ACTION RESEARCH: TRENDS AND VARIATIONS

Rodney J. Beaulieu
Fielding Graduate University, Santa Barbara, CA.

ABSTRACT
Action research continues to grow as a research tradition, yet misconceptions about what it is and is not remains, even among scholars. For example, some mistakenly believe action research is only about professional development and is not a scholarly research approach. Some assume action research must be accomplished through a collaborative process with representative stakeholders, and others believe it can be done alone as an independent process. Some believe action research is about problem solving while others avoid discourse about problems altogether and prefer to focus on the positive aspects of a setting. And, some begin the research process with defined assumptions about the core issues while others have no presuppositions and follow a discovery process. The goal of this article is to point to the various ways action research is defined and applied and position it as a growing research tradition.

INTRODUCTION
In an editorial commentary, Clausen (2012) wondered about a colleague’s misinformed view of action research. As she put it, action research is neither “scholarly” nor “truth seeking” because it is not grounded in quantitative methods, and it is not “perspective seeking” because it is not an authentic qualitative approach. Instead, action research should be relegated to “professional development” for teachers (p. 1). I appreciate these kinds of thought-provoking arguments because they both inspire new opportunities for discussions about epistemology, methodology, and the purpose of research, and they require rebuttals for further clarification. They also remind me about how misunderstood action research is in the academic world, and how it is usually singularly associated with teacher research. This article aims to challenge the assumption that action oriented
research is neither about truth seeking nor perspective seeking, is outside of scholarly interests, and is merely a variation of professional development for teachers.

Action research is solidly rooted in scholarly research and although teacher research and professional development are prominent topics, these are not necessarily the primary goals of action research, such as those who work with organizations and communities. While it may be true that action research has not prioritized some of the key goals of scientific research, such as theory building, hypothesis testing, or generalizing about the findings, it is indeed about truth seeking, albeit contextualized truth seeking. It is also perspective seeking, usually by representative stakeholders in the research setting. The main goals of action research are to invoke the voices of stakeholders to inform the next action steps in the research, when these steps aim to improve their quality of life. Unlike other forms of interpretive research, action research is about seeking perspectives that are defined by the stakeholders, not by principal researchers, and it can involve exposing truths that are not guided by the myths of objectivity. For action researchers, seeking a singular truth or perspective is not necessarily a desirable goal. Instead, capturing the various stakeholders’ perspectives can expose a broader view of the conditions that exist in a setting and offers opportunities for developing strategies that accommodate those different views. It also requires considerable improvising along the way, with each stage of the research informing the next one.

Clausen’s colleague emphasized that action research is not truth seeking because it is not quantitative. Does she assume that truth can only be achieved through quantitative methods? Many qualitative researchers would surely challenge this prerequisite of numerating the conditions of life. As Einstein famously put it, “not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.” Is she also assuming that quantitative measures are never used in action research? She might be surprised to learn that some action researchers use quantitative data, such as performance scores, to track changes in their studies. This kind of outcome data can provide informative details about the effectiveness of the initiatives taken in the action research. For example, Rodriguez (2006) used longitudinal standardized test scores to determine if Latino students in Los Angeles benefited from action research interventions. The results indicated impressive outcome scores and generated national recognition and generous grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Perhaps one reason some scholars assume that action research is merely professional development for teachers is because teacher research is often associated with action research, as the growing body of literature indicates (e.g., Mertler, S. 2011, 2008; Bruce, S.M. & Pine, G.J., 2010; Gordon, S. 2008; Pine, G.J., 2008; Sagor, R. 2000 Stringer, 2008; McKernan, 1996; Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 1994). Moreover, action research is also associated with an old, yet growing tradition of educational research. As McKernan (1988) notes, the seminal sources of action research can be found in the Science of Education movement of the late 1800s and early 1900s, and John Dewey’s “progressive education” work. These movements involved scholars who applied systematic research methods for studying and improving educational practice. The education-based action research
movement was also advanced by Corey (1949, 1953, 1954) and his associates at Columbia Teachers College, and the teacher-as-researcher movement of Great Britain in the 1960s, which was linked to the Center for Applied Research in Education, established by Lawrence Stenhouse (1926-1982). It is unlikely that the scholars associated with these historical movements would have characterized their work as not being truth seeking or perspective seeking, or that it was merely limited to professional development for teachers.

Paulo Freire (1921-1997), the former Director of the Department of Education and Culture of the Social Service in Brazil, and an internationally recognized scholar, is another example of an educator who contributed to the advancement of action research as a scholarly way of knowing, and as a practical method to create political change in the social structure. He developed theories of literacy that resulted in successfully teaching illiterate workers to read and write in less than two months. His writings, *Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1967), and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968, 1974), promoted literacy as a method for engaging the poor in social criticism and social action, and led to important social reforms.

If action oriented research is not actually a scholarly approach, as some in the academy believe, we might conclude that it is not growing as an academic discipline. Yet, a recent database search on ProQuest (see Table 1) indicates that interest in action research for doctoral dissertation writing is steadily growing. Searching through all the registered dissertations written in English over the last dozen years, the phrase "action research" appeared in about 2% of the titles and/or abstracts, and in the last few years, at least 2.4% of all dissertations involved action research, indicating a notable increase. The gradual and steady increase in the number of action research dissertations is encouraging, especially when we consider the potential benefits that result from this kind of research. I do not mean to suggest that other kinds of research are not beneficial to society or the development of knowledge; I merely mean that action research offers a powerful approach for improving practice and solving problems.

**Table 1: Percent of Action Research Dissertations by Year**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Dissertations</th>
<th>Action Research Dissertations</th>
<th>Percent of All Dissertations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>63,876</td>
<td>1031</td>
<td>1.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>47,531</td>
<td>996</td>
<td>2.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>48,556</td>
<td>923</td>
<td>1.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>50,080</td>
<td>1,022</td>
<td>2.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>51,836</td>
<td>1,095</td>
<td>2.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>53,837</td>
<td>1,127</td>
<td>2.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>55,712</td>
<td>1,201</td>
<td>2.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>53,790</td>
<td>1,202</td>
<td>2.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>53,380</td>
<td>1,195</td>
<td>2.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>52,627</td>
<td>1,267</td>
<td>2.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>49,389</td>
<td>1,197</td>
<td>2.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>36,116</td>
<td>875</td>
<td>2.42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This new popularity in action research agendas suggests that a growing number of researchers are interested in resolving social problems through methods that are improvised, contextualized, and informed by participants who are actively engaged in change initiatives. Moreover, because action research is usually an ongoing process, these doctoral dissertations represent an ongoing commitment to improving practice in the targeted research settings, which hopefully benefit from it. If not, we might expect the popularity of action research to have diminished over the years.

An active interest in action research as a scholarly discipline is also evident in the number of refereed academic journals that are now available on the topic. Several are widely circulated (Action Research, The Canadian Journal of Action Research, Educational Action Research, Systemic Practice and Action Research, International Journal of Action Research), and numerous universities (e.g., Brown University, Washington State University, California State University, National Louis University, Southern Cross University) have generated their own systems of communication on the topic as well. Moreover, some academic associations have formed special interest groups (e.g., American Association of Educational Research, American Sociological Association). Even government-based organizations, such as NASA, an unarguably advanced scientific institution, funds research that is action oriented to improve their projects (Koutner, T., 2004). While many action research publications reflect a special interest in professional development (e.g., Grant, 2007; Zuber-Skerritt, 1992), as Clausen’s colleague noted, many are about improving conditions that go beyond one’s own development. Would the authors who contributed to these journal articles describe their own work as not being academic or not contributing to scientific projects? Do the editorial boards of action research journals prioritize professional development, and avoid truth seeking or perspective seeking? Are readers of these articles merely seeking professional development tips?

What Clausen’s colleague also implies is that scientific research is not aimed to resolve human problems through action oriented methods. Yet, scientists who are committed to managing sustainable urban water supplies, for example, (Hellström, D. Jeppsson, U., Kärrman) or increasing water productivity in agriculture to meet the goals of food production and environmental security (Molden, Murray-Rust, Sakthivadivel & Makin, 2002) do indeed apply action oriented methods in their practice. Accordingly, they reflect on historic practices, scrutinize current practices, solicit input from informed stakeholders, conduct empirical research, usually in stages, phases or cycles, sometimes with quantitative measures, and formulate action steps for improving practice. From this perspective, action research implements an agenda that prioritizes the betterment of the world, through whatever methods that can achieve this end.

It is true that if the merits of action research were tested against the criteria of positivist science, it would likely not meet the critical tests, as Susman & Evered (1978) argued. However, because action research is rooted in a different tradition than the one that spawned positivist science, it should not be judged or compared against the criteria of positivist science.
Although action research has arguably been a formal scholarly endeavor for at least 65 years since Lewin (1946) first introduced it as a methodological approach for studying and resolving workplace conflict, it continues to be the subject of methodological approaches to studying and resolving workplace conflict, it continues to be the subject of misconceptions about what it is and how to define it. In addition, several derivatives have emerged that further complicate a clear understanding of its assumptions and goals. Some action researchers insist that it is a process that involves a broad base of collaborative participation among stakeholders (Hall, 1992; Park, 1992; Park et al., 1993; Heron & Reason, 2001; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2007), while others define it as an autonomous process for improving individual practice, such as teacher research (Stringer, 2008; McKernan, 1991; Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992; McNiff, 2005). Some emphasize a democratic process for soliciting input from a broad range of stakeholders that include many voices, some of which might not be active participants (Mischen & Sinclair, 2007; Gaventa, 1988; Freire, 1972;). Others emphasize the researcher’s independent reflections (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998; Burchell & Dyson, 2005; Torbert, 2006; Shi, 2010; VanGluten, 1999). Some emphasize action research in large communities (Stoecker, 2005; Senge & Scharmer, 2001), while others focus on more narrow settings, such as organizational action research (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010; Bruce & Wyman, 1998; McNiff & Whitehead, 2001), or educational action research (Corey, 1949, 1953, 1954; Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 1994; Stringer, 2008b; Sagor, 2000). Some prefer to focus on problems and solutions (Lewin, 1946; Freire, 1970; Stringer, 2008a; Sagor, 2005, 1993; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2007; Park et al., 1993; Whitehead & McNiff, 2006), others ignore problems and focus on the positive aspects of a setting, such as appreciative inquiry (Reed, 2007; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Whitney, Trosten-Bloom, Cooperrider, 2010), and still others prefer to minimize preconceptions altogether, such as grounded action (Poonamallee, 2009; Simmons, O., Gregory, T., 2003).

Although the body of literature about action research continues to grow and become more differentiated in its viewpoints and specializations, we can still find a common definition: action research is about improving the quality of human life, acquiring knowledge to become better practitioners, and developing strategies to address problems. Unlike other behavioral or social research approaches, it is not primarily focused on theory building, though it can be grounded in theory or aims at theory building (Gustavsen, 2001; Frisby, Maguire, Reid, 2009; White, 2004; Dick, Stringer & Huxham, 2009; Friedman & Rogers, 2009). It is not concerned with hypothesis testing, though it can involve speculation about the research findings (Lewin, 1946). It is not necessarily preoccupied with generalizing the findings across other settings because the research is usually conducted at a single, unique setting, such as a case study. And, unlike other forms of traditional research, it usually is an ongoing process, with each stage or cycle of research informing the next. Moreover, action research is about doing research with others, not doing research on others, setting it apart from other scholarly research traditions (Heron & Reason, 2001).

One final difference between some interpretations of action research and more traditional forms of research concerns the socio-political topics that are the center of focus. Kurt Lewin’s seminal work on race relations (1946) and earlier scholars, such as W.E.B. Du Bois’ research (1868 – 1963) are good examples of this focus. An important American sociologist, Dubois is given little recognition as an action researcher, even though he is...
probably one of the most formative contributors to this tradition. He used actual data with systematic and rigorous methods to present arguments against the racist rhetoric that formed the basis for the Jim Crow laws, lynching, and unfair educational and employment access. His *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), in particular, was a socio-political argument against the prevailing assumptions about Blacks being responsible for the failures of post-Civil War Reconstruction Era. While he never used the term *action research* in his work, he evidently combined a scholarly perspective with his activism, and inspired and collaborated with like-minded civil rights activists and scholars to create social change.

Another example of the socio-political value of action research can be found in the grassroots activism of the Bumpass Cove Citizens Group (Marsh, 2002) – a 1970s ad hoc civic group that mobilized Tennessee citizens who discovered that illegal toxic waste was contaminating their community’s drinking water source, making them ill. Concerned citizens became organized, sought help from outside legal and scientific experts, and halted the dumping. Another example of political activism through action research is the Yellow Creek Concerned Citizens’ struggles to take care of a toxic creek in Middlesboro, Kentucky (Williams, 1999). In both these examples of action research, the process begins when citizens perceive an urgent problem that needs to be resolved; they then launch community-based activism, collaborate with scholars, scientists and politicians, and learn through an emergent process. While not all community activism is grounded in action research, these two examples point to the improvised dynamics that eventually lead to collaboration among professional groups to solve urgent problems.

One variation of community action research is participatory action research. One major difference from other forms of action oriented research is that ordinary individuals play a central role in drawing attention to community issues, motivating others to become involved, and sustaining the work (Park, 1999). Participatory action research is usually initiated by local citizens who are affected by an urgent problem in their community, such as in the examples above. In this kind of community-based action research, those who initiate the work are not necessarily scholars who are trained in research, or activists who understand political maneuvering. Instead, they tend to be individuals who become action researchers after struggling with the power structures, and deciding to work collaboratively with others in the community to address the issues. As members of the community, they explore the parameters of the problem, and they devise methods for collecting data and analyzing them, and planning intervention strategies. While participatory action research might begin from a grassroots effort, members might also seek outside help, such as legal experts, scientists, and other professionals. Much of the day-to-day work is carried out by local community members.

In sum, because action research is often practiced in educational settings and motivated by the need to improve practice, it is understandable why some in the academy confuse it with teacher research or professional development. As I hope I made clear, there are many variations in action research, and it resists simplistic definition. As a growing tradition, it fits well with scholarly research agendas that are aimed to improve the quality of life.
REFERENCES


**Biographical note:**

Dr. Rodney J. Beaulieu is a Professor and the Founding Program Manager at the School of Educational Leadership and Change, Fielding Graduate University, Santa Barbara, CA. He guides action research in educational systems, healthcare agencies, and nonprofit human service organizations. His doctoral degree in Educational Psychology is from the University of California, Santa Barbara.