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ACTION RESEARCH – FROM ACTION RESEARCH TO CRITICAL ACTION RESEARCH

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Abstract

Although action research has been around and had been used for a couple of decades in the world of academics and practitioners, its value and essence are often under appreciated. In the Singapore education scene, some may perceive action research as beneficial especially with the slew of recent reforms that demand greater accountability not only to the product, but also the process of education such as the School Excellence Model (SEM) and External Validation (EV). Some are given the choice between WITS (Work Improvement Teams) or LCs (Learning Circles) – the latter is one form of action research. In this paper, the author will provide the rationale for the use of action research in current change agenda, and conclude by emphasising on the necessity for action research to be critical, reiterating the salient proposition that "action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes" *(Reason and Bradbury, 2001, p. 1).*

Introduction

For the past six years, the author observes that the education change agenda since 1997 has been evolving. Although the pace and extent of change have been relatively consistent over time, policy-makers in education are beginning to see the need for change at a deeper level, which aspires a development from structural to cultural change, from bureaucracy to advocacy, and from change of 'hardware' and 'software' to 'heart ware'. There is also an increasing realisation by policy-makers that schools ought to have greater autonomy to initiate innovation and change, transcending changes that are 'top-down' and bandwagon in nature.

Based on the speech made by the Acting Minister for Education during the MOE Work Plan Seminar 2003, it is apparent that MOE (Ministry of Education) wants greater diversity and experimentation at the school level.

> "Let some birds fly faster or higher, or just fly differently, even if they break the usual formation, while the rest of the flock watches and decides if they should join in and do something different too." (MOE, 2003)

Indicators such as 'careful experimentation' and 'let some' however suggest MOE's determination at capitalising on its established efficiency advantage. In other words, the call for autonomy and diversity must not jeorpadise efficiency. The key problem that the author observes is that without substantial clarity to the idea of 'careful experimentation', schools might eventually either adopt a wait-and-see mentality or copy another experimentation project without understanding the context nor the coherent values supporting it.

This problem becomes complex when one considers that the type of change required is fundamentally different from the past. In Mr Tharman's speech in iTopic convention in 2002, he demonstrated his support for cultural change in the classroom that supports a different form of learning.

> "Our goal is ultimately not about the use of technology, but about changing the culture of the classroom and school to support and motivate thinking and independent learning among our pupils … More and more of this change has to be driven by teachers themselves. Teachers who keep up with the times, and who try out new approaches to teaching, will infect their pupils with an enthusiasm for experimentation and change. It is they who will help our pupils prepare for a very different future." (MOE, 2002).

The ambiguity of the idea of 'careful experimentation', and emerging signs for greater accountability to follow autonomy such as internal school evaluation using measurable indicators and results as evidence, has led the author to propose action research as one of several platforms to help schools experience meaningful change. The author's current concern is that the usefulness of action research might go into slumber when the approach towards using action research is not true to its philosophical principles, thus resulting in seeming failures.

Rationale For Action Research

The author conceptualises the issue regarding 'careful experimentation' projects to the notion of the 'zone of ambiguity' (Diagram 1). The author observes that the notion of 'careful experimentation' has a dual message. First, schools are encouraged to exercise greater autonomy along with the call for greater diversity, but within understandably unclear OB (out-of-bound) markers. Experimentation requires a certain degree of undefined parameters. Second, schools are also required to be efficient in their use of resources in experimentation projects, which the author observes to be an 'accountability' element. This is both understandable and justifiable taking into consideration Singapore's small land size and thus lack of natural resources.
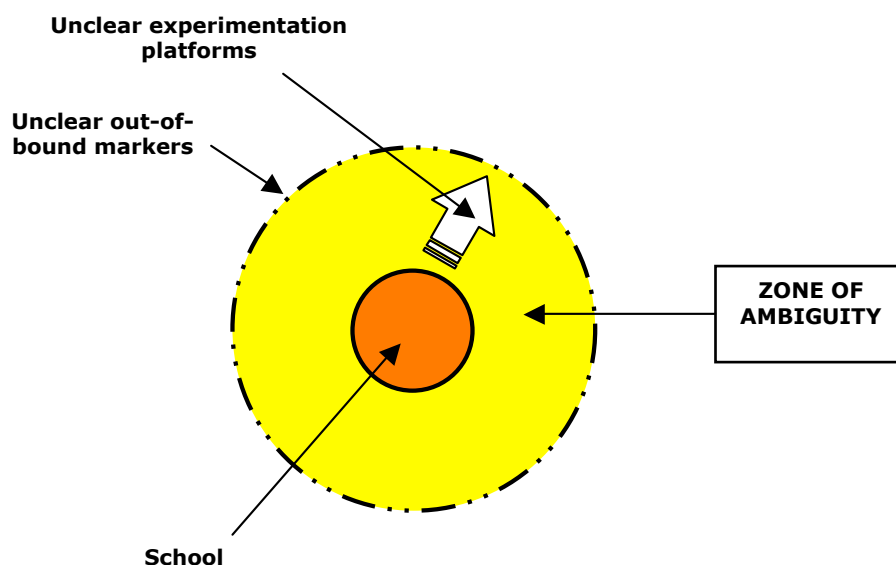

Diagram 1: Zone of Ambiguity

However, the problem rests in the lack of clarity in experimentation platform and thus ambiguity in the autonomy-accountability reciprocal relationship, which might eventually constrains schools to exert and maximise their autonomy. While autonomy requires reflection and action, accountability demands openness to critique from various individuals, groups or institutions with vested interest regarding the use of resources. It is at this juncture that the author is persuaded to propose action research as a platform for experimentation projects which has much potential in promoting autonomy and accountability, and thus reduce ambiguity and uncertainty in the change process.

Basically, action research is a cyclical process involving stages of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988). However, in the presence of several variants of action research, the following characteristics would be widely accepted (Kember, 2000):

- ❑ concerned with social practice
- ❑ aimed towards improvement
- ❑ a cyclical process
- ❑ pursued by systematic enquiry
- ❑ participative
- ❑ determined by the practitioners

Although there are debates on the nature, methodology and purpose of action research – which is beyond the scope of this paper, the author shares with McNiff (2002) that there is general agreement that action research has an identity of its own.

With regards to autonomy, action research projects are usually voluntary in basis – essentially initiated at the practitioners' level with or without advocacy. This is crucial as action research embraces a critical research paradigm, where participants are politically empowered through the attainment of praxis (integration of reflection and action), and the participation in the design, implementation and interpretation of the research study (Merriam, 2002) in order to change their social conditions. The ability to determinately decide on engagement of experimentation projects is crucial. The author believes that this helps make such projects sustainable as it heightens ownership and responsibility.

Praxis is essential in bringing about empowerment of the individual as it directs day-to-day activities with intellectual engagement by 'reflection' as opposed to 'being told to'. In comparing the notions of power and authority, Barnes (1986) qualifies power as directing a routine with discretion – thinking and reflecting, while authority without discretion. True autonomy would thus seek to empower individuals to think as opposed to 'being told to'. The idea of 'to think' also goes beyond simply solving problems, but questioning deep-seated assumptions, as termed by Argyris and Schon (1974) as 'double-loop learning'. Here, tacit assumptions are made explicit, challenged and reassessed, as opposed to single-loop learning where changes are made without changing the framework of assumptions. Involvement in action research thus has potential at bringing about paradigm shifts.

In terms of accountability, action research usually involves a multi-disciplinary approach in research. It welcomes the use of both quantitative and qualitative research methods, and the use of inductive and deductive research framework. With regards to research epistemology, it embraces Habermas' notion of knowledge-constitutive interests (1972) where knowledge is pursued for three purposes. First, the 'technical' purpose is to control and manipulate the

environment to satisfy basic needs. The 'practical' purpose is to promote mutual understanding of individual interests and needs through the use of language. The 'emancipatory' purpose is to act rationally by being self-reflexive and self-determined in order to liberate consciousness from forces of domination.

Being participatory in nature, it also cannot escape being inclusive or democratic in its processes and thus highly values inter-actions, inter-communications and inter-relationships among individuals, groups and institutions – where power relations are symmetrical – so as to transform social environment. The inclusive nature also ensures that 'intelligence' is shared across vested interest groups. Following this argument, the author agrees with Dewey that one of the dangers of inequitable intercourse is *"unbalanced intellectual stimulation"* (Dewey, 1916, pp. 84-85). Channels for accountability within an action research context are therefore maintained through these interactions, besides tangible paper evidence that usually comes at the end of research projects.

Lastly, the author observes that the values of 'collective intelligence' (Brown and Lauder, 2001) have close relation to the values of action research. Brown and Lauder (2001) defined collective intelligence as *"empowerment through the development and pooling of intelligence to attain common goals or resolve common problems"* (pp. 218-219). The concept of 'collective intelligence' emphasises co-operation over a Darwinian survival of the fittest, democratisation of intelligence, relationships that are based on trust, and making a virtue of mutual dependence and sociability based on information, knowledge and lifelong learning.

The author is in full agreement with the ideals of 'collective intelligence' (Brown and Lauder, 2001, p. 226) where –

- ❑ individuals have a stake in the economy and society
- ❑ individuals have a sense of security
- ❑ there are open networks of communication and interaction
- ❑ people have a wide degree of discretion and freedom about the way they work and live their lives
- ❑ mistakes and failures are seen to be part of a learning process of experimentation and innovation rather than as negligence or ineptitude

Criticality In Action Research

The discussion above surfaced several 'critical' elements of action research that fit the current change agenda – that is, for greater diversity through 'careful experimentation'. However, action research projects could be done without these 'critical' elements. For the conclusion, the author wishes to reiterate the need for action research to be 'critical'.

1. Empowerment. Action research must first seek to empower individuals. In the author's view, out of Habermas' knowledge interests, the emancipatory element is most essential. In practical terms, action research projects ought not to be done using coercive means – even to the extent of using hierarchical means. This will not only remove discretion and intellect, but also sustainability. In this regard, I propose that 'empowerment', as defined within this paper, ought not to be unequally distributed throughout the school, especially that of the teachers, parents and pupils by virtue of their hierarchical positioning in the school organisation.

2. Inclusiveness. The need of action research to be participatory in nature only suggests that it ought to welcome individual differences – acknowledging diversity in society. In Dewey's term it is a *"continuous readjustment through meeting the new situations produced by varied intercourse"* (Dewey, 1916, pp. 86-87). This would suggest a paradigm shift that sees persons beyond their roles, and raising their consciousness to see that persons are humans and have human worth and value. This would also suggest the need to see everyone having different personality, talents and preferences – among others.

3. Integrativeness. The embrace of diversity and complexity does not imply chaos or self-annihilation. It does however demand that individuals must be involved in conversations and dialogue to move ahead as one. In this regard, Habermas' 'theory of communicative action' (1984) may be helpful to provide a guide towards reaching consensus. In his theory, inter-subjective communications through language is central to his idea of an ideal speech situation, where a form of consensus is pursued and reached through the inter-subjective participation and communication of everyone who is affected by the decision. This consensus is reached in the co-presence of the following validity claims that participants make –

1. comprehensible and well-informed speech-acts make an objective claim to truth;
2. a normative claim to rightness; and
3. evaluative claims to authenticity and sincerity.

In addition, these validity claims can be accepted or contested as all participants have mutual critical potential. The idea of integrativeness is not limited to interactions between individuals, but also between individual groups, organisations and institutions.

Last but not least action research projects ought to address issues of inequality and inequity such as social class, gender, ethnicity and special needs to name a few. In this respect, the author proposes that research projects should address needs of the majority as well as the minority, the ranked and 'unranked', and the 'voiceful' and 'voiceless'.

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