LIVING ACTION RESEARCH IN COURSE DESIGN: CENTERING PARTICIPATORY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT
Action research (AR) courses provide openings in higher education to engage students, schools and communities in democratic and socially just ways within the contexts of research, classroom learning and broader social interactions. Such opportunities are strengthened when instructors design AR courses with the goal of enabling students to experience and 'live' AR principles within the learning environment itself. In this paper, we describe and critically examine how social justice and democratic principles were reflected and experienced by students in two online AR courses we co-designed. Our findings suggest AR courses embedded with AR principles can become transformative learning environments.

KEYWORDS: Action research, participatory action research, praxis, curriculum design, instructor reflection, reflection-on-practice, higher education.

INTRODUCTION
While many researchers espouse the values of action research (AR) in their work, the extent to which these participatory and social justice principles are embodied and actualized in (research) practice varies. Faculties of Education can mirror this disjuncture, promoting social justice and democratic frameworks yet lacking consistent or substantive course design and pedagogy that reflect these values (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Michelli & Keiser, 2005; Ratts & Wood, 2011; Roman & Eyre, 1997). When engaging this work in the university classroom, there is also the problem of not sharing, via publication, course designs and implication experiences. In this paper we describe our processes of developing and implementing two AR courses in our Faculty of Education. In particular, we centre our discussion on the social justice and participatory principles of AR and our efforts to implement them across our course design, including learning experiences and
assignments. Our goal has been to create an experiential and reflective on-line AR learning environment that supports students to become more equitable, responsive, collaborative and transformative researchers within their educational and community contexts.

CONTEXT

Like many faculties of education, our faculty has increased our interest in and dedication to social justice principles. In faculty program, policy and mission statements, social justice and diversity are relayed as guiding principles. Actions reflecting these values are of increasing importance. We have recently added a social justice specialization in our Master of Education Degree within the Curriculum Teaching and Learning Studies program. With our colleagues we noted that to encourage theses related to the specialization, we need appropriate methods and content courses. Restorative justice principles are used in certain situations to address issues of student academic misconduct. An Indigenous Issues Interest Group has been formed to focus on Indigenous education and general education on Indigenous issues. A LGBTQ2S and Allies committee (now SAGE – Sexuality and Gender in Education) has been established within our faculty to promote safe and celebratory spaces and to ensure our education graduates are prepared to do the same in their schools and classrooms.

Within our provincial department of education and our local school district there is a focus on safe and caring schools. A current spotlight in our school system is the establishment of a Gay-Straight Alliance within every secondary school in the province. In preparation for such clubs, and to make all schools welcoming and supportive spaces for gay, straight and transgender students and parents, professional development for all principals and teachers has been planned and is being implemented. Social justice projects are also undertaken in individual schools, sometimes initiated by students themselves.

We know that teachers’ desires and efforts to engage social justice and democratic practices in schools should be supported and empowered through our university course work. As well, we believe that it is important for university researchers to increasingly engage research practices in K-12 schools that reflect participatory, democratic principles in their interactions, relationships and initiatives in these contexts. AR courses offer openings for faculties to focus on engaging students, schools, communities, and themselves in democratic and socially just ways within the context of research, classroom learning and broader social interactions. In our faculty we have offered initial and follow-up research courses that provide a brief introduction to AR. Our design of two online asynchronous AR courses now allows students to gain concerted and in-depth knowledge and experience in participatory research. While AR courses exist in many universities, what is less clear is whether these course designs are focused on students’ experiential engagement of AR’s social justice and democratic principles within the learning pedagogy and experience itself. As instructors, we felt it was important to reflect, embody and live these principles as much as possible within the course experience itself. In doing so, it was our hope to invite a transformative learning space as a community of learners.

By transformative learning we mean “bringing life (in all its interconnections) and the dynamics of personal and societal change into the classroom context....expand[ing]
opportunities to foster learning environments that are integrally attentive to issues of meaning-making, critical reflection, social justice, diversity, care, collaboration, and community” (Gardner & Kelly, 2008, p. 1). For ourselves, AR offers students and educators a ‘theory and practice’ which directly contrasts the “currency of neoliberal educational perspectives in Canada and the United States” as is currently illustrated via “standardized curricula and testing, the pressures toward competency-based and outcome-driven measures of teacher and learner accountability, the increasing association of skills-based and content-driven instruction with notions of desired educational efficiency, and the expanded commodification of education through (the often globally-driven pressures for) economic corporate sponsorship” (Gardner & Kelly, 2008, p. 1). In doing so, we believe AR courses can be invitations to acknowledge “the whole human being and his or her place in community and the world. By seeing the cultivation of human experience as the basis of education, we multiple our ways of knowing ("epistemology"), and enrich our understanding of the world ("ontology")” (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010, p. 60).

Not surprisingly, obstacles are often encountered in promoting and enacting AR courses and research within university and K-12 settings. Participatory action research’s focus on collaboration, shared knowledge construction and ownership of the research, as well as its view of research as an emergent process with the goal to create practical change stand in contrast to many research approaches (Williamson & Prosser, 2002). Many institutional settings and structures lack the flexibility or commitment to similar research principles to enable AR to be fully engaged and to thrive in practice. Ethics review boards can impede the emergent and collaborative qualities of AR in their requests for detailed, in-advance outlines of the research process (Blake, 2007; Jones & Stanley, 2008; Zeni, 1996). Funding committee time lines can rush and restrict the time needed to meaningfully engage AR principles and processes. Institutional grading policies can limit the extent of student-instruction collaboration in student evaluation and/or credit given to students’ active participation and class engagement. The presence of AR itself becomes a tool to uncover structures, processes and principles in educational settings impeding social justice and democratic engagement.

**METHOD AND METHODOLOGY: A COLLABORATIVE EPistemology AND PROCESS**

Self-study is a methodology that supports educators “to describe and interpret” their pedagogies (Bullock & Christou, 2009, p. 77) as well as “explore pedagogical questions” (Louie, Drevdahl, Purdy and Stackman, 2003, p. 150) with the goal to better understand and improve their practice. Collaborative self-study can be seen to enhance this reflective work by creating a “culture of inquiry” (Kitchen, Ciuffetelli Parker, & Gallagher, 2008, p. 158) based on mutual interest to collectively explore an area of educational practice (Bullock & Christou, 2009, p. 77). As Louie et al. (2003) state, “collaborating researchers can ask questions, demand details, offer alternative explanations” as well as create “equally valid accounts from different perspectives” which in turn “helps researchers avoid solipsism” (p. 156). Further, as Clift, Brady, Mora, Choi, and Stegemoller (2005) indicate, “there is much more to be interrogated when a study comprises more than ‘one’ self” (p. 98).
As co-constructors of the AR courses, we identified three collaborative self-study questions.

- How would we describe our creation of an on-line environment that was reflective of AR principles?
- Did students’ course work/responses illustrate they were able to engage AR principles in meaningful/experiential/transformative ways? If so, how?
- What reflections and insights serve to enhance our course design and implementation of AR principles?

Within this reflective context we drew from Heron and Reason’s (1997) concept of “intersubjectivity”; namely, we acknowledged that “our personal knowing is always set within a context of both linguist-cultural and experiential shared meaning” and understood that “having a critical consciousness about our knowing necessarily includes shared experience, dialogue, feedback and exchange with others” (p. 283). In doing so, we engaged a participatory epistemology involving four ways of knowing as outlined by Heron and Reason (1997). As “experiential” knowers we drew from our lived experiences as AR researchers and instructors. As “presentational” knowers we engaged in aesthetic and metaphoric forms (e.g., visual images, symbols, concept maps) of meaning to articulate our “intuitive grasp” (p. 281). In “propositional” knowing we drew from our academic, conceptual knowledge. Our “practical” knowing (e.g., know-how, skills) grew via our engagement of all three prior forms of knowing. As further stated by Heron and Reason (1997), “[c]ritical subjectivity means that we attend both to the grounding relations between the forms of knowing, and also to their consummating relations. Thus it is a close relative of Torbert’s ‘consciousness in the midst of action’ (1991: 221)” (Heron & Reason, 1997, p. 282).

We drew from five data sources, including collaborative discussions, meeting notes, individual teaching journals/reflections, systematic review of the on-line course’s design and content, and samples of student course work and experiences. Student material cited in this paper has been used with student permission. In conjunction with the forms of knowing as outlined by Heron and Reason (1997), we engaged multiple analytic strategies to examine our data to gain insight on our questions of inquiry. We began by immersing ourselves in the data via multiple readings of these texts. We conducted a content analysis to examine when, where, and how AR principles were mentioned and present across the data. We compared and contrasted our findings across data sources to identify patterns and foster complex/nuanced understanding of our research questions. These processes were engaged both individually and collectively to take advantage of the dynamic interplay of individual and collaborative meaning-making. Here we individually “coded and categorized” and then created “common categories that emerged and the categorical clusters were collapsed to form general patterns” (Kitchen et al., 2008, p. 160).

**FININDS**

Here we present the findings for the three inquiry questions examined during our collaborative self-study.
**Describing the Creation of an On-line Environment Reflective of AR Principles**

In our course design we used the term Action Research as an umbrella term to include participatory action research, critical action research, community-based action research, teacher/practitioner inquiry, classroom inquiry and collaborative self-study. Amidst the variations in these approaches, a common thread is the goal to study issues/realities/conditions impacting people's lives with intent to effect "various forms of social action and research leading to social action" (Lewin, 1946, p. 35), change and improvement. Also common is the intent to engage in processes of action and reflection, often in the form of "a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the result of the action" (Lewin, 1946, p. 38).

Within this context three goals guided our course design. Two goals included wanting to create a course that grounded students in both AR theory/principles and its practice. This meant not only exposing students to quality and diverse AR theory/principles and research-based scholarship, it also meant creating a course experience which allowed students to experience AR theory/principles and research within the on-line learning environment itself. In short, we wanted to practice or embody what we 'preached' within the on-line environment itself, paying particular attention to the engagement of participatory and social justice principles as our central priority of curricular and pedagogical focus (see figure 1). The words we selected to include in this Wordle or word cloud (see www.wordle.net) describe principles we engage in our own (participatory) action research projects. They are principles articulated in the literature and are congruent with our course design goals. We sought to create a learning space that fostered "the democratization of knowledge" (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003) by creating co-learning, non-expert/non-hierarchical, collaborative learning and interactive spaces. We wanted to engage students as active knowledge constructors and experts on their own lives and learning (Brown & Galeas, 2011) and to do so in ways that created a “bridge’ between the students’ lived contexts [and knowing] and the curriculum” (Cammarota & Romero, 2011, p. 490). This meant engaging students’ multiple ways of knowing (e.g., creative, affective, cognitive, somatic), honouring their local knowledge and beginning with student voices, knowledge and experience before engaging the formalized curriculum of readings. Engaging social justice principles meant creating learning experiences to foster our individual and collective critical reflection and transformation. As in PAR, this meant, within our on-line context, “raising questions about the conditions of practice and the assumptions and values” we held as co-learners as well as taking the time to “analyse the social constraints” on our practices and “find ways to counteract these constraints and/or learn to work around them thus giving... [us] a sense of ownership of the knowledge and action generated” (Atweh, 2003, p. 28).
A third goal shaping our course design comprised our desire to design the course in a manner that ignited and strengthened students’ ability to transfer their on-line learning and experience to their K-12 classrooms. Namely, to engage AR classroom projects and embody AR principles in their teaching pedagogies. AR is not just about research, it is also a powerful set of teaching and learning principles. This meant inviting and preparing students to work against the grain of many standard teaching practices of classroom management and top-down control. In doing so, we need to be informed, grounded and wise to ensure students do not face failure or dismissal within the current school system. Here we outline how we sought to engage participatory and social justice principles in practice via our course template design, course assignments and evaluations and pedagogical processes and readings.

**Course template design**

We created an emergent, creative, flowing yet edgy, alternative visual and interactive learning environment to reflect AR principles. We used local downtown graffiti images from alleyways as course icons and navigation tools (see figure 2). This was intended to mirror the ways AR resides on the edge of many norms and ‘main streets’ of dominant research culture. Standard black text used in most on-line courses was replaced with bold and coloured fonts to reflect an informal, alive, creative, ‘outside the box’ learning atmosphere. We changed standard headings and language used in on-line courses (e.g., modules, lecture material, course instructions and expectations) to reflect a democratic and collaborative intent and tone. For instance, students were invited into learning experiences called “contact zones” to relay dynamic interactive spaces of conversation and connection across diversity, not modules. Here we drew from Torre and Fine’s (2006) reference to their PAR team a “contact zone” which they describe as “a politically and intellectually charged space where very differently positioned youth and adults are able to experience and analyze power inequities, together” (p. 24). As course instructors we shared our experiences and knowledge via what we called ‘informal instructor notes’
using a non-expert conversational styles, in contrast to using the term ‘lecture material’ and speaking as experts in third person, detached, formal style. Students engaged with the on-line site not just via standard written text but also through word walls, images, poetry and collage to relay AR principles of valuing multiple ways of knowing and of knowledge construction.

Figure 2: Course splash image

Course assignments and evaluation
Students complete two major pieces of work. For the first piece, students choose one of four options, including an AR proposal, critical analysis paper, vision paper or student-designed assignment. The research proposal allows students to think through the design and implementation of AR study of interest to them and their context. The critical analysis paper involves reviewing and critically analyzing an area of the AR literature (e.g., ethics, research dilemmas, team partnership, or principles, etc.), including the student’s own perspective on the topic. The vision paper invites students to explore ways they can integrate forms of democratic participatory inquiry and social justice principles into the daily practices of their classroom, school culture and/or community-based educational organization. The student-designed assignment allows students to be fully self-directed in proposing a piece of work that best reflects their interests as learners. Students opting for this alternative submit a proposal to the instructor to support mutual discussion and consent before proceeding.

The second piece of work involves ‘course engagement’ comprising three components. First, students facilitate a portion of on-line conversation or group work in the goal to engage the class using democratic and social justice facilitation and inquiry skills. Second, students keep a course reflective journal (in Elgg, a private social networking space linked to the online course) to share personal, professional and academic reflection, learning and experiences during the course. Here they are encouraged to draw from multiple ways of
knowing (e.g., intellectual, affective, somatic, intuitive) and expression (e.g., images, creative writing, poetry, music, doodling, photographs). Finally, students complete a self-assessment of their course learning that is then placed in democratic dialogue with peer and instructor evaluations.

**Pedagogical processes and readings**
Memorial University embraces its mandate to provide learning opportunities to the most remote and rural areas of our province and beyond. Our distance education provider uses Desire 2 Learn as its platform for online course delivery. D2L has a good variety of tools for communication, including discussion, chat, email, groups, online rooms and integration with Elluminate Live for real-time audio discussion. Although we did not employ that latter tool, wanting to maintain asynchronous learning possibilities, we did ask to supplement D2L with an open source social networking technology – Elgg – which includes The Wire – a status update tool, blog and wiki features, and file sharing and bookmarking possibilities. We thus could utilize multiple technologies to support our pedagogical choices, which included:

- Having students exchange reflections on each others’ journals/blogs.
- Having students share their thoughts and questions on other groups’ conclusions, which were arrived at within group spaces and then shared in class spaces.
- Having student groups co-create a focus for research, articulate a research design, and engage in interactive data collection and analysis.
- Having students represent and disseminate their data to their classmates and receive feedback.
- Having students create found poems from readings.
- Modelling via instructor reflections on the readings and instructor notes in the content spaces.

Of equal pedagogical importance was the tone and quality of exchange we sought to foster as a community of learners – one what was critically engaged, welcoming, informal, respectful, non-competitive and valuing of each member’s strengths and contributions. The sharing of personal and professional narratives of experience was as important as the intellectual analysis of academic readings. We sought to blur divisions and boundaries (e.g., student/teacher, personal/professional/academic) in the goal to expand our opportunities for learning and to better engage our complex interplay of subjectivities as individuals and as a group. The Wire in Elgg contributed to the building of community; it facilitated an informal on-going personal communication where students shared comments on the weather, the possibilities of school closures, their families, their health and other non-course related topics. Most online courses call for a self-introduction at the beginning of a course. Students usually post about their community, job (school or college, position) and master’s program, including number of courses completed; in Elgg, the personal day-to-day experiences relating to these topics gave greater insight into their lives on a continual basis, facilitating self-selection of collaborators for the research experience and contributing to the development of a close, caring community.
To provide more detail on these pedagogical processes, we describe the on-line research exercise. Here students work in small groups to co-construct a topic of research, articulate a research design, and engage in interactive data collection and analysis. The goals are for students to gain experience working as a democratic research team, formulate key facets of the AR research process and to engage AR’s rhythms of observation, reflection and planning/design. Action as a usual part of the action research cycle was not expected due to time constraints. (The full action research cycle is the focus of the follow-up course Putting Action Research Methodologies into Practice.) The process outlined in the first course (Theoretical and Methodological Foundations of Action Research), supported by appropriate readings, were to collaboratively:

1. select a research focus and question, formulate a plan for inquiry, and decide on the context for the research;
2. apply for ethical approval of the research;
3. collect data through the agreed upon method (one piece each);
4. analyze the collated data;
5. represent the findings; and
6. formulate an action plan of change.

**Evidence of Students' Meaningful Engagement of AR Principles**

Students represented their engagement with and appreciation of the AR principles and the tenets of social justice. Some of their representations were explicit, and others implicit. They came in the form of comments, feedback and reflections within and across the various facets of the course. We focus on the on-line research exercise to provide an in-depth illustration of how AR principles were engaged by students in intersecting, embodied ways that they experienced as transformative.

In one course, three groups were formed for the on-line research exercise. The dialogic process of coming to group consensus about the research inquiry they would undertake led to an expression of commitment to the project and interest in the outcome – they had begun working together as a collaborative team. Selected foci for the research included parent-teacher interviews, technology integration in classrooms, and social networking sites as tools for engagement and literacy learning. Interviews were the main method of data gathering, supplemented by surveys in two cases. All three groups saw the necessity of including student voices; one group felt that the voices of parents, teachers, and students should all be included in the inquiry. Teams also gave priority to incorporating participant voices in their research representations. Themes of democracy and voice took on new importance. Many students expressed the realization that, as teachers, they had never invited or heard others’ points of view on the research topic before, particularly in such a direct way, as is given priority in AR.

Course participants were completing Master of Education degrees in several of our programs: Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Studies; Educational Leadership Studies; and Health Professional/Post-Secondary Education. Thus, they represented a number of different educational fields and roles, as well as different locales across the country: K-12
teachers, school leaders, a district specialist, and a clinical supervisor in the Faculty of Medicine (with MD and PhD degrees). Each group had to negotiate common ground and a shared perspective on their inquiries. As well, they drew on their varied contexts to connect with participants that offered diverse experiences and points of view. Such multiplicity presented challenges in analyzing data and representing findings but also broadened perspectives and viewpoints. Importantly, student diversities strengthened their awareness of AR's attentiveness to the importance of working across impacted communities and sectors to foster more relevant, democratic change.

Students created a number of representations of their research experience. We noted the use of many principles of AR in student comments and representations. One group chose to research students’ and teachers’ use of social media websites in schools. They decided to re-present their findings as a found poem on a glog – an interactive poster created on the site Glogster EDU (http://www.glogster.com/). Glogs may present images, text, interactive and animated elements, video, sound, and hypertextual links. In examining their rationale for the use of Glogster, what becomes explicit is their keen awareness and desire to incorporate AR’s attunement to the engagement of multiple ways of knowing and representing to best reflect the voices of the researchers and participants as shown below. The group wrote:

- present the research in the form of a poem so that the reader also gets a voice;
- appeal on an affective level as well as a cognitive one;
- afford the use of images as well as text. “The images enhance our interpretation of the data and the choices we made with regard to font, layout, and presentation, reflecting our interpretation of the data as much as the text of the poem.”

These choices and comments demonstrate reflexivity, dialogue, creativity, and opportunities for intuitive, emergent and resonant response – all principles we had laid out and encouraged in the course design.

Another group researched the use of technology in schools from students’ point of view. They began by collecting written responses to survey questions which they supplemented with interviews. They were inquiring what technologies students were allowed to use in class, for what purposes, and how they felt about their technology use opportunities. They represented their data as a dialogue drama to engage their creativity, express multiple ways of knowing and incorporate youth-friendly forms of representation. They expressed gaining new understanding of the importance of including participant voice.

A third group investigated parent-teacher interviews from the perspective of parents, teachers and students. Each group member interviewed one of each, and then combined their data. While the group itself began with a sort of deficit view of parental interest in coming to the school for interviews (i.e., the parents or guardians teachers need to see, don’t come), their conversations gradually changed as they heard multiple viewpoints. In reading through the work and comments of the students below, what becomes evident is
the language of participatory and social justice principles being taken up by these students. For instance, notice their use of the terms transformative, power relations, social injustice, different angles, multiple voices, reflect, creative, change is needed, and opened our eyes. It would seem that this group began to embody or internalize the values of AR, and in doing so, discovered a new sense of awareness, voice, and agency as students and educators. As they indicate in the subsequent excerpts, they felt transformed.

One group member wrote (comments used with permission):

“Our narrative is a transformative one as it aims at multiple voices that take into account all people who are shareholders in a problem they believe needs fixing, which is the current way parent teacher interviews are conducted. Our study would focus in on the issue of social justice as it seeks to discover the reasons for the inadequacies that are found in the current system by listening to the more human side of story and its many perspectives, and realizing that change is needed.”

They decided to represent some of their findings as a cartoon (used with permission). Their explanation follows Figure 3:

Figure 3: Addressing the shortcomings of parent teacher interviews

The group went on to state, “So, why did we choose this method? I think the photo/comic is a creative way to emphasize the challenges that are present between the home and school. PT meetings are an opportunity to break down these barriers and work collectively for the benefit of the student. An image gives the viewer an opportunity to view and reflect on our message. Comics can be a very powerful medium for sharing
important information. They are used daily in newspapers often to share thoughts on world affairs, politics, or sometimes just for a laugh.”

They further noted: “Our study involves multiple voices which help us think from different angles resulting in an open mind which is willing to transform. Our study has opened our eyes to the problems that exist in the parent teacher interview process. It has already transformed us.”

They also reflected: “If our study were to continue, we would expect to uncover the power relations at work. Parents care for their children but do not always attend parent teacher meetings for reasons relating to social injustice. Change is needed!”

During each stage of the research process, groups planned and carried out their research activities facilitated by private chat spaces. When they had completed each research activity, they reported about it on the weekly discussion board to their classmates and received comment. As individuals, they also reflected in the form of a journal posting in the Elgg social networking space. These activities provided opportunities for communal sharing, collaboration, reflection, and feedback.

One example of this kind of feedback is a response to the cartoon displayed above (Figure 3): “I really like your re-presentation. The strength in the comic layout took me off-guard as I reviewed it...wanting more! The two sets of voices was a wonderful way of cutting through and making the dialog issues so obvious. I will never go to and see parent-teacher interviews the same again!”

Reflecting back on the power relations during the initial stages of this on-line research exercise, course participants reflected that a facilitator is needed to get activities started. Some group members seemed more ‘vocal’ than others, spending more time on the D2L group chat site (visiting more often) and this sometimes appeared initially as domination. However, all indicated that there was opportunity to contribute ideas to the planning, and thus power and decision-making was shared. Having a common goal was also important in achieving consensus.

In their reflections, group members used words like “respectful” and “accommodating” to describe the road to consensus. While often the first ideas (foci for inquiry) were the ones carried out, building of the plan for research, including the research design, context, potential participants, etc. were developed with input from all. All students engaged in strengths-based language in responding to others (e.g., “Yes, that’s a good idea” and “Yes, we can also...”) even when the suggestion turned the plan in a somewhat different direction. Asking open-ended questions and expressing openness to contradiction or disagreement was also common.

In our course design, we asked that someone volunteer to facilitate each conversation as the research design and research activities were planned and completed. This placed ‘power’ in each person’s hand on a rotating basis. Often the facilitator called for a response
from a group member by name to ensure that everyone had a chance to contribute and express an opinion toward a decision. Power was shared in a manner that allowed students to engage their particular expertise and interests (e.g., knowledge of Web 2.0 tools, ability to summarize well what the group had achieved). This was further extended in that student interactions revealed ways they brought more of themselves to their learning and group relations. For instance, one student noted that, “family lives, personal experiences, and our professional lives as well as our view of the world or positionality were all at play while discussing as a group.” Diversity of experience was often acknowledged by students as group strength; this is central to effective AR teamwork.

We end this section by citing one student comment on the course as whole (used with permission). Using any one of the multiples spaces available to them – The Wire or blogs in Elgg or Discussions in Desire2Learn, students elected to make final comments on the course:

“Last night's snow put me in the Christmas spirit and I put on my Christmas playlist (which I have listened to for 3 years now). I know all the songs on it very well! However, today I heard one of the songs with new ears. The band aid song "Do they know it's Christmas" really hit me differently this year. I normally love singing along absentmindedly...today all I could hear was the othering of "they". Those children the song was dedicated to should be a part of we!!! Anyway, just a last minute thought...I am sure this course has transformed us all :).”

This comment illustrates how the participatory and social justice principles of AR began to shape her lens on the world. Here the student is critically ‘reading’ and participating in the world in a new way.

**Further reflections on enhancing AR principles in course design and implementation**

As university professors, we increasingly acknowledge the importance of ‘making a difference’ by fostering social justice and democracy in the lives of our students, schools and communities. Our design of two AR courses comprises one such attempt. As course designers, we wanted students not just learn to about AR and its principles, we wanted students to experience and embody them in practice. It was our hope that in doing so students would be more prepared and impassioned to engage participatory and social justice principles in their classrooms and communities. AR was an excellent conduit to infuse these principles across all facets of our course design. By offering students consistent invitations (throughout the course design) to witness and engage these principles, they were able to experience how these principles can shape learning and lives in transformative ways.

As institutions of higher education, we need to foster learning cultures where students are given multiple openings to decipher the meanings and felt experiences of justice and democracy. Such cultures are akin to AR because the process of engagement itself is viewed as a powerful tool of ‘knowing’ and of co-creating curriculum and change. We found
that while short in duration, a thirteen week on-line course, if concertedly attentive to these principles (via course design), can offer students time to grow in meaningful ways while simultaneously allowing them to experience that this journey is always in living movement. Igniting this experience of change and movement is perhaps the most significant contribution instructors can offer to their course design when seeking to engage democratic and social justice principles. As Gardner (2008) states,

“[w]hen movement becomes an embodied lived relation – something ever dwelling and permeating in the present moment – deeply held patterns and styles of movement in education become shaken, subverted, and transformed. During experiences of such embodied movement, I have watched, almost comically, my best laid plans and seemingly sophisticated patterns for class become transformed into rhythms I neither recognize nor see repeated. Teaching and learning become a kind of transpedagogical process - something that draws from within, across, and beyond our constructed pedagogical borders, leaving truncated educational patterns of motion impossible to maintain” (p. 19).

At the same time, the “pedagogical borders” to which Gardner (2008) refers are a reality. Ethics approval procedures provide one example. Ethics review, usually carried out by a faculty committee for in-course research experiences (not to be published elsewhere), was particularly challenging and time-consuming and, in this case, carried out by members of the University’s research ethics board. In the case of the second AR course (Putting Action Research Methodologies into Practice), ethics approval took even longer, meaning that the research could not possibly be completed within the course semester which required that the research be continued into the next term. During future course offerings, pre-arranged measures will have to be created to address the tensions between ethics approval and semester timelines. Setting up a faculty ethics review committee – as authorized by University policy – before the course begins and offering them opportunities to review the AR principles within the course may ease concerns about research experiences within the course and remove some of the subsequent stress and time crunch for the course participants.

Do AR courses hold promise to foster social justice and participatory principles within universities, schools and communities? Yes! We suggest that the viable research proposals formulated within this course, the collaborative action and learning exhibited and acknowledged by the course participants, and the often-stated desire to share and listen to voices not always privileged within schools and other institutions are some examples of AR principles in practice. Within the course experiences, we observed committed professionals with transformed views of research and collaboration. We trust these principles will remain important to these teachers and professionals. Following the course one teacher in particular communicated with the instructor regarding his plans for establishing a Gay-Straight Alliance in his school – a challenge in a community and school where religious conservatism and current culture did not welcome such conversations and practices. The teacher hopes that the practices of AR and its principles - involving students
as collaborators, encouraging community participation, representing the current situation and possible alternatives in creative and visual ways, incorporating emergent and iterative designs of planning and action, and integrating multiple voices and perspectives in a process of gradual change - will make the establishment of the Gay-Straight Alliance a success despite the challenges.

We believe it is important to examine our own pedagogical practices and reflect on the values we incorporate within our courses. As well, we seek to assure ourselves that our intentions are realized by course participants. We also hope, in sharing our experiences, to encourage openness about graduate courses among institutions. As co-designers of these AR courses, we anticipate that these AR courses will continue to be offered, that graduate students will opt to enroll, and that subsequent offerings will continue to engage course participants in such a way that they experience and embrace AR principles in their educational work, as we, too, intend to do.

REFERENCES


**Biographical Note:**

**Dr. Morgan Gardner** is an associate professor in the Faculty of Education at Memorial University in Newfoundland and Labrador. Her participatory action research (PAR) projects focus on partnering with youth, youth-serving organizations, schools and local communities confronting social-educational barriers in the goal to foster democratic and social justice change in high school. Interconnected research themes include: youth-community-university partnerships, student voice, arts-informed research, strengths-based social justice approaches, transformative education, collaborative self-study and narrative approaches and community engagement in educational reform.

**Dr. Roberta F. Hammett** is currently professor in the education faculty at Memorial University, soon to be retired and appointed Honorary Research Professor. She received her PhD from The Pennsylvania State University. Her research interests centre on literacies, with a particular emphasis on their intersections with digital and Web 2.0 technologies, gender, identities, multiculturalism, secondary education, teacher education, media, community, and teacher professional development. Her publications include five co-edited texts, many book chapters and articles and numerous conference presentations nationally and internationally.