

Action Research and Collaboration: A New Perspective in Social Research and Language Education

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The clever man will tell you what he knows; he may even try to explain it to you. The wise man encourages you to discover it for yourself, even though he knows it inside out.

Revans (1980), quoted in Action Research, Principles and Practice, McNiff, 1988, 52 Biography

Abstract

The disconnection between what counts as social research (SR) and what serves society's needs and interests results in a way of theorizing which, while useful, does not integrate theory and practice; a form of social theory that is not embodied in real lives and does not help non-academic people understand their contexts and practices. This disconnection in SR demands a new epistemology, a new way of knowing and doing research that can meet the everyday needs of people living real-life situations. A dialectical paradigm, researching and knowing from experience through intellectual study, can enable people to

rethink social theory as a practical discipline oriented towards social renewal. Within this perspective, action research (AR) can align social research and teaching to social needs because it creates a space for collaborative reflection about the mutual contrast and integration of many kinds of knowledge systems and the shared design of both the goals and the actions aimed at achieving them. Social researchers and language educators could use AR and collaboration to develop legitimate knowledge, promote social change and solve problems, while creating a space for joint reflection and dynamic interaction in language classrooms.

Resumen

La desconexión entre lo que se reconoce como investigación social y lo que le sirve a las necesidades y los intereses de la sociedad produce una manera de hacer teoría que, aunque útil, no logra integrar teoría y práctica. Dicha teoría social no está cimentada en la vida real y no ayuda a los no-académicos a entender sus contextos y prácticas diarios. Tal desconexión le reclama a la investigación social una nueva epistemología, una manera nueva de conocer y hacer investigación que le permita dar respuesta las necesidades diarias de la gente en las situaciones reales de sus vidas. Un paradigma dialéctico que consistiría en investigar y conocer la experiencia a través de trabajo intelectual podría hacer que los investigadores reconceptualicen la teoría social como un disciplina práctica orientada a la renovación social.

Dentro de esta perspectiva, la investigación acción puede alinear la investigación social y la enseñanza con las necesidades sociales, porque crea un espacio para la reflexión colaborativa sobre el contraste y la integración de distintas clases de sistemas sociales y el diseño compartido tanto de las metas como de las acciones encaminadas a lograrlas. Los investigadores sociales y los profesores de lengua podrían utilizar la investigación social y la colaboración para desarrollar conocimiento legítimo, promover cambio social y resolver problemas a la vez que crean un espacio para la reflexión conjunta y la interacción dinámica en los salones de clase.

Key words: Theory, research, propositional knowledge, dialectical knowledge, social research, action research, collaboration, language education.

Palabras clave: Teoría, investigación, conocimiento proposicional, conocimiento dialéctico, investigación social, investigación acción, colaboración, educación en otra lengua.

Introduction

Among other objectives, one of the key missions of universities and academics is the production of high-quality research and the transmission of legitimate knowledge. However, the conventional way universities and academics have for understanding, and producing studies disconnects what counts as social research and knowledge and what serves society's real interests. This disconnection results in a way of theorizing which, while useful, does not integrate theory and practice; a form of theory that is not embodied in real lives and does not help non-academic people understand their contexts and

practices. It is important, then, to rethink the type of research society demands and the type of knowledge people really need. In brief, it is necessary to reconsider the relationship between what social scholars do and what ordinary people want and need.

Rethinking social research and knowledge in higher education contexts

What has until recently been seen as legitimate scholarship in higher education contexts has been generated mainly by academics with a clear orientation to propositional knowledge. According to McNiff (2000), legitimate scholarship has largely taken the form of propositional knowledge, that is, facts and information about phenomena and experience generated by rigorously controlled experimentation, statistical analysis of observed variables and disinterested speculation. Propositional forms position people as objects of study, excluding them as knowers; knowledge is seen as an abstract, objective, value-free artifact and research as the application of scientific methods. This dominant rational epistemology encourages social researchers to produce abstract theory, which often has little relevance to ordinary people's lives in non-academic contexts.

It is advisable, then, to use a new scholarship in higher education contexts, which demonstrates a new epistemology, a new way of doing research that could better meet the everyday needs of people in real-life situations. As McNiff states, the focus of scientific enquiry needs to shift from propositional forms of theory that deal with facts and information to dialectical forms of theory that can show how people themselves explain what they do in terms of their own values and intentions. In this new epistemology, people are positioned as active knowers who are responsible for coming to their own insights about the nature of their lives and acting on that knowledge. This new research paradigm entails ideas to make self-reflection and to work out action theories to explain how knowledge is experienced and produced in and through practice in everyday contexts. This reflective emphasis is near the worlds of real-life practice which are messy and unpredictable and which are separated from the sanitized world of abstract thinking. This dialectical perspective can enable scholars to rethink social theory as a practical discipline oriented towards social renewal rather than regard it as a static, conceptual "thing" separated from everyday people's lives.

Social research through action research

Social research (SR) is meant to understand, enhance and promote social renewal, but this type of knowledge production has great limitations at the university level. According to Greenwood and Levin (2005), this limitation is due to two main factors. First, SR has a problematic elaboration. A great deal of SR is written in elaborate language that is unintelligible to the subjects of research and to those who want to and can benefit from the findings. Second, knowledge conception and production at the university level is still very restricted. The traditional conception of knowledge tends to be grounded in its explicit forms and, consequently, most universities attempt to gain or retain control over knowledge products that are understood to be self-financing and to be good investments: sciences, engineering, parts of economics, and the applied fields of management, and law. Thus, obscurity in language and traditional profit-oriented knowledge production limit and restrict the potential of SR to promote social renewal.

How, then, could SR promote social renewal and, ultimately, connect the academy and society? Greenwood and Levin state that action research (AR) can be one way to align university research and teaching to extra-university needs because it deals with real-life problems in context and allows participation by non-university problem owners. Because of its real-life contextualization and non-academic participation, AR creates mutual teaching and learning opportunities for university researchers and public participants. If managed skillfully, AR can respond positively to the connection between the public and academic environments in which universities and SR must operate.

AR can connect SR, society's needs, and social renewal mainly because, as Greenwood and Levin say, it creates a space for collaborative reflection, the contrast and integration of many kinds of knowledge systems, the linking of the general and the particular through action and analysis, and the collaborative design of both the goals and the actions aimed at achieving them. Thus, AR is a collaborative arena for knowledge development in which the professional researcher's knowledge is combined with the local knowledge of the stakeholders in defining the problem to be addressed. Together, they design and implement the research that needs to be conducted to understand the problem, and they evaluate the adequacy of what was done. AR can, then, connect social knowledge and society's needs collaboratively while developing valid knowledge and theory and promoting social change.

Action research and collaborative reflection

Central to the AR view of knowledge production is the notion that any research is a collaborative joint understanding of what the problem in focus is, an understanding in which both professionals and problem owners have a say in studying the issue the group will deal with. Greenwood and Levin also stress the cooperative nature of AR when they refer to it as co-generative inquiry built on professional researcher-stakeholder collaboration aimed to solve real-life problems in context. This collaboration is based on an interaction between local knowledge and professional knowledge, which creates mutual learning and teaching opportunities for researchers and participants and meets the needs for mediated communication and action.

But, what exactly does collaboration mean? According to Panitz (1996), collaboration is a philosophy of interaction and personal lifestyle where individuals are responsible for their actions, including learning about and respecting the abilities and contributions of their peers. It suggests a way of dealing with people, which respects and highlights individual group members' abilities and contributions. There is a sharing of authority and acceptance of responsibility among group members for the group's actions. Collaboration ties into the social movement, asserting that group members should base both knowledge and authority of knowledge upon consensus building through cooperation. Nunan (1992) states that this perspective brings together a number of disparate philosophical viewpoints and research traditions. These include humanistic education, experiential learning, systemic-functional linguistics, and psychologically motivated classroom-oriented research.

Wood and Gray (1991) state that collaboration occurs when a group of autonomous stakeholders of a problem domain engage in an interactive process, using shared rules, norms, and structures, to act or decide on issues related to that domain. The domain is the issue or set of issues that stakeholders are interested in, such as local traffic congestion or a nation's economic health. Stakeholders may have shared or differing interests in a problem domain and these interests may change over time. Some degree of autonomy is required, or else stakeholders "merge" rather than "collaborate." Rules for governing interactions must be implicitly or explicitly agreed upon. Acting or deciding is needed to reach a common objective.

Social research, action research and collaboration in language education

Stephen Kemmis (1993) states that the educational researchers' task should involve taking concrete, explicit steps towards changing the theory, policy and practice of educational research, as well as participating in the work of changing educational theory, educational policy and educational practice more broadly. He claims that SR is always (in one way or another) connected to social action and social movement. He distinguishes the connection between SR and social life as intrinsic to research as an activity, not extrinsic, or instrumental, or as a question of the enlightenment of individuals who will later set about changing the world - though these things may give clues to important aspects of a deep critical understanding and practice of action research. AR is always related to social action because, as Kemmis asserts, it always understands itself as a concrete, practical expression of the aspiration to change the social (or educational) world for the better through the improvement of shared social practices, shared understandings of these social practices, and the shared situations in which these practices are carried out. Action research, thus, offers ways in which educators can improve social life through research on the here and now, but also in relation to wider social structures and processes.

Nunan (1992) claims that in language education, teachers, learners, researchers, and curriculum specialists can collaborate for a number of reasons. They may wish to experiment with alternative ways of organizing teaching and learning; they may wish to create an environment in which everybody teaches and learns from one other equitably; they may simply be concerned with promoting a philosophy of cooperation rather than competition. However, rarely do language teachers use appropriate research methods, tools and techniques to account for the complex interplay between the social/interpersonal and cognitive/intrapersonal dimensions of language teaching, learning, and use from a collaborative perspective. AR can help language teachers, learners, and researchers make a collaborative reflection that leads to an improvement of understanding and experience in language classrooms.

Language education could definitely use AR to develop legitimate knowledge while promoting positive social change when conducting research in English language teaching classrooms. The obvious starting point would be the use of concrete problem situations in English language teaching classrooms and the development of research questions from

a negotiated joint understanding among the teacher, the students and the researcher. Starting here, the researcher, the teacher, and the students would accommodate each other and help build a necessary knowledge platform to work through the problem while transforming their own perspectives. This joint effort would bring the diverse bases of their knowledge and their distinctive social locations to bear on a problem collaboratively and to solve a real English teaching problem in context. As a result, AR could help language education research create a space for collaborative reflection and dynamic interaction, which could ultimately bring about social renewal.

Conclusion

Conducting research and furthering knowledge are two of the most challenging missions of academics and universities. The most notable challenge has to do with the fact that most theoretical findings do not necessarily help the lay public understand and/or improve their everyday lives, in part because the propositional paradigm of research that has been inherited is abstract, objective, and value-free. To complicate matters, obscurity in language and profit-oriented knowledge production can restrict the role of research and the type of knowledge generated in higher education contexts.

The benefits of less propositional and more dialectical forms of theory for SR can be many and varied. Most notably, the dialectical paradigm gives researchers and educators the opportunity to integrate theory and practice. This new form of theory is embodied in real lives and helps the non-academic population understand their contexts and practices. In this new epistemology, people are positioned as active knowers who are responsible for making self-reflective inquiries to work out action theories that explain how knowledge is experienced and produced in and through practice in real-life contexts.

In such an epistemology, AR can not only align SR and knowledge to extra-university needs, but also create collaborative learning-teaching opportunities for academic and non-academic participants. Central to the AR view of knowledge production is the concept that any research is a collaborative joint understanding in which collaboration is taken as a philosophy of interaction and personal lifestyle that respects and highlights individual group members' abilities and contributions.

In language education, teachers, learners, researchers, and curriculum specialists could collaborate through AR methods, tools and techniques

to account for the social/interpersonal and cognitive/intrapersonal dimensions of language teaching, learning, and use. AR could help language educators and researchers develop valid knowledge, promote social change and solve classroom problems while creating a space for collaborative reflection in action. Thus, a dialectical perspective can enable researchers and educators to rethink social research as a practical discipline oriented towards the social renewal of people's real-life contexts and practices.

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