Oxford Review of Education

Action research: a contradiction in terms?

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The core idea of action research is that there should be an intimate relationship between inquiry and practical or political activities. A challenge to this idea based on an influential ancient Greek hierarchy between *theoria* and *praxis* is examined. The contrary, pragmatist, notion that all inquiry arises out of human activity is accepted, but not the instrumentalism sometimes derived from it. Research must be treated as operating on the same plane as any other activity, but the relationship between the two will always be less than isomorphic, and this creates the prospect of severe tensions. These can be managed contextually in two ways: by subordinating inquiry, or by making it primary. Both are legitimate, but any attempt to treat the two components of action research as equal faces contradiction.

Introduction

There are diverse types of action research, varying across several dimensions: in whether carried out solely by practitioners or involving external agents; in how far it is pursued individually or collectively; in whether it is concerned with local and specific problems or with bringing about wider educational or social change; in which methods it favours; in what methodological or theoretical stances it draws on, for instance positivism, pragmatism, interpretivism, critical theory, or postmodernism.[1] However, abstracting from this diversity, the core feature of action research seems to be that there should be an intimate relationship between research and some form of practical or political activity—such that the focus of inquiry arises out of, and its results feed back into, the activity concerned.[2]

While not all of its advocates promote action research as the only legitimate kind of educational inquiry, it is often very closely associated with the instrumentalist view that to be of value research must serve practical and/or political goals directly.[3] In this paper I will argue that while the concept of action research points to some important differences in the form that educational inquiry can take, it is open to internal contradiction.

The diversity of action research

The history of the term 'action research' is usually traced back to the work of the

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social psychologist Kurt Lewin, writing in the USA in the 1940s (see Lewin, 1946; Adelman, 1993).[4] The starting point seems to have been a request in 1939 for Lewin to help a new manufacturing plant solve the problem of low productivity on the part of its workers (see Marrow, 1969, ch. 14); and his involvement in this kind of consultancy work continued through membership of a US Government task force in the Second World War and through links with community development organisations.[5]

Lewin portrayed action research as involving a spiral process in which a hypothetical solution to a problem is formulated and tried out, its level of success monitored, the proposed solution reformulated in light of this, the new strategy implemented and assessed, and so on. The key notion is that the spiral promises closer and closer approximation to an ideal solution of the problem, based on genuine theoretical understanding of the processes involved. Thus, Lewin viewed applied social science as pursuit of practical improvement that is properly combined with the search for theoretical understanding; he famously declared that 'there is nothing so useful as a good theory' (cited in Marrow, 1969). At the same time, he did not see action research as simply a matter of external agents intervening to bring about improvement and develop theoretical knowledge. There was a democratic element built into his conception of action research: the aim was to generate participation and 'self-management'. And his assumption that there were close links between science, social improvement and democracy was consonant with the ideas of other, even more influential, writers of the early twentieth century—notably, John Dewey (on whom see Westbrook, 1991 and Ryan, 1995).[6]

The idea of action research was taken up in the field of education in the USA during the 1950s. Here it was very much concerned with enabling teachers to apply scientific method to solve their practical classroom problems, and thereby to facilitate the educational process. The conception of science relied on was of a kind that would be labelled today as positivist, in the sense that it took natural science—interpreted as involving quantitative measurement and causal analysis—as the ideal, though the model had to be adapted for practical purposes. This action research movement had largely died out by the end of the 1950s, or at least had become more dispersed and diverse in orientation. But the idea of classroom action research was revived, or perhaps reinvented, by Lawrence Stenhouse, John Elliott and others in Britain in the late 1960s and 1970s, promoting the concept of the 'teacher as researcher' (Stenhouse, 1975; Elliott, 1991; see also Bartholomew, 1971). Once again, the aim was to use research in improving educational practice, and it was to be carried out by practitioners themselves, not by external agents. However, on this occasion the conception of research employed was a less positivistic one, modelled more on the kind of approach to inquiry employed by historians and anthropologists; broadly speaking, what today would be referred to as qualitative method.

This development of teacher research was a response to what many saw as the failure of large-scale curriculum projects actually to change practice on the ground. Stenhouse argued that effective curricular improvements could only come about through being developed and tested in the classroom by teachers; indeed, that this was the core of a proper understanding of teacher professionalism. The work of

Stenhouse, Elliott and others led to the establishment of the Classroom Action Research Network, and later to a variety of courses designed to facilitate teacher research (see Elliott & Sarland, 1995). In the process, there was diversification in conceptions of what classroom action research involves, with some versions emphasising instrumental solutions to practical classroom problems (Nixon, 1981; Hustler *et al.*, 1986); others treating educational action research as part of a broader movement for social change (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis, 1988); and yet others treating it as, in effect, personal professional development (Whitehead, 1989). Some feminists also developed distinctive versions of action research, designed to further equality of opportunity between the sexes and/or to challenge patriarchal society (see Kelly, 1985 and Weiner, 1989). Simultaneously, the notion of action research spread into other fields; including that of educational management, when this grew rapidly in the 1980s and 90s.[7]

In this paper I want to focus on what I identified earlier as the central idea of action research: that there should be an intimate relationship between inquiry and some practical or political activity. I will explore the different forms this relationship could take, and their implications.

An ancient view rejected

Let me begin with what might be seen as a classical argument against action research on the grounds that it is internally contradictory. This involves taking the two components of that phrase as representing, respectively, *praxis* (action) and *theoria* (research), in their ancient Greek senses. An influential strand of Greek thinking treated *praxis* and *theoria* as different ways of life; and, moreover, as ways of life occupying different positions on a status hierarchy (Lobkowicz, 1967, 1977). For Plato and his followers, and in some places for Aristotle too, *theoria* is the superior way of life: it is the closest that humans can approach to the divine. It involves detached contemplation of the world, divorced from human activity; in which the universe's essential, and therefore eternal, characteristics are comprehended. By contrast, *praxis*, and the forms of thinking associated with it, are concerned with human affairs, which are temporal and contingent in character, and therefore of little significance for the universe as a whole. So, *theoria* involves detachment from, and *praxis* immersion in, the flux of ephemeral events that makes up human social life; what would later be referred to in some quarters as History, in contrast with Reason.

While much of this position has been abandoned or modified down the centuries, the idea that there is a difference in status between *theoria* and *praxis* has persisted. In the Middle Ages, inquiry was closely associated with religious calling, and especially with the monastic movement; and this reinforced the idea of its detached, even other-worldly, character. Furthermore, the hierarchy between *theoria* and *praxis* survived the process of secularisation. To take an extreme example, when in the early twentieth century Julien Benda writes about the treachery of the intellectuals, what they are betraying are universal ideals that he regards as standing above history, and which are intrinsically related to intellectuals' proper pursuit of philosophical and scientific knowledge or imaginative understanding through literature and art.

He treats these rational, universal ideals—and the occupations associated with them—as sacred by comparison with the profane, temporal activity of politics (Benda, 1927).

It is not difficult to see that, in these terms, to tie research to action in the world would be to conflate two quite different ways of life, as well as to betray the higher nature of *theoria*. And, indeed, some attitudes towards action research display opposition on these grounds. For example, many years ago in an attack on criminology for not studying 'adult, unreformed, "serious" criminals in their natural environment', Polsky explains this in terms of a failure on the part of criminologists to free themselves from 'traditional social-work concerns'. He continues: 'in the years immediately ahead [the struggle to do this] may be even more difficult, because of a recent retrograde development: lately a number of sociologists themselves have joined forces with social workers to promote extra-scientific goals in the name of science and have saddled us with new euphemisms for these goals, such as "applied sociology" and "action research" ' (Polsky, 1967, p. 115). From the tone of Polsky's discussion—at one point he talks of 'fouling the waters of science with muck about "the dual role of practitioner-researcher" ' (p. 142)—what we have here is dismissal of action research as equivalent to do-gooding, as mere practical work, compared with the higher ideals of science.

Now, despite the continuing influence of this status hierarchy, often transmuted into a privileging of 'pure' or theoretical over 'applied' research, much late nineteenth- and twentieth-century thought was directed against the classical distinction between *theoria* and *praxis*, or at least against treatment of *theoria* as a higher calling. Over that period, science came to be conceived very differently from the way the ancient Greeks had thought about it: it was now regarded by many as specialised inquiry that had abandoned not only religious but most normative concerns. And this perception was shared both by many of those who supported as well as by those who denounced this development. Furthermore, over the past two centuries, natural science has become more and more closely involved in the development of technologies. Indeed, in some areas it has become subordinated to the task of producing technological innovations, in the form of what Ravetz has called 'industrialised science' (Ravetz, 1971).

There were also some other intellectual changes preceding this shift in the nature of science which challenged the ancient hierarchical relationship between *theoria* and *praxis*. Renaissance humanism, the linking of heaven and earth under the same explanatory scheme by Newton and Leibniz, and Kant's 'Copernican revolution' in philosophy, all worked against viewing human beings and their practical affairs as separated off from the rest of the universe, and/or treating them as subordinate in importance. And this was reinforced in the nineteenth century by the development of various forms of positivism, historicism and life philosophy—in particular by the work of Comte, Marx, Dilthey, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche—and into the twentieth century by Marxism, pragmatism and existentialism.[9]

I will focus here on just one of these philosophical movements, the one that has probably been the most influential on notions of action research: Dewey's pragmatism. For Dewey, as for other pragmatists, scientific inquiry is not an activity that is

set apart from ordinary life, involving detached contemplation from some Olympian vantage point. He spent much of his intellectual life trying to counter this view, along with other 'dualisms'. For him, inquiry does not begin from a philosophical decision to engage in sceptical questioning, in the manner of Descartes, where thinkers seek to detach themselves cognitively from their taken-for-granted world in order to find some solid foundation on which true knowledge can be built. Rather, inquiry—even scientific and philosophical inquiry—arises within the course of human social life, is shaped by its context, and should feed back into the flow of ongoing collective activity that makes up the wider society.

The paradigmatic model of inquiry for the pragmatists was a course of action being interrupted by the frustration of expectations, with research employed to resolve the problem and thereby enable continuation of the activity (see, for example, Dewey, 1929). Indeed, they saw all cognition as stimulated by mismatches between expectations and outcomes. So, while Dewey did not deny the need for occupational specialisation in modern societies, he did not see scientific modes of thought as restricted to scientists. Rather, properly interpreted, science represented the highest form of rational thinking about problems, and needed to be diffused throughout society. Thereby, so it was assumed, any tendency for science to become a source of expertise that undermines democracy is negated. In Dewey's view, when it is properly understood scientific inquiry is central to democracy, which he conceived as a process of collective deliberation about what policies are best for all in dealing with the various problems that a society faces.

Here, then, as in the ancient model, science is still given high status, but it is not regarded as cut off from everyday activity; it is treated, instead, as the model for how we should live our lives; and through education it is to become the guiding orientation of the whole society. In short, scientists are not an other-worldly elite, they are ordinary people using a rational method which can be applied beyond the specialised areas in which they work; an extension that can transform individual lives and whole societies for the better. This is the core of Dewey's scientific and democratic humanism (on which see Rockefeller, 1991).

It is not difficult to identify affinities between this and much of the thinking associated with action research, and these are no accident. As indicated earlier, Dewey's writings had a pervasive influence in the early part of the twentieth century, especially in the USA where the notion of action research first developed. Moreover, Dewey's arguments are surely correct in some important respects. The classical idea of an absolute distinction between action and inquiry, with the latter operating on a higher plane, must be rejected. Inquiry is a human activity, and as such shares some features in common with others. Furthermore, much inquiry does indeed arise in the context of the experience of a problem, and is concerned with resolving that problem. Alfred Schütz notes that the Greek root of the term 'problem' means 'that which is thrown before me' (Schütz, 1970, p. 26). This amounts, in his terms, to an 'imposed relevance'. And there is little doubt that inquiry can be stimulated by imposed relevances.[10] However, this is not the only source of inquiry. Equally important is the puzzlement that Aristotle regarded as central to human beings' relationship with their world: deriving from an instinctive

curiosity (Lear, 1988). This can range from sheer wonder at the existence and character of the world through to more mundane puzzles about particular features of it that we do not understand. This is what Schutz refers to as intrinsic, rather than imposed, relevance.

So, there are times when we initiate inquiry, or find ourselves embarked on it, without having been stimulated by a practical problem. Moreover, science and philosophy have become institutionalised; in other words, they are specialised occupational activities that are carried on outside the immediate context of other activities—and they therefore generate their own intellectual problems. Even where they are oriented towards providing knowledge relevant to some practical issue, they do not usually form an immediate part of courses of action directed towards dealing with that issue. Instead, they are carried out 'off-line' from those activities, and very often by people who are not members of the relevant practitioner group. Of course, we might argue that this represents an alienation of inquiry from practice, that the two ought to be more closely related. But this is an argument that cannot be justified by appeal to how things naturally are—in other words, by appeal to a single paradigm for the emergence of inquiry from practical problems.[11]

Recognising intrinsic relevance as a stimulus to inquiry points to the possibility of a much looser relationship between research and other kinds of activity. It suggests that knowledge can be of value in its own right, in resolving intellectual problems, and perhaps even in stimulating new ones, rather than simply in terms of helping to solve practical problems. In this way, something of the idea of research as a matter of detached contemplation of the world resurfaces; but without any implication that this represents the only worthwhile, or a superior, form of life.

So, what is to be accepted and what rejected from the ancient Greek model? While we must reject the status hierarchy between *theoria* and *praxis*, it should be recognised that inquiry can be distinct from other activities, and can be stimulated by intrinsic, not just imposed, relevances. And while not all inquiry is a way of life, some inquiry is a specialised occupation, for which we might retain the label 'research' (see Hammersley, 2003). To summarise, then, the classical argument for action research as self-contradictory fails, but the pragmatist argument against it does not establish that research must always be an integral part of some other activity.

Research and 'action' as potentially contradictory

It is often not obvious what the intended relationship is between the two components of the phrase 'action research'. Nor is it usually made clear—the other side of the coin—what is the category system to which 'action research' belongs. A fundamental question is: which of the component terms refers to species and which to genus? In other words, is action research a form of research, as the ordering of the words implies, and as I have assumed up to now, or is it a form of action? Furthermore, what contrasting forms of research, or of action, are assumed by the implicit typology; and what is the nature of the contrast?

In some versions, of course, action research claims to transcend the distinction

between research and action. Thus, while inquiry is to be re-formed to make it serve practice, so also is practice to be transformed through the influence of research.[12] Yet what typically happens instead, I suggest, is an oscillation between emphasis on each of the two component terms—rather than transcendence of the difference between them. And the reason for this is that no overcoming of the distinction between inquiry and other types of activity is possible. While Dewey's main aim was to transcend dualisms, including that between theory and practice, he was not successful.[13] And the same is true of advocates of action research. In some key respects, pluralism prevails, and it is therefore important to preserve distinctions; though without going to the other extreme of treating them as incommensurabilities. Indeed, distinctions are essential for seeing the relationships *among* things.

The difference in character between inquiry and other activities can be obscured by an overemphasis on what they share in common. In reaction against the influence of the ancient Greek view I discussed earlier, where an absolute difference in character is claimed, it is often noted that many other activities involve the collection and analysis of information; indeed, that in some cases this is central to them. And the conclusion occasionally drawn from this is that all practitioners are therefore necessarily researchers. In the case of Stenhouse, this conclusion is reached through reliance on a view of school teaching that is modelled on an old conception of academic secondary education, where students participate in the process of inquiry that is believed to be central to the life of learning.[14] Thus, Stenhouse often portrays teaching as equivalent to inquiry, much as Dewey saw scientific inquiry as properly permeating human social life generally (Stenhouse, 1975). However, there are questions not only about the breadth of applicability of this view of education but also about the extent to which it manages to integrate teaching and research except under very special conditions (see Hammersley, 1993).

Another overlap that may be used to suggest a false isomorphism is the fact that both research and other activities involve processes of trial and error. A stimulus for this is Popper's account of scientific inquiry. However, a crucial point here is that in each case trial and error is directed towards different goals: in the case of science towards discovering whether a hypothesis is false, and in the case of other activities towards finding solutions to practical problems or improving existing strategies for dealing with them.

It is certainly true that there is overlap between inquiry and other forms of activity, including teaching. Thus, teachers often face problems, and one strategy (though not the only one) that they may engage in to resolve these is some form of investigation. If a child gets a calculation wrong, the teacher may look at the working and perhaps also ask the child how he or she produced the answer, with a view to determining whether it was simply a mistake or indicates a fundamental misunderstanding that needs to be remedied. Teaching may also involve inquiry as part of teachers' evaluation of their work, for instance judging whether or not some particular pedagogical strategy worked in a desirable way on some occasion and whether it might work again in the future, or indeed about the very goal of the education in which they are engaged. However, such overlap between inquiry and teaching does not imply identity. Not all aspects of teaching take the form of inquiry:

when teachers show children how to do calculations, or when they address the class about the topics to be covered in lessons, inquiry is not the activity in which they are engaged. Nor are the *goals* of teaching the same as those of inquiry. And the kind of inquiry that teachers engage in as part of their work is not the only sort of inquiry there is.[15]

So, while inquiry may be closely related to other forms of activity, it is never isomorphic with those activities. And any lack of isomorphism leaves open the probability of contradictory tensions. Given that, by their very nature, different activities have different immediate goals, there will be occasions when each demands a divergent course of action, and sometimes those courses of action will be fundamentally incompatible. In other words, rational pursuit of inquiry may often lead the actor in a different direction from rational pursuit of some other activity; or even in a direction that would be judged detrimental in terms of the latter. For example, if with Stenhouse we see teaching as involving the testing out of curricular hypotheses, this might require practitioners to engage in actions, such as teaching different material to different groups of pupils, that from an educational point of view would be difficult to defend or could even be judged unacceptable.

Any attempt to combine inquiry with some other activity can generate contradictory pressures in a variety of ways:

- while the information that could be produced by an inquiry may be regarded as necessary or valuable, the costs in terms of resources needed for doing the investigation could be judged too high in practical terms, for example because they come from funds needed for intervention;
- while the value of an inquiry may be accepted in principle, uncertainty about reaching a clear conclusion—or the amount of time it would take to reach a clear conclusion—might be judged excessive and thereby not warrant engaging in inquiry rather than other activities;
- the intrinsic value of an inquiry could be recognised, but the opportunity costs regarded as too great. In other words, to engage in inquiry at the time concerned would mean not doing something else which is judged to be of greater value: there is direct incompatibility, and a choice has to be made between one course of action and another. To use an example from medicine, seeking to run a randomised controlled trial may mean that a particular patient is assigned a placebo rather than the drug which would normally have been prescribed and which his or her doctor takes to be the most appropriate treatment. Here, there is a direct conflict between what is needed in order to gain sound knowledge for future policy and what is most appropriate in a particular case in treating a patient;
- the value of an inquiry may be recognised, but what we might call the effect costs are judged too high. In other words, some of the consequences of the practitioner engaging in the inquiry are evaluated as too damaging. For example, pursuing inquiry may indicate uncertainty on the part of the actor, and thereby undermine his or her authority with an important constituency. Alternatively, it may involve giving away inside information that could be consequential—it is important to

remember that inquirers always give out and give off information about them-selves in the course of their work.[16]

Any attempt to combine inquiry with some other activity, or to relate the two closely together, is likely to generate contradictory tendencies of these kinds (see Marris & Rein, 1967, ch. 8 and Rapoport, 1970, pp. 505–507). These tensions have usually been managed contextually in one of two main ways: by subordinating inquiry to the other activity, or by setting up institutional barriers around inquiry to protect it from, or to mediate the demands of, other activities. Of course, it is precisely such institutional boundaries that many advocates of action research wish to demolish.

Typology not hierarchy

I have argued that 'action research' cannot refer to a fusion of, or a transcendence of the distinction between, research and some other activity; that while there may be overlap there cannot be isomorphism; and that as a result there is the likelihood of contradictory tensions. The existence of these tensions is obscured by what we might think of as an Enlightenment myth, whereby pursuit of the true and the good are always in harmony—in the medium if not in the short term. While this might have been a plausible idea in the eighteenth century, it certainly is not today; given, for example, the experience of twentieth-century natural science and its role in techno-logical developments that have had many negative as well as positive consequences.

In the nineteenth century this Enlightenment myth had already been modified by Hegel and Marx. They saw contradictions as inevitable, but as the driving force behind historical change which would eventually result in the overcoming of all conflicts among human ideals; this being the 'end' of History in both senses of that term. However, it was precisely this kind of meta-narrative that some nineteenth- and many twentieth-century conservatives, liberals and radicals rejected, and that is rejected most vociferously today by postmodernists; and with good reason (see Hammersley, 1992, pp. 106–109).[17]

As already noted, there are two main ways in which the tensions between research and other activities can be, and have been, managed. It is important to recognise the sharp contrast between these, but also to acknowledge that they are both legitimate and can coexist within the same society. In other words, what we need is a typology, rather than some all-purpose hierarchy—of either the ancient Greek kind or the inversion of it promoted by some pragmatists and action researchers. From this point of view, there are two fundamental types of inquiry: one which is subordinated to some other activity, and a second which is pursued in its own right. In the first type, any conflicts are resolved in favour of the other activity, in the second they are resolved in favour of inquiry. What is critical here is which goal or goals are taken as the immediate priority.

In the case of inquiry-subordinated-to-another-activity, inquiry is a sub-activity: its pursuit is geared to other prevailing concerns. It will be started and terminated in accordance with those concerns, and how it is conducted will be properly shaped by them. Of course, even here, there remains an analytic distinction to be drawn

between inquiry and the activity to which it is subordinated. It is not that the two sets of goals are fused, but rather that a *context-specific* hierarchy operates between them, in which the goal of inquiry is subordinated to others.

The second way of managing tensions between research and other activities is to separate them institutionally. At the most primitive level, this involves an actor clearly distinguishing between the role of researcher and other roles. Further along the road, it is exemplified by an organisation setting up a research department, or buying in research from outside. In its most highly developed form, it involves organisations and institutions which are funded to do research, rather than being contracted to carry out particular pieces of research. Universities are the key example of this full institutionalisation.

In the more developed of these forms of institutionalisation, what we have is research as specialised inquiry. Rather than a practitioner temporarily suspending some other activity in order to carry out an investigation, inquiry becomes the primary occupational practice. Even where research is stimulated by some practical problem, and contracted by an organisation that needs information relevant to this problem, inquiry is pursued in the terms originally set (these perhaps even being adapted for research purposes), not continually reshaped by subsequent changes in the on-going activity that it was contracted to assist. What is involved here is not just a difference in what is treated as the prime concern but also a difference in the distance between inquiry and other activities. In inquiry-subordinated-to-other-activities the relationship is very close, whereas in institutionalised research the relationship is more distant. In the latter case, the contradictory tendencies between different activities are to a considerable extent externalised: they are minimised within the inquiry process, so that conflict tends to arise at the interfaces—where research and other forms of practice meet.[18]

The advantages and disadvantages of these two solutions to the problem of contradictory tendencies are mirror images of one another. What inquiry-subordinated-to-another-activity offers is inquiry that maximises the chance that relevant and usable information will be produced. However, this is achieved at the risk of overlooking the falsity of key assumptions built into the activity, and/or of failing to provide knowledge of underlying generative processes or about wider social forces. By contrast, specialised inquiry maximises the chances of finding errors, and of discovering the range of causal factors involved. Yet at the same time, it is in danger of producing information whose relevance for any particular practical activity is remote; in other words, considerable work may be necessary to 'translate' this knowledge into a usable resource. Even in the case of practical (rather than academic) research, where the framework of inquiry is set by practical considerations, there is a risk that by the time the results are produced the relevance of the information aimed at will be eroded, or transformed; or that what is produced will be too complex and qualified to be found useful (see Hammersley, 2002).

How does this typology relate to action research? Much of what goes under that heading would be classified in my terms as inquiry-subordinated-to-another-activity. This is exemplified by Wallace's treatment of 'action research' as a 'generic term covering a wide range of strategies intended to bring about improvement in some

practical situation' (Wallace, 1986, p. 98). This makes clear that the immediate goal governing much action research is to bring about change in the world rather than to produce knowledge about it; inquiry is subordinated to practical goals. Other definitions carry more or less the same message, albeit in different words. Here, for example, is Reason and Bradbury: '[…] the primary purpose of action research is not to produce academic theories based on action; nor is it to produce theories about action; nor is it to produce theoretical or empirical knowledge that can be applied in action; it is to liberate the human body, mind and spirit in the search for a better, freer world' (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p. 2). Along the same lines, in the field of education, for Carr and Kemmis the goal of critical action research is to restructure professional practice and thereby to transform the education system and society at large, not simply to produce knowledge that is relevant to educational issues (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). For all these writers, in effect, action research involves the subordination of inquiry to some other form of practice.

Of course, many action researchers would resist this categorisation of their work. One reason is that, as noted earlier, while they want research to serve action of some kind, they also usually want to transform the conventional ways in which such action has previously been carried out; and often the role envisaged for research is not just to serve as a source of valuable knowledge but also as model for this transformation. Here, action researchers appeal, implicitly or explicitly, to what they regard as the liberating potential of research.[19] There are at least two aspects to this. First of all, it may be seen as offering a more open-minded perspective in which taken-for-granted assumptions are questioned and explored, stock descriptions and explanations abandoned, new possibilities for interpretation and action envisaged, and so on. Thus, writing about the Girls into Science and Technology (GIST) project, Kelly expresses the hope that 'teachers have come to question their taken for granted assumptions about the world (that is, to take a research stance on their experience), and will continue to examine and evaluate their own actions now that the formal Project is finished' (Kelly, 1985, p. 134). A second feature of research often valorised by action researchers is its allegedly democratic character. Thus, Kemmis writes: 'action research was (and is) an expression of the essentially democratic spirit in social research' (Kemmis, 1982, p. 14). Very often research communities are treated as models for discursive or deliberative democracy, of precisely the kind that many action researchers believe need to be institutionalised in society as a whole.[20]

So, rather than simply subordinating inquiry to another activity, action researchers want instead to maintain a more equal relationship between inquiry and the other form of activity which it is to serve. Yet any attempt to do this will run into the problems discussed earlier. On this interpretation, 'action research' *does* become a contradiction in terms: it refers to a combination of activities with different immediate goals, simultaneous pursuit of which will generate incompatible orientations.

Conclusion

While recognising the diversity of ideas and practices associated with the term

'action research', this article has focused on what seems to be its core: that there should be an intimate, two-way relationship between research and some form of practical or political activity—such that the focus of inquiry arises out of, and its results feed back into, the activity concerned. The question addressed is whether such a relationship involves a contradiction between the two components of 'action research'. An ancient Greek view about *theoria* and *praxis* was examined as one affirmative answer to that question. This was contrasted with the pragmatist philosophy which has been influential on some versions of action research. The pragmatist idea that inquiry arises out of human activity was accepted, but not the rather instrumental conception of inquiry that is sometimes derived from it. It was argued that inquiry does not begin only from imposed relevances arising from practical problems but also from intrinsic relevances deriving from intellectual puzzlement.

In the second part of the paper, I argued that research and other activities must be treated as operating on the same plane, but that any relationship less than isomorphism creates the likelihood of contradictory tensions between them. I noted that these can be, and have been, managed in two main ways: by subordinating inquiry to the other activity or by treating it as primary. However, I argued that neither solution should be turned into a universal, all-purpose hierarchy, whether that of the ancient Greeks or its inversion by some pragmatists and action researchers. What is required is a typology that acknowledges the value and legitimacy of both solutions, but also recognises the distinctiveness of the two kinds of inquiry which result: inquiry-subordinated-to-another-activity and research as a specialised occupation.

In these terms, most action research would amount to inquiry-subordinated-to-another-activity. However, I noted that many action researchers would not find this categorisation acceptable. This is because they wish to use research as a model for transforming the practical or political activity with which they are concerned, for example in order to make it more open-minded or democratic. As a result, they demand a more equal relationship between research and the action it is to serve. Yet this gives rise to contradictory requirements, and thereby makes action research inherently unstable: it will always tend to oscillate in character between inquiry-subordinated-to-another-activity and specialised research. In this sense it *is* a contradiction in terms.

Acknowledgments

Notes on contributor

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recent years most of his work has been concerned with the methodological issues surrounding educational research. His books include: *The politics of social research* (Sage, 1995); with Peter Foster and Roger Gomm *Constructing educational inequality* (Falmer, 1996); and *Taking sides in social research* (Routledge, 2000).

Notes

1. There are some interesting hybrids in terms of philosophy, see for example Argyris *et al.*'s (1985) 'action science', which brings together the approaches of Dewey, Lewin, and Critical Theory. There are also lines of thought which share much in common with some versions of action research without employing that phrase. Examples of the latter include Popper's 'technological approach to sociology' (Popper, 1960, p. 46), Campbell's notion of the 'experimenting society' (see Bickman, 2000, pt. 2), Rothman and Thomas's 'intervention science' (Rothman & Thomas, 1994), and the notion of 'interactive social science' (see *Science and Public Policy*, 27, 3, 2000). On action research and postmodernism, see Brown & Jones, 2001 and MacLure, 2002.

2. Some of the diversity in action research arises from what sort of activity the research is designed to serve. It is perhaps also worth noting that, while the service relationship is central, it is not necessarily framed in terms that privilege practitioners. Indeed, as I have pointed out elsewhere, some forms of action research seem to involve what we might call research imperialism, in that they are directed towards a transformation of practice which re-makes it in the image of research (Hammersley, 1993).

3. Some advocates certainly do see action research as replacing other kinds. Here, for example, is Sanford: 'Like other industries, social science has been polluting its environment. Not only has it been spoiling its research subjects by treating them as means rather than ends; not only has it been disseminating a rather monstrous image of researchable man; it has been creating an enormous amount of waste in the form of useless information' (Sanford, 1970, p. 18). For a more recent, and less vitriolic, version of the same position, see Greenwood and Levin, 1998.

4. There are other sources, however. Gunz (1996) and Altrichter and Gstettner (1997) point to the work of Moreno; others have cited Collier (1945). There is also the interesting question of the influence of Marxism, notably through Lewin's relationship with Korsch, who emphasised early on the connection between theory and practice: see van Elteren, 1992.

5. However, in many ways, this work built on his earlier experience in applied psychology in Germany: see John *et al.*, 1989. It is important to note that Lewin saw action research as a supplement to, not a substitute for, basic—that is, experimental—inquiry.

6. Graebner (1986) documents the development of this notion of 'democratic social engineering', and raises questions about its democratic character. See Lippit, 1986, and M. Lewin, 1987, for defences of Lewin.

7. For useful histories of action research that are particularly concerned with education, see Kemmis, 1982; Wallace, 1986; and McTaggart, 1991. For accounts of the sources and nature of action research in other areas, see Rapoport, 1970; Sanford, 1970; Hult and Lennung, 1980; Elden and Chisholm, 1993; Reason, 1994; Greenwood and Levin, 1998; Reason and Bradbury, 2001. For the most part these histories focus on action research in English-speaking societies. However, there was also a parallel development of action research in German-speaking countries, the immediate stimulus for which was the student movement of the late 1960s. As this suggests, it was openly oppositional both to the socio-political *status quo* and to the very notion of social and educational research as an activity that is separate from political action. This movement seems to have largely died out by the mid-1980s; but at around the same time a new action research movement, influenced

by the work of Stenhouse and Elliott, emerged. On these developments, see Altrichter and Gstettner, 1997.

8. Aristotle recognised the existence of practical sciences, but he seems to treat them as subordinate in status to theoretical ones, and as unable to produce knowledge in the true sense. Interestingly, an influential ancient Greek view of practical inquiry was that, unlike theoretical inquiry, it could only be justified in terms of its usefulness. For a rather different interpretation of Aristotle, see the work of Gadamer (Zuckert, 2002).

9. There is a danger here of a false contrast between ancient and modern views. In fact, there is diversity on each side. For example, the Sophists, and Socrates too, reacted against philosophy's previous preoccupation with the nature of the universe and with mathematics in favour of a focus on the ideals which should guide human beings in their lives: see Guthrie, 1971.

10. It is perhaps worth noting that imposed relevance does not require that the problem be accepted as given, it can be reformulated.

11. For an argument that some knowledge can be treated as of value in itself, see Hammersley, 1995, pp. 140–142.

12. A very explicit example of this was the Girls into Science and Technology (GIST) project: see Kelly, 1985.

13. Perhaps the most fundamental dualism Dewey failed to transcend is that between instrumental and intrinsic value: see Rockefeller, 1991, p. 253.

14. This conception of academic life, which at one time dominated higher education and some parts of elite secondary education, assumes that research and teaching have a symbiotic relationship. But note that there has always been a tension, especially in non-elite institutions; and that, whereas in the past teaching was often subordinated to research in many universities, there is increasing pressure today for priority to be given to teaching.

15. It is worth emphasising that the distinction between inquiry that is part of some other activity and specialised inquiry must not be conflated with the separate question of *who* carries out the inquiry. Just as action research may be carried out by external agents as well as by practitioners, so specialist inquiry can be carried out by people who are occupational practitioners of various kinds. Many teachers in schools have engaged in research which is not closely integrated with their practice; and most educational research focuses on schools but is done by people who are engaged in teaching in higher education. Even aside from this, many people engaged in practical activities will sometimes experience puzzlements of various kinds that have no immediate practical implications, both during the course of action and in reflecting later on their experience. And they may go beyond thinking about the matter to actively engaging in some inquiry about it, whether seeking illumination from relevant literature, talking to colleagues, or even engaging in data collection and analysis.

16. An important consideration here is that ethical judgments are properly determined, in part, by social role: see Emmet, 1966, especially Chapter VII.

17. An important source for some postmodernists here is Nietzsche. In 1886 he summarised the point: 'There is no pre-established harmony between the furtherance of truth and the well-being of mankind' (quoted in Hollingdale, 1977, p. 198).

18. Elsewhere, I have formulated this in terms of research and other forms of activity becoming different 'worlds', in the phenomenological sense of that term: see Hammersley, 2002, ch. 3.

19. Sometimes the model here is empirical research, more recently it has tended to be philosophical inquiry.

20. On these forms of democracy, see Dryzek (1990) and House and Howe (2000). It is perhaps worth noting that research cannot operate on a completely open-minded basis—as with other activities, some assumptions have to be made if anything is to get done. Moreover, the function of criticism, and therefore the limits that should operate on it, are different for different activities: see Hammersley, forthcoming. And while there are areas within the organisation of research where something like deliberative or discursive democ-

racy takes place, this is not directed towards the production of central policies. Research communities are to a large extent spontaneously generated forms of organisation, and must be (Polanyi, 1962). Finally, even if research communities were discursive or deliberative democracies, this would not in itself make them a good model for the organisation of other forms of practice. Further argument would be required to justify this; and the problems with these types of democracy are well known.

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