...AND LOSE THE NAME OF ACTION
An Editorial

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Like most kids of the McLuhan generation, I have vivid memories of images from television. Alongside the many comedies and adventure shows I watched, I remember commercials as miniature sagas conveniently repeated every half hour in case I missed them the first time. Sometimes, they involved an action-packed 30 seconds of Kool-Aid jugs crashing through brick walls or otherwise mild mannered men applying Hai Karate to become Kung Fu masters. Interspersed with these small vignettes, came the voice of Victor Kiam. In a fatherly way, he talked about using an electric shaver that his wife had given him and would close by saying “I liked it so much, I bought the company.”

Lately, my mind wanders back to this phrase as I think of the progress of Action Research over the past few years. Of course, the whole methodology as outlined by Kurt Lewin emerged from an industrial rather than educational setting. That being said, however, the direction of the approach grew distinctively out of the grassroots of any organization from the beginning of the movement in the 1940s. This is why it has been seen so often by the research and business community as a trifling endeavour, amounting to little, with shaky groundings. Seen in its worst light, it was just plain subversive. As such, for most of its history, this methodology has been ignored by the “higher ups” in the organizational hierarchy in favour of more large scale, quantitative research – and this holds true for the educational enterprise as much as any other business. So, for generations, Action Research seemed to stumble along, promoted by some prophets (see Argyris, 1994; Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982; Stringer, 1999, Whitehead & McNiff, 2006), tried by some, shunned by many; rising and falling with the interest and expendable cash of the day.
In the last 20 years, however, Action Research’s star seemed to be in the ascendance as even large companies and governments seem to be promoting this participant-based research. Funds have been loosened in larger school boards, for example, so that teachers and other participants could engage in large-scale action research projects. On the surface, this is good news indeed as society seems to be turning to more inductive techniques to solve complex and locally-based issues. However, on closer inspection, is this the case? Has Action Research hit the big time, or has the methodology changed so radically with the addition of this new level of bureaucracy that it is no longer recognizable?

This conversation has been one that has been taken up in the recent works by Steven Jordan, an editorial board member for CJAR, and Marc Spooner, one of our review panelists (see Jordan, In Press; Jordan & Kapoor, 2016; Spooner, 2018). Both discuss the neo-liberal agenda and how it has appropriated the term “Action Research”: While research is indeed done at the grassroots level and collaboration appears between levels, in actuality, most of those engaged in the physical labours have little control over the focus and ultimate conclusions of each massive study.

What seems to hold together all our studies for this issue is how they straddle larger studies under the Action Research umbrella without succumbing to the top-down approach to handling the projects. Shelli Casler-Failing from Georgia Southern University, for example, incorporates the big business of LEGO into the classroom but, with the accent on Social Constructivist Theory, manages to focus on the classroom rather than any larger agenda. Similarly, when Donna San Antonio from Lesley University undertook a collaborative project dealing with social-emotional learning with a local school, work and focus was undoubtedly negotiated and settled upon based on the mutual respect of the partners – as this methodology would naturally dictate. Even Lauren McNamara’s large scale research project involving seven schools represents a true collaboration where, through involvement of the staff members and university researchers, meaningful experiences emerged through the specific locations. Finally, while Anne Bonycastle seems to take on the whole concept of the school orchestra, turning the idea of composing on its ear, she grounds the work in the school location, making her study a true composition of Action Research. Even our book reviews this issue seem to follow this trend – both deal with cities, but do so by breaking metropolises down to their grass-roots.

What becomes quite clear to me over years of immersion in the world of this methodology is that bigger isn’t necessarily better – at least without some thought as to where you are rushing. It is more important to be constantly vigilant; to make sure that what you are doing stays true to the vision of what you intended. So easily, one can be seduced by the promise of increased funds, help, or exposure. This is something of which the research community should be aware and avoid before we once again hear a familiar voice exclaiming: “I liked Action Research so much, I bought the methodology”!
REFERENCES


