REVIEW ESSAY


Reviewed by Qingping Li, Central South University, China

As is known to all, teacher education is a field of scientific inquiry where future teachers receive systematic training in “worthwhile pedagogic practices” so that “they are more likely to emulate them in their role as teachers” (Morris, foreword). To make this happen, teachers in teacher education should experiment with innovative ways to improve their own practices aimed at addressing important issues in the teaching of different subject domains, such as assessment, curriculum, and learner autonomy in the era of modern technology. But whether innovation means effectiveness is an empirical issue. The book edited by Ming-Fai Hui and David L. Grossman (2008), Improving Teacher Education through Action Research, is a collection of action research reports on a series of projects conducted in Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIEd) aiming to find more effective ways of teaching in the new era.

The book includes 10 chapters plus an Introduction, with each chapter being a case study. Chapters 1-4 are put under Section 1: Assessment for Learning. Section 2 is devoted to Innovative Pedagogy, including Chapters 5-6. Section 3 consists of Chapters 7-10, Linking Theory to Practice.

The introduction was co-written by Hui and Grossman. According to the editors, the methodological choice for the projects was based on the epistemological notion that research paradigms other than action research are to answer questions or test hypotheses while action research is to “initiate change to bring about improvements in teaching and learning” (p. 2). Second, in this new era of fast change, teachers are driven into “adventurelands” where their predecessors have never trodden. The use of modern technology in teaching is an example of new domain knowledge. At the same time, teachers
continue to be held accountable for student success. As a result, dedicated teachers are required to launch forward into self-regulated explorations of effective practices while at the same time are assessed or even punished according to some external standards. Action research is a solution to this dilemma.

Chapter 1 was contributed by David Carless and explores the possibilities of developing productive synergies between formative and summative assessment processes. Possible approaches include debriefing details and criteria for the progressive assignment, working in groups for the assignment, prompt feedback on group planning of the assignment, post-assignment tutorials by the teacher, and post-assignment mini-viva tutorials. In these different stages, feedback was provided both from peers and the teacher. It’s easy to understand that feedback should be provided quickly and chances should be provided for students to act on it for learning to happen. Carless acted upon this principle and tried an innovative mini-viva, in which each group met the tutor and provided clarification or elaboration on any points made in the assignment. This not only provided feedback, but also dialogue between teacher and students.

In Chapter 2, Amy Ah-May Chan-Yip was interested in finding out how effective large-scale lectures (called mass lectures) were in helping students learn about issues concerning educational reform in the new era. The instructional technique was implemented as a mass lecture-tutorial-seminar combination offered by both tutors and guest speakers. Unfortunately each teacher was only given a small opportunity to perform and might have only had one lecturing spot. As a result, there was no ongoing reviewing or revision of teaching strategies, as is common in action research for improved practice. To remedy this shortcoming, all teachers were required to participate in all mass lectures so that each lecture could prepare. It was found that the earlier taught content items were better understood by students and they did not pay much attention to the relationship between and among different lectures. In this teaching mode, teachers grew professionally. Team members developed collegiality, and every individual teacher developed new skills and insights in giving mass lectures, preferably aided with multimedia and tutorials.

In Chapter 3, Ming-Fai Hui introduced a very interesting topic, and yet a daunting task for all teachers, cultivating creativity in the classroom. She was the writer, coordinator and instructor of the teaching module, which was divided into two parts. In Part A, students attended lectures on the understanding of cultivation of creativity. In Part B, students applied the idea of creativity to design and produce teaching materials as prospective teachers. It was found that creativity could be cultivated among students in a very fruitful way and the best approach to this end might be mindfulness journals and class sharing of completed assignments for the previous lesson.

Because of the specific political background, people in Hong Kong have been amotivation in the learning of Chinese (Putonghua, Modern Standard Chinese). Teaching Chinese to Hong Kong students is thus a very difficult and unrewarding task. Pamela Pui-Wan Leung (Chapter 4) experimented with an approach which incorporated understanding students (their expectations), collaboration with students (immediate feedback), setting realistic goals, encouraging participation (prelected exercise), offering learning alternatives and
optimizing student potentials (student presentation followed by teacher and peer comments). In chapter 5, Ming-Fai Hui aimed at teaching creative problem-solving (CPS) at the tertiary level. According to Hui, CPS is a process, but if the teacher chooses to explain the process step by step, supplemented with concepts and principles when necessary, students will find it extremely boring and no learning will happen. Starting out from this rationale, Hui decided to find out an innovative teaching strategy. The one she worked with was called the guided discovery method, in which students were engaged in authentic problem-solving tasks. Students first met with a challenge, then they brainstormed for ideas and possible solutions. After one solution is worked out, acceptance has to be sought from possible resisters. The researcher used mindfulness journals, class observation, lesson reflection and photographs as data triangulation. More action research is in order for more effective teaching methods.

Learning environments are now supported with information technologies (IT). Eugenia Mee-Wah Ng tried to equip her students with IT skills, especially skills in cooperative learning and peer assessment in computer supported learning environments (Chapter 6). Students were encouraged to discuss topics on online forums and then work in groups to present topics followed by open discussion and peer assessment. Results showed that students’ opinions were very positive on computer supported learning environments and peer assessment in these environments was deemed by them as facilitative in enhancing learning.

In this post-modernist society, a post-method approach to education is strongly advocated both by teachers and administrators. An important feature in this new change is to advocate and encourage learner autonomy (LA). Rita Shuk-Yin Berry (Chapter 7) explored ways in incorporating LA into curricula. In Study 1, she adopted an implicit approach and found that curricula incorporating LA elements were useful in engaging students in learning and facilitating learning itself. But implicit message in the curriculum is difficult to get for some learners. So in Study 2, a more explicit approach was adopted. Interview data showed that these student teachers found it very effective to link theory to practice in an explicit way, and these student teachers were very reflective in their practice, which in turn, will improve their teaching in the future.

One issue that naturally emerges with learner autonomy is how teachers manage individual differences in learning. Kai-Ming Li (Chapter 8) experimented with an e-learning environment that was developed to cater to such differences. The environment was a Self-managed Online Learning Environment for Teacher Education (SOLETE), which is a web-based platform. This platform is equipped with a resources building application through which users can upload multimedia materials to the system. It also has a built-in tool for creating internet hyperlinks. The discussion forum allows users to initiate discussions on any topic interesting to the users. Teachers create online exercises and/or surveys to track students’ progress. A special management feature was built in the system that allows students who have similar traits to receive similar learning plans or to participate in the same discussion forum. Responses from questionnaires and participants’ journals showed that results were encouraging. Both students and teachers found the system very supportive and facilitative in enhancing learning, especially among low achievers. But how
to use the discussion forum and assessment to best benefit both teachers and students calls for more empirical research.

In Chapter 9, Ina Yuen-Mei Siu implemented the process writing approach among English learners in Hong Kong. Through action research, the researcher acts as the agent of change, introducing new insights to the theory in use. The researcher found that process writing had positive impact on students’ writing: they self-corrected more and they became more interested in writing.

As has been specified by John Elliott in Chapter 10, the concluding chapter, educational action research is credited with some qualities which are not equally displayed in the case studies reported in this book. But these case studies addressed some important issues educational practitioners have to consider. The first is the issue of formative assessment, or assessment for learning. As demonstrated in this book, in the process of formative assessment, learners self-evaluated their own learning and assessed teachers’ teaching. At the same time, teachers self-evaluated their own teaching and assessed learners’ learning. This dynamic assessment effected change and both facilitated learners’ learning and improved teachers’ teaching.

The second issue is the use of modern technology and cultivation of learner autonomy. Like it or not, today’s learners are netizens. They are marked with distinctive behavioral traits and their life is closely related to modern technology such as social media, the internet, and the computer. Modern technology offers learners a great potential for autonomous learning. Any decisions on teaching, including curriculum design, materials development, teaching strategies, feedback strategies, to name a few, should be based on this fact. Ng (Chapter 6), Berry (Chapter 7) and Li (Chapter 8) provided us with important implications on this issue.

The third issue that merits our attention is how to theorize on some important educational constructs, or goals, so that teachers can operationalize them in their actual teaching. For example, creativity is an abstract concept which is hard to define and even harder to measure. But teachers may take this as the ultimate goal (e.g., Hui, Chapter 3). And problem-solving is a practical skill. But what are the criteria for the best solution to a problem, or the most creative solution to a problem (e.g., Hui, Chapter 5)? If these constructs, and many others, are to be incorporated into teaching, should the teacher still be the sage on the stage, or the guide by the side?

The contributors to this book worked to triangulate their data to make their inquiry more rigorous. In each study, more than one data collection method was used: journals, self-reflections, interviews, questionnaires, and peer-feedback. These case studies were guided by important questions arising from day-to-day practice, and they provided answers to these questions with the hope that teachers could improve their future practice. In this sense, these researchers have collectively constructed a professional knowledge base (Elliott, Chapter 10) for teacher educators who are working toward their aspirations in an era of accountability (Hui & Grossman, Introduction).