Quality features of an action research strategy

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Text in context

Talk about ‘quality’ is in fashion presently. The reasons for the following discussion, however, are connected with some specific experiences in my work background. I should clarify them so that you can put what I am saying into context. My experience derives from work as a university teacher action researching his own classrooms and doing collaborative development work with groups of school teachers (see Altrichter et al. 1993). This work is located in Austria which is a special case with respect to ‘action research’ (see Altrichter 1997). It has seen an amazing growth of interest in action research during the last fifteen years. This development was situated in a very centralist education system which—as one subtle commentator put it (Gruber 1990)—highly values stability and continuity. Under these circumstances action research was a counter-movement of school and university teachers who wanted to make use of these pockets of flexibility and opportunities for innovation which were still available.

Recently however, the situation has changed. Starting in the 1990s Austria, as many other industrialised countries, has pursued a policy of decentralisation and ‘autonomy’ in schools. Not surprisingly, this policy was accompanied by calls for quality assurance and evaluation (see Posch & Altrichter 1993, 1997). This has resulted in a growing demand for practicable, small-scale development work and evaluation both from the schools and from educational administration. Action researchers who have built up such competencies during the last years see a rising demand for their work and knowledge. In some respect they experience themselves as transferred from the fringe of educational activities to its political centre which is puzzling, satisfying and seductive at the same time. Furthermore, more and more people and projects are claiming that they are doing action research, collaborative research, self-evaluation—or ‘a kind of’ all these things.

Thus, there seems to be some need to discuss and clarify for ourselves and those we are collaborating: What are the quality features of action research? Usually, theory of science and methodological considerations are rather abstract which results in little interest paid to them by researchers themselves and by practitioners in the respective fields of practice. This, however, runs counter to one of the basic premises of action research, namely, that it aims to involve practitioners in research and development work and also in the reflection about it. Thus, there is a second question which is of equal importance linked to the first one: How can quality criteria be communicated in an understandable way to practitioners?

The goal of such a discussion is to propose some aspects for the methodological reflection of action researchers which I consider vital elements of research. And it is not to identify the correct version of action research. With respect to this I agree with Susan Noffke:

Action research has ‘multiple’ meanings and uses. Its ‘potential’ cannot be judged apart from the ‘ideological’ bases which drive its practices, as well as

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the material contexts [...] What we need to look for is NOT whose version of action research is THE correct one, but rather, what it is that needs to be done, and how action research can further those aims (Noffke in Hollingsworth 1997, 312).

What kind of methodology?

Action researchers usually feel that the traditional–empirical, vaguely falsificationist methodology is not adequate to their work. Very often they react by claiming that their research is profoundly different from traditional–empirical research and formulate ‘alternative’ methodological criteria. However, empirical research practice is in many respects quite different from a number of popular items of the canon of traditional–empirical research methodology, too. Many of the everyday activities and decisions within an action research project are not so profoundly different from those in projects based on the traditional–empirical rationale. Thus, my hunch is that it might be sensible to critically examine whether or not some claims of traditional–empirical methodology are well-founded and appropriate before devising an alternative methodology for action research and, thereby implicitly accepting, the rightfulness of traditional–empirical methodological criteria.

What we see nowadays is a profound crisis of a philosophy of science conceived as a ‘science of order’, as a ‘board of censors of research’, as an ‘institutionalised ideal method’ (see Weingart 1984). The way out, I would suggest, cannot be found by quickly devising some new norms and rules to replace the obsolete ones (see Altrichter 1991). Rather, we have to reframe our thinking about what a methodology is for and what it should look like. Ironically, Feyerabend (1976) who is usually considered as a funny, but destructive guy seems to provide the most inspiring ideas for this task. Drawing on Feyerabendian thought, I want to sketch the main features of such an ‘alternative methodology’:

- **Avoid general rules for research**: The methodology does not consist of a limited set of general rules by the help of which we can distinguish the good from the bad, scientific from unscientific research. There is no firm foundation to appeal to by which we can secure the decency of our research even from the outset. The main intention of a methodology is, on the contrary, defensive. It attempts to keep the space of research and insight open since it is aware of the fact that useful procedures and methods may be developed that we cannot foresee, and also that the procedures which we know to be problematic on a general level may be of limited worth in specific settings.

- **Insert research experience into an inventory of rules**: Feyerabend (1977, p. 368) is not against all rules nor is his cardinal rule ‘anything goes’. Rather he says: ‘I neither want to replace rules, nor do I want to show their worthlessness; I rather want to increase the inventory of rules, and I want to suggest a different use for all of them’. He denies that a specific methodological procedure may be generally superior but he suggests collecting different procedures in an inventory of rules. These rules may prepare a researcher for his/her task since they provide historical examples of dealing with research problems and illustrate the complexity of the endeavour.

- **Research into one’s research**: Research is not the application of pre-specified methods, but it is methodical in itself, and is essentially a reflexive endeavour. However, these ‘rules of thumb’ must be justified, criticised and developed within any project by the
researcher anew. The methodological structure of research, the coherence of its elements, however, have to be argued within every specific research enterprise. 'The methods we choose are... there to be tested as much as the substantive hypotheses' (Walker 1985, p. 47). Researchers must scrutinise their 'methods-in-use' to learn more about the potential and pitfalls of these methods in specific contexts and to prevent them from becoming petrified.

- **Sitate research in a democratic context**: Who is to choose between alternative research programmes in the absence of firm methodological rules? Feyerabend's solution is as follows: give the power to select research programmes to lay committees of tax-payers concerned with the respective research. His concept of 'democratic research' is clearly moulded on the liberal democratic image of elective participation. I personally feel more comfortable with the model of democratic research which action research offers: research aims to involve all those who are concerned with a practical problem in a collaborative effort to change situations according to shared aspirations.

**On the relationship of epistemological, ethical and pragmatic criteria**

What follows from this? For the practice of research and research facilitation it would be helpful to develop such an inventory of 'rules of thumb'. In the following section I want to propose for discussion and further research some basic items for such an 'inventory' which are derived from our experience in action research projects (and which also seem to reflect some basic features of 'reflective professional action'. See Altrichter & Posch 1989, pp. 29).

Before doing so, let me draw your attention to another specific aspect of our methodological recommendations: usually, methodological arguments are derived from epistemology. However, there are two additional, equally important sources for quality in action research: ethics and pragmatics of research. Research is an intervention in social situations; many research instruments are 'reactive' (that is, they stimulate persons being researched to do things they would not have done otherwise); the research situation is a learning situation itself. To account for this, action researchers bind their work to ethical codes which have to be negotiated at the beginning of collaborative work and frequently renegotiated during its course as their meaning has to be clarified on occasion of concrete cases (see section 3 for concrete examples). There are two interpretations to ethical quality:

- Action research should be compatible with the educational aims of the situation under research. For example, data collection by performance tests based on individualistic competition will be incompatible with a classroom which aims to develop students’ cooperation.
- Action research holds that profound and lasting development of practice will only occur in collaboration with other persons concerned with the situation under research and not against their will. Thus, the research strategy must build on democratic and cooperative human relationships and contribute to their further development.

Some researchers consider ethical considerations nowadays as highly necessary, others as unjustifiable hindrance of progress. Most of them, however, would view them as quite distinct from the striving for insight, that is, from the epistemological side of research. It must

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2 See, for example, the process of developing such a practitioner-based 'methodological inventory' in Altrichter 1990, pp. 230).
be emphasised that the argument proposed here is different. At least for action research which aims to integrate understanding and change in a consistent strategy ethical considerations are also highly practical and conducive for the progress of insight.

Let me explain this claim: Argyris and Schön (1974, pp. 68, 87) have distinguished two typical ‘behavioural worlds’: model I is characterised by an attitude of ‘mystery and mastery’. Actors try to remain in control of the situation and withhold information from their partners ‘as a precaution’. In model II, on the contrary, action and problem solving is seen as a shared task of all persons concerned which only can be achieved if all persons can influence the development of the situation and have access to all relevant information. Research itself is based on the accessibility of information and cannot flourish if important data are withheld or faked. If researchers themselves are playing the game of ‘mystery and mastery’ they will create a similar attitude in their partners and thereby undermine the very basis of research. In this sense, ethical claims are at the same time epistemological claims aiming to ensure that the epistemological basis for insight and understanding is not destroyed.

Pragmatic quality criteria, on the other hand, check whether the research strategy and the specific research instruments are pragmatically compatible with classrooms and teachers’ work conditions (in the sense that they are usable for teachers without too much additional training and that they fit to the economics of time and resources). At the first view, these pragmatic criteria look rather misplaced in an epistemological and ethical discussion. At the second view, one becomes aware that pragmatic, epistemological and ethical criteria stand in specific and sometimes tense relationships within each research activity. For example, a data analysis technique which is pragmatically problematic because of its extensive demands on teachers’ time is also epistemologically problematic: opportunities for insight, cross-checking and critique cannot be realised because of sheer lack of time. Additionally, it is ethically problematic: if other persons concerned cannot understand its results without extensive effort there will be a tendency to avoid negotiation.

The quality criteria

Let me quote a piece of data which is virtually ‘archetypical’ for the action research tradition:

The Humanities Curriculum Project (HCP) aimed to expose 14–16 year old students to controversial topics from the humanities and social sciences (for example, war and peace, race relationships and the like). The basic teaching strategy of the project consisted of two central ideas:

- The teacher was to be relieved from the task of providing information but rather was to concentrate on facilitating the students’ discussions as a ‘neutral chairman’.
- Short provocative pieces of information (excerpts from literature, newspapers, graphs and the like) were provided as hand-outs meant to illustrate different points of view and to stimulate students’ discussions.

One day John Elliott, who was a member of the HCP team, was asked to call on a school because of problems with the written material. Students would read the hand-outs but no discussion would start. The teacher assumed that students did not understand the information because it was too difficult. To solve this problem the teacher started to abandon the HCP teaching strategy and to explain the content of the hand-out by mini-lectures.
When Elliott heard this story he suggested collecting some more information in order to improve the understanding of the situation. The teacher selected six students who had the following conversation with Elliott:

Interviewer (I): Well, what do you think of this new approach?
Student (S): I don’t like it!
I: What don’t you like about it?
S: We don’t like these materials, these documents, we don’t like them.
I: So, what don’t you like about them? Are they too difficult to read?
S: Oh, no—Oh, no, we can read them.
I: Can you all?
S: Of course, we can read them.
I: So, what’s the problem?
S: The problem is we disagree with what they say.
I: Oh, good. You actually disagree with what they say?
S: Yes!
I: Well, then you can express your disagreement in the class.
S: Oh, no, you can’t!
I: Why not?
S: The teacher would not like it.
I: Well, why wouldn’t the teacher like it?
S: Because the teacher agrees with what these documents say.
I: How do you know that the teacher agrees with what these documents say?
S: (looking very surprised at the interviewer because of this stupid question): The teacher wouldn’t give you these documents in the first place if he didn’t agree with them, would he? (see Elliott 1986).

I am using the interview to exemplify and discuss our quality criteria and also to indicate by what strategies action research aims to enhance quality of practitioner research.

1. Action research is characterised by confronting data from different perspectives

What can we learn from this story? Firstly, that we as practitioners are theorising anyway in problematic everyday situations. Confronted with a problem (with a discrepancy between expectations and reality), the teacher reacts with an ‘explanation’, with a ‘theory’: The teaching strategy does not work because the hand-out is too difficult. Secondly, this little story illustrates that practical theories which do not take into account the interpretations of all relevant social actors concerned in the situation are in danger of yielding misleading explanations which, in turn, will result in flawed ‘problem-solving’ actions. For example, the teacher’s strategy to give mini-lectures to explain the hand-outs wrongly assumed that the students’ perception of the situation was identical with his teaching intentions. If he had put this action strategy into practice it most likely would have reinforced the students’ perception that the teacher agrees with the hand-outs. That would not only have failed to enhance student discussion but also made it more and more difficult for all parties to understand the situation.

Generally, action research acknowledges that social reality is constituted by the contributions of different actors who all hold—sometimes differing—interpretations about what is happening. When a practitioner formulates a practical theory about an issue of
his/her practice it is—implicitly or explicitly—also a ‘theory about theories’ (that is, a theory about the different actors’ views about the same social situation).

Practically, action researchers tackle this problem with the following strategies:

- **Also collect views other than your own**: Interviewing the students in our example obviously makes the ‘practical theory’ more comprehensive and improves the chance that some reasonable action strategy might be derived from it. The views of all relevant parties directly concerned by the situation under research must be represented in the ‘practical theory’. Who is actually ‘directly concerned with the situation under research’ is sometimes only found out through research itself.

- **Confront different perspectives on the same situation and use ‘discrepancies’ as a starting point for the development of your practical theory**: For example, the discrepancy between the students’ and the teacher’s perception asks for the development of some action to reconcile them—otherwise it would be impossible to successfully teach the HCP strategy.

- **Develop your research into a ‘collaborative project’**: If social reality is constituted by the contributions of different actors, constructive development of social reality must not by-pass (however benevolently) the participants’ reasoning but must eventually be a ‘collaborative task’. The confrontation of different epistemological perspectives—and their integration with respect to specific issues—is so important that such a principle is included in the **ethical codes** which govern the conduct of action research. Action research is considered ‘ethical’ if research design, interpretation and practical development produced by it have been **negotiated** with all parties directly concerned with the situation under research.

2. Action research is characterised by closely and iteratively linking reflection and action

Unlike many other research and development approaches, action research does not want to replace the practitioners’ thinking by expert knowledge but rather aims to build on it and to support it. Compare, for example, the story from the HCP: ‘outsiders’ do not come in to tell the practitioner ‘how it is done’ (because they are simply not able to do so due to the lack of ‘local knowledge’ necessary to deal intelligently with the fairly complex situations of practice). Rather they support the practitioners in their reflection on their own situation, for example, by helping them to get access to additional aspects of the situation (as the students’ perceptions were). The students’ perspectives were not any ‘new information’ brought to the situation from outside; rather they were—in principle—available in the situation, but access was difficult or too little attention was being paid.

A characteristic of traditional empirical research is the personal and institutional separation of reflection and action. The research setting is designed in the institutions of scholarly research; it has to be implemented by practitioners in the institutions of practice. Implementation ‘fidelity’ is supervised by some emissaries of the world of social science. Data are collected by professional researchers and brought back to the research institutions to be analysed.

Compared to everyday deliberation, the practice being researched and the reflection on it are strangely fragmented. This fragmentation brings some advantages:
leaving the stage of practice dispenses with the pressures of subsequent action, and, thus, wins some time for analysis;
the separation of the roles of acting and reflecting brings some detachment from the motivation and loyalties in the action system for the ‘reflection specialists’ which expands their room for manoeuvre.

However, those advantages do not come without potential disadvantages:
leaving the stage of practice does not only dispense with the pressures of subsequent action, but also from the opportunity to have the results of reflection continuously tested;
the separation of the roles of acting and reflecting may detach researchers from some of the motives and loyalties of the practice system, however, it does not detach them from all motives and loyalties. Rather, reflection specialists are governed by their own loyalties to the system of institutionalised research. Thus, there is some danger that ‘science goes its own ways’, the results of which sometimes seem to be very far off the needs of everyday practice.

Action research opts against this methodological separation. It follows that it has to build its strategy consistently on the advantages of the integration of action and reflection. Practically, that means:

- **Closely link action and reflection**: Try to express the ‘circle of action and reflection’ (see Fig. 1) in your research design. Looking back on one’s practice one tries to develop an explanation for what had happened, that is, a ‘practical theory’ (in our example students don’t discuss because the hand-outs are too difficult; or later on: students don’t discuss because they think the hand-outs reflect the teacher’s opinion and they don’t want to challenge the teacher). From any practical theory one can also ‘look forward’ and develop ideas for subsequent action (for example, teach information via mini-lectures; or later: work towards changing students’ perception of the teaching strategy).

Fig. 1: The cycle of action and reflection

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  data, information
 /
 action interpretation, ‘practical theory’
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 action ideas
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- **Emphasise ‘iterativity’ of research**: The circle of action and reflection does not stop with having developed ‘new ideas for action’. Practitioners are under pressure to act and, thus, will have to put these ideas into practice. And they will directly experience the results of their action (which are—indirectly—also the results of their reflection, of their practical theory). This should be a good reason for continued reflection which will lead to further
development of the 'practical theory'. Precisely the fact that practitioners' reflection is rooted in their everyday practice allows them to put a practical theory to a series of tests, and to develop and refine it in several 'cycles of action research'. This characteristic repetition and progression of action and reflection in several cycles of research (which we dub 'iterativity') is the main source of 'rigour' in action research.

3. Action research incorporates reflection and development of educational values

The HCP teacher felt that his teaching strategy was not efficient. He tried to develop his 'practical theory' of the situation in a way that allowed him to derive a more efficient teaching strategy. However, this is only half of the job for a reflective practitioner. Even if he had been successful with his new teaching strategy he would have had to ask himself, 'What happened to my original educational intentions (which made me adopt the HCP strategy)?' 'Which educational values do I promote with my new teaching strategy?' 'Am I happy with these values?'

Action research holds that a teaching strategy is an attempt to realise an educational idea in a concrete interactional form. As educational ideas always incorporate educational values, it does not make sense to separate instrumental questions ('how can I promote learning?') from intentional ones ('what kind of learning am I promoting thereby?'). Thus, by researching an issue of our practice we both reflect on the effectiveness and the educational value of the teaching strategies employed.

This is why action research is sometimes considered to be 'political'. However, practitioner action research is political because it is about people changing themselves and their circumstances and about informing this change as it happens, but it is not more political than any other kind of research. The difference is that the politics of other kinds of research are undeclared and submerged under the spurious guises of 'objectivity' (rather than disciplined subjectivity), 'detachment' (rather than expressing a defensible human interest) and 'value-free' (rather than expressive of particular values in concrete research situations) (McTaggart 1997, p. 7).

4. Action research is characterised by holistic, inclusive reflection

Unlike many experimental researchers, reflective practitioners cannot content themselves with checking whether their actions were instrumental in achieving the objectives they were aware of from the start. Rather, they also have to examine whether unexpected side-effects result from the action strategy or not. For example, if the HCP teacher had gone ahead with giving mini-lectures, unwanted student perceptions could have been reinforced as an unintended side-effect: the teacher is the one in possession of the truth which is not to be disputed. This side-effect obviously runs counter to the intended main effect of the HCP teaching strategy.

Reflective practitioners do not evaluate their practical experiments by asking 'Did we achieve the ends we set ourselves?' Rather they ask 'Do we like what we got?' as Argyris et al. (1985, p. 218) argued. This seemingly more vague question accounts for the fact that practitioners hold professional responsibility for the whole situation and cannot ignore side-effects they did not happen to anticipate in their theoretical expectations.
5. Action research implies research and development of one's own self-concept and competency

In our HCP story, the teacher finds out that he had misjudged the situation. Maybe, his new practical theory (students understand the hand-outs but they don't want to dispute them) calls for teaching strategies which he does not readily have available in his routine repertoire.

Unlike traditional researchers, action researchers do not research other persons' practice but their own. It follows that, by investigating a situation they themselves are deeply implicated in, they also scrutinise their own contribution to this situation and, consequently, their own competency and self-concept. This is what gives action research rigour and seriousness. Action researchers also research and develop themselves and they have to live with the effects of their theories and experiments. This is one reason for the fact that some action researchers undergo phases of anxiety, uneasiness and feelings of being 'de-skilled'.

Practically, action research aims to counter these feelings by the following strategies:

- **Peer collaboration and consultation by 'critical friends':** Action research projects or courses try to establish a conducive climate through 'group support' and 'facilitation by tutors/external consultants'. In group discussions researchers can explore if their concerns are shared by their peers and sometimes detect that what seemed to be personal inadequacies are widely shared problems. Sometimes 'external consultants' are called in as 'critical friends' who are supposed to give both sympathetic and constructively critical feedback to the practitioner's actions and reflections.

- **'Control of research' by the persons directly affected by the situation under research:** This ethical principle aims to ensure that action research is not 'high-jacked' by external persons. Stenhouse (1985, p. 57) argued that responsibility for and control of the course of practice-oriented research should rest with those persons who are directly concerned with it and who have to live with its effects in their daily practice. The principle of 'control' commits external consultants (who often have more experience in research and are, therefore, quicker in offering research designs and theoretical explanations) to subject their work to the deliberations of those people directly concerned with the situation under research.

- **Start small and develop your research gradually:** One of the clever catchwords of the environmental movement is 'think globally, act locally' and it should also form part of every sound action research strategy. It is sensible to select a relevant, relatively feasible issue out of the endless sea of all the things which ought to be done. It is reasonable to start small. However, to 'think big' (in the sense of being aware of more complex connections and repercussions of one's selected issue) will help to gradually develop one's research.

6. Action research is characterised by inserting individual findings into a critical professional discussion

Action and reflection gained a new quality in the initial HCP example because the teacher was prepared to discuss his experience outside the walls of his classroom. Action research encourages practitioners to formulate their experiences and practical knowledge in order to
share them with fellow professionals, clients and an interested public. There are at least three reasons for that:

- Participating in a professional discussion is a means of validating and developing the insights of individuals. By exposing my practice and my practical theories about it to a public discussion I have a better chance of becoming aware of shortcuts and flaws of my reflection. Chances are also better for linking my insights with other persons’ findings and for getting feed-back and appreciation for my work.
- Sharing individual insights makes them accessible for other professionals and broadens the knowledge base of the profession.
- Publication of accounts of reflective practice also expresses an important political idea—for the constructive development of the educational system it is necessary that both:

  a) educational professionals get more say in the discussion about future developments of the educational system (a precondition for that is that they increasingly make their views known and provide understandable and well-founded arguments and examples from their practice) and,
  
b) educational professionals are responsive to ‘their clients' and the public and that they are in the position to satisfactorily answer questions about their own and their institution’s accountability. Reflective practitioners need reflective clients. They must be able and willing to communicate the knowledge base of their actions to clients and to negotiate mutually beneficial ways of practising their profession (see Schön 1983, pp. 290).

Practically, we try to organise seminars in action research projects which give the opportunity to cross-read individual case studies, to critically discuss them, to relate their findings, and to examine them for overlaps and contradictions in order to establish the range and the conditions of their validity. Also, we try to provide for opportunities to publish practitioners’ case studies and to organise peer in-service training where action researchers share their experiences.

REFERENCES


