An Examination of Action Research

**Part 1: Background**

In this post, I am examining the second chapter in a book titled *Action Research in Education*, written by Mary McAteer. The chapter is titled *Getting to Grips with Perspectives*. McAteer is currently a Senior Lecturer Professional Learning at Edge Hill University, located in Lancashire, U.K. McAteer has various publications in both books and journal articles and is an active member in the action research community (“Mary McAteer”, n.d.).

As defined by McAteer (2013), Action Research is a “methodology, a way of understanding and generating knowledge about the complexities of practice” (p. 2). She also makes the distinction between methodology and method, as Action Research is not a ruleset on “the ways in which this knowledge construction process can be designed” (p. 2).

Specifically, for an educator, how to practice is informed by theory, but theory is often generated by an observation of practice. Therefore, there exist an “essential theory–practice relationship…which, in the words of Campbell and Groundwater-Smith, is a form of practice that crosses ‘the boundaries between theory and practice where it creates praxis, the synthesis of theory and practice’” (McAteer, 2013, p.2).

To conduct action research, educators would employ strategies “of planned deliberation, of systematic data collection, collation and analysis, of theory testing and theory generation” (McAteer, 2013, p.3) in relation to their praxis.

Action research’s purpose is ‘enabling professionals to understand their practice better and use that enhanced understanding in order to effect changes in practice’ (McAteer, 2013, p.3). Throughout the article, I believe McAteer (2013) best contextualizes action research to practicing educations in the following statement:

For many teachers, day-to-day reflection involves reviewing the effectiveness of delivering a set of learning outcomes, of engaging learners in formative feedback activities and ensuring that a range of pedagogies is used to support the diverse needs of learners. While these are necessary and commendable activities, action research is predicated on the concept of a more critically reflective practice, which challenges the teacher to move beyond the ‘normal’ evaluation of practice to a more problematizing approach; one which raises questions, and seeks alternative perspectives. (p. 4)

To collect and then act on the reflections gathered during action research, McAteer (2013) suggests educators could be “keeping a reflective diary or log is one way of capturing these reflections” (p.4) as “those who write learning journals ‘take responsibility for discovering personal learning needs’ and ‘question, explore, analyse personal experience’. Moon (2006) suggests that such journals support metacognition, thus enabling their writers to learn about their own learning” (p.4).

**Part 2: Critical Analysis**

After learning of this methodology, I would argue that any and every educator could make use of it as most already engage in on-demand reflection and change. Action research encourages educators to make that process more meaningful and detailed by essentially researching themselves. However, I struggle with the nomenclature; why bother attempting to make the case for this methodology as valid research when the concepts of objectivity and metrics are deemed inapplicable?

Considering the research aspect of the methodology, action research develops a framework for the subjective and individual needs of its participants. Individuals who participate in action research do not all start or finish in the same place, which as McAteer (2013) points out, is a mechanism of the methodology:

It must be remembered that a particular strength in action research is the acknowledged location of the practitioner right at the heart of the process. In being constructed like this, in having ‘I’ at the core of the action research question, it is deeply personal and contextualised, drawing on the values and beliefs of the researcher, and challenging him/her to reconcile those values and beliefs with practice. (p. 11)

Therefore, the ‘data’ in action research is applicable to only the participant. This is both a benefit and a hinderance. The participant will be able to apply a plan better than anyone as they will understand their ‘results’ better than anyone. This fact however, while it is a definite gain for the participant, is what leads to my earlier question of action research being valid in the first place. When the process is both conducted and informing mainly (and really, only) the participant, it cannot be replicated nor tested.

McAteer (2013) states that this is to be expected:

Given that many teachers base their teaching on experiential learning approaches, and acknowledge the importance of the attitudinal and affective responses to these approaches, it would be difficult to imagine them describing knowledge of and in the classroom as objective, value free and not strongly bound up in the individuals involved. (p. 13)

As a teacher, I agree with this statement. However, I do not believe that it logically leads to proving validity. The expectation and/or empirical truth that a teacher will be subjective in their action research due to the nature of the career does not give it a pass as valid research. It seems McAteer is arguing that the subjectivity of analysis, results, and action are facts; accept it and embrace as part of the research.

During the process of action research, there is no necessary criterion of what sort of conclusions should be reached after reflecting upon observations, a participant can apply action research not as a project, but rather as a habit. Why not develop this concept as a way of being, rather than an academic exercise? Why make the case for the ‘research’ label?

As the participant continues the process they are simultaneously the researcher, the researched, and the reader. To better understand this, I created a framework of the action research process where I organized each aspect into a type of actor (McAteer suggested I would likely do this as a novice). *Figure 1,* the action research spiral (Kemmis et al., 2014), illustrates how I understand the stages of action research.



*Figure 1.* The action research spiral

During each stage, the participant will (likely) generate questions related to the following: their data gathering bias (what to include when observing), their reflexivity habits when reflecting (what sort of moods or values drive their reactions), and their planning process bias (what sort of things the participant believes make for a good plan).

Noting the individual nature of action research, there will be many other things to critically consider. However, as I reflect on my own values, I would start with questions on the subjects of data, reflexivity and planning. Each ‘actor’ contributes to generating questions on these subjects.

The researcher is the critical friend actor. This actor has the responsibility of generating the questions regarding quality, effort, and knowing. This actor asks the participant if they truly believe that their plan for the next cycle will succeed, and why. They ask the participant why they are focusing on particular observations rather than others. They ask the if the participant’s reflexes are rooted in a biased belief or grounded in theory.

The researched is the ego actor. This actor is responsible for assessing and questioning the participant’s opinion and feelings on themselves as the research happens. While this is subjective to the participant, McAteer (2013) questions removing the human element in educational research (thereby rendering it more objective) in asking “how should we begin to understand our role as educators were we to dehumanise it?” (p. 13). The ego actor is the human voice in the process. For example, this actor may ask how the process of the research is changing participant. Or, what emotions are flaring due the research process, which ones are supressed, and why?

The reader is the outsider actor. This actor has the responsibility of generating questions from the point of view of a third party. This is a powerful tool for the participant to employ, for it allows them to attempt an objective review of what has been researched (or at least a less subjective one). Perhaps this is rather self-serving as I have taken the stance of a lack of objectivity being a hinderance in this research. The outsider may ask: how would a person unfamiliar with the participant or the field react to the research? What sort of ideas does the research generate in others?

Overall, the employment of these actors is an attempt of the participant to generate questions in the broadest sense possible. In order for action research to be effective, the topic of what they research can be narrow, but their analysis must be broad. Wider points of view allow for a deeper intellectual investment from the participant, but also establishes a framework for a consistent ‘practice’ of the research.

However, it does not mean the research ‘results’ will be analyzed in a consistent manner. Consider a “researcher’s feelings of vulnerability, confusion, insecurity and so forth. In writing about these experiences and feelings, the action researcher in effect bares their soul” (McAteer, 2013, p. 16). While the researcher conducts the process, we mustn’t forget that their analysis of themselves will also be influenced by their feelings. Where or how does a researcher exit this subjective circle of influence and synthesize an unchanging truth?

McAteer has sold action research to me; I want to research it further, practice it, and I would encourage others to consider familiarizing themselves with the concept. But I struggle to accept it as a valid research methodology. Rather, I would accept it as the practice of continuous growth of praxis.

References

Kemmis, S., McTaggart, R., Nixon, R., & SpringerLink (Online service). (2014;2013;). The action

research planner: Doing critical participatory action research (2014th ed.). Singapore: Springer Singapore. doi:10.1007/978-981-4560-67-2

McAteer, M. (2013). Getting to grips with perspectives and models. (pp. 21). London: SAGE

Publications Ltd. doi:10.4135/9781473913967.n3

Mary McAteer. (n.d.). Retrieved July 13, 2019, from

https://www.edgehill.ac.uk/education/about/staff/mary-mcateer/