THE ENDS AND THE MEAN-SPIRITED IN ACTION RESEARCH
An Editorial

Kurt W. Clausen
Editor-in-Chief

Recently, I was informed by a member of the academy that Action Research, as a technique, really didn’t exist in a methodological sense. Instead, it was this person’s impression that the loose term was too informal in its approach and seldom identified any underpinnings of its research. From what she could see, it was not really quantitative because it was not “truth-seeking”, but neither should it be considered qualitative because it was not even “perspective-seeking”. Rather, she believed that it should be seen more as professional development, in that it offered a good pretext to free up teachers’ and other “practitioners” time to learn more about their classes. She then brought her thesis to a triumphant conclusion - however justifiable, action research could not be placed in a category of “scholarly” research.

To the untrained eye, I wouldn’t have seemed to flinch. But what appeared to be bored detachment was really two reflex arcs duking it out in my right arm. Should I drop my drink in stunned disarray and walk away or should I swiftly throw its contents in the face before me and pick up the gauntlet? A truly flight or fight moment that, had it been in nature and not a conference cocktail party, would have led to my imminent demise due to hesitation. In the end, the words just hung in the air like epistemologically-charged burnt toast. Eventually, their currents turned awry, the drinks dribbled away and so did we.

For me, the wonderful thing about conversing with people whose views you abhor is that they rile you, they aggravate and irritate you. Inevitably, they lead you to action. Sometimes they lead to a knee-jerk catharsis (i.e., exclaiming “what a chauvinist” and banging your fist on the table) and an immediate return to your traditional view. Sometimes, they lead to deep-seated antagonism (and on rare occasions neuroses) stemming from the fact that you had not come up with a good oral defense when you needed it. I think the best thing that comes out of such an attack, however, is that, sometimes, my annoyance emerges from the fact that Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach was quite right in her observation of stopped clocks.
Action Research is a technique that seems to be interested in ends. We researchers look at a situation and want to make it better. We see a classroom not functioning properly, an operating room that could be more efficient, a university program that is in need of rejuvenation. That is what seems to hold this group of researchers together rather than what pre-ordained methods should be used. Perhaps that is a strength and a weakness. It is a strength because it empowers the researcher. As a grassroots movement, we are free to do what we want, choose how we view the world, and select the method we think is important. In Blakean terms, this “informal” approach is much more fountain than cistern. We have our eyes on the horizon rather than following a dogmatic path to get there.

However, this fixation on action may also be our weakness – and many a detractor has applied a cheese grater to this Achilles heel. The question does remain whether or not they have a point. In our drive for individual empowerment, have we remained mum for too long on epistemology and methodology? Should we, as a legitimate methodology (at least according to Kurt Lewin, Wilfrid Carr, Stephen Kemmis, Kenneth Zeichner, and Sandra Hollingsworth) always make a point to discuss openly what many studies have taken for granted? The articles in this issue of CJAR would certainly argue for this - to greater and lesser extents, they all pick up the challenge laid by my drinking companion and acknowledge the necessity of a thorough discussion on areas that are usually ignored by action researchers. From the University of Alberta, Marilyn Abbott and her team outline the cyclical methods they employed to create a collaborative project at their faculty. In two separate articles, Astrid Steele of Nipissing University and Cathy MacDonald of Dalhousie University then deal directly with the issues of methodology, power, equity and transparency when using Action Research. Finally, David Costello from the Western School Board of Prince Edward Island puts a qualitative methodology on his research project to see if he can find answers using a Foucauldian lens on a mandated literacy program.

In my mind, at least, I have come to the conclusion that an action researcher is duty-bound to discuss methodology and epistemology (heck, even ontology) in every research study they publish, if only to beat “scholarly” researchers at their own game of rigour. The trick will be avoiding the mortis.

REFERENCES

