In understanding our own reality, there are times when we can apply theories from other realities with similar elements, to orientate ourselves and to help us understand and transform our own reality. In these cases, these theories can provide a means to understand how self-understandings have become distorted by broader ideological conditions. Theoretical accounts also offer possibilities of how these constraints may be overcome.

Action research does not simply focus on understanding the patterns and significance of the past and the present, but also aims "to transform the present to produce a different future." (Carr & Kemmis 1986:183) Action research therefore needs to be committed not only to understanding the social world, but also to helping to TRANSFORM it. Although there is a real gap between school curricula and political change, action research can seek to establish the conditions under which it can identify and expose those aspects of the social order which frustrate rational change, and provide a basis for action to overcome irrationality, injustice and deprivation. This is not a romanticized belief that educational change will liberate South Africa, but a belief that even though schools offer limited prospects for change, they have a serious role to play in the liberatory process. It is, therefore, a deliberate strategy for emancipating practitioners from the often unseen constraints of assumptions, false beliefs and ideology existing in our society, and is a challenge to the established authority. In this process, participants can gain skills which enable them to distance themselves from manipulation, to focus on liberation and to take control of

their lives by removing false assumptions and eliminating the adverse effects of hindering organisational arrangements.

Action research is not simply concerned with the transformation of our own immediate situation, but also with viewing education within the South African social, economic and political structure in which it is found. In this way, action is not simply focused on the classroom/school, but on the wider social system in which we live. Situations themselves can be transformed by changing the practices that constitute them and the understandings that make them meaningful. As Lazarus (1988:17) puts it,

This process focuses on enabling people to develop a sense of control over their own lives, (the development of personal power) and to develop strategies for gaining access to particular resources in society, thereby gaining realistic control over situations that affect their lives (political power).

This is particularly pertinent in the South African context as it will involve transforming oneself and the social relations in the school, and mobilizing links with the broader community, rather than simply reproducing existing relations. As Walker (1988:150) states, action research "will be highly political". She argues that this also necessitates raising questions regarding the interests that are served in our teaching and research:

I would support Stephen Kemmis (1986) in his assertion that action research and critical reflection on the part of oppressed teachers is not only about changing their teaching practice but also about the progressive transformation of schools by linking teachers within schools to broader oppositional forces. (Walker 1988:151)

This is a particularly pertinent issue as it is rare to find teachers who are both innovative and progressive in their teaching practice and also actively involved in community structures and struggles outside the classroom. Even though political action will transform education, "action research may well be the means for those of us involved in education to develop a coherent social and political perspective adequate to the task". (Kemmis 1986:52)

The transformative feature of action research is most often not immediately realisable, but should be viewed as enabling one to begin to live out the future in the present. Therefore the action research process can be adopted as part of a democratic, challenging process in the present to realise a future and different education structure in South Africa.

The 'outcome' of the action research process may suggest the need for further problem clarification and for subsequent modification and development of action hypotheses. This means that in the action research process, evidence can be given regarding why a practice was viewed as unsatisfactory, how it was changed, and what the researchers' and the participants' observations were regarding the process and the change. These need to be documented as faithfully as possible, whether through audio, visual and/or written means to explain the process and present evidence to back up claims of change. McNiff (1988:6) notes that "Action research resolves to give reasoned justification to claims to professional knowledge." Criteria for movement or change need to be jointly decided. The action research process is systematic, and although it allows for unpredictability

and is not prescriptive, it is not ad hoc and random. It requires researchers to be very aware of process and to be focused and directional in their activities.

The approach is also not static, for observable problems are often symptoms of deeper, underlying problems. If, for example, a particular group domination is the perceived problem, it may emerge that that is simply indicative of a deeper problem about class, gender, economic issues, etc. And so other problems may be explored as and when they arise without losing sight of the main focus of the enquiry. We may also enter an enquiry at any point with other questions of concern. McNiff (1988:43-45) believes that

Action research should offer the capacity to deal with a number of problems at the same time by allowing the spirals to develop spin-off spirals, just as in reality one problem will be symptomatic of many other underlying problems ... Generative action research enables a teacher-researcher to address many different problems at one time without losing sight of the main issue.

These different 'phases' are held in dialectical tension, each informing the other through a process of planned change, monitoring, reflection and modification. In other words, the phases do not stand as separate, rigid entities, but exist in their relationship with each other.

It is important to have a realistic sense of the RISKS involved in the action research process, so that we can be sufficiently sensitized to try to prevent these possible deviations. What is more, these 'risks' are also necessary, for action research is not an 'absolute', 'purist' approach that is appropriate at all times and

in all places. The 'problem areas' of action research can become a constant critique and reminder to revise and reflect on action research itself, so that it does not become an end in itself.

For instance, it would be possible for me to follow the action research 'steps' slavishly, but by so doing, lose adaptability and sensitivity within the particular situation at hand. If I become prescriptive and inflexible regarding the following of particular steps and cycles, it is possible that I would limit my perceptions and thus the opportunities that might arise in a given situation. The action research process might guide and focus the teacher/researcher, but the latter needs to be consciously aware of the dangers of allowing it to become a rigid framework that limits or inhibits liberating action. The focus needs to stay with the enquirer rather than with the methodology, especially as the focus on 'method' could also inhibit the role the collaborating group, the context and critical theory might play in directing the course of action. (McNiff 1988:8)

It is also possible to focus on observation and description with technical explanations and actions, thereby focusing on school improvement rather than on an emancipatory mode of education. This is particularly important to note, as the action research process can be used to maintain and improve the existing status quo. I might, for example, observe that my students are not sufficiently involved in the day-to-day life in the classroom. My explanation for their lack of involvement may be that they are given insufficient material to work on. My action may involve the increased use of worksheets.

This type of process would be very different from a process that engaged with students to ascertain whether they felt involved, or in which another colleague assisted with her perceptions regarding the level of involvement in the class. If we were to look together at possibilities for enhancing involvement and were to assess jointly whether the action had actually constituted increased involvement, a much richer situation would arise.

The danger always exists, then, that the original aspiration of a new paradigm/action research project could be dissipated and its original meaning surreptitiously reinterpreted so as to accommodate continuity with the previous approach/style. Similarly, the original vision could be reduced from an alternative view of the nature of 'research' to a mere set of ideas and methods which could be accommodated within the broad requirements of the very paradigm it had originally promised to eliminate and replace.

The 'risks' of action research should serve as a continual challenge to the approach itself. The teacher/researcher's contribution lies in promoting a particular dynamic, and in putting at the disposal of the groups the 'technical' instruments that allow them to have an increasingly more focused and precise comprehension of their social and historical situation in order to begin to transform it.

Action research situates educational activities within concrete practice and a conceptual framework that allows the 'unveiling' of the learners' world and its causal structure. This is done collectively, with the objective of generating participation and

organisation for transformation on the micro and macro level of education and society.

It is with this understanding of action research in mind, that I will now outline my first action research project.