

The case for pedagogical action research in psychology learning and teaching

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IT IS JUST OVER 12 years since *Psychology Teaching Review's* first Special Issue on action research in psychology. In the guest editorial for that issue I suggested that pedagogical action research can be controversial, and that for some academic psychologists it appears to be no more than curriculum development rather than 'real' research (Norton, 2002). I wonder how much has changed since then. It is still difficult to find many studies in the published literature about systematically investigating aspects of our own teaching psychology practice through an action research approach, although there are more sources that use key word phrases like 'reflective teaching' and 'professional practice'.

In this paper I am going to consider why this might be the case. I intend to argue for a more inclusive approach to pedagogical research which enables us, as psychology academics, to think more critically about how we teach and how we might improve our students' learning.

Apologia

I am aware that I am breaking with 'traditional scientific discourse' when writing this paper but I have a specific aim in so doing. Action research has a long and chequered history and it sits uneasily alongside the scientific approach. Most psychologists and indeed most readers of *Psychology Teaching Review* will be familiar with the objective passive third person voice when reading journal articles, but one of the avowed intentions of action research is to challenge the status quo. So instead of starting traditionally with a literature review followed by some critical pointers, I am beginning with a hypothetical vignette depicting what could be a

typical learning and teaching problem in psychology.

Sam is a chartered psychologist who has recently been appointed to teach counselling psychology to third-year students. She has taken the university's Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (PGCLTHE), a generic course accredited by the Higher Education Academy, and is now in her second year of full-time lecturing. Sam's students are disappointed that by taking her counselling psychology course they cannot actually get BPS accreditation as it is not one of the core courses. Rather than take the route to chartered counselling psychologist most of the students are beginning to think of other ways of becoming a recognised counsellor. During the course of her teaching Sam gradually becomes aware that there is a subtle but palpable rejection by students of psychological approaches to counselling and more of a generalised 'talking helps' approach. To counteract this unforeseen turn of events, Sam designs her assessment tasks and assessment criteria to more fully require recognised psychological theories and methodologies, but to her dismay, the students appear to be 'going through' the motions and paying lip service to the assessment criteria rather than genuinely engaging with applying psychological theories to counselling issues.

So what would you advise Sam to do? You might suggest that she consults with fellow psychology lecturers to see if they have experienced similar problems. There is a growing realisation of the power of professional networking (Pataraiia et al., 2014; Vaessen, van den Beemt & de Laat, 2014). Alternatively you might advise her to draw on her own experience from what she has

learned on the PGCLTHE course and design even more focused assignments. A third option might be to suggest that she invites counselling psychologists as visiting speakers to talk to her students and hopefully stimulate more engagement with psychology. All of these possible solutions are interventions and if Sam were to carry out any of them she would, as a good conscientious teacher, be acting on certain assumptions about what is wrong and what needs fixing. She might then design some sort of 'before and after' measure to see if her students improved following the intervention. Such an approach would be a classic piece of pedagogical research (I have carried out many similar studies myself) but sometimes the resulting improvements can be disappointing because researching in educational contexts is complicated. What is demonstrably measurable may be only a pale shadow of a difference or improvement in desired learning. There is much in the literature about assessment and authentic learning and how in taking the psychometric approach to assessment we sometimes assess what is measurable rather than what is meaningful (Eisner, 1993; Orr, 2005). The same point applies when attempting to evaluate the effects of an intervention using academic performance measures. Alternatives such as student satisfaction questionnaires which are commonly used in pedagogical intervention or innovation studies are similarly missing the reality of contextualised and complex changes in student learning.

Nevertheless, taking an evidence-based approach is seen as an important way forward for educational research and practice, indeed it is one of the fundamental tenets of the Higher Education Academy (HEA Strategic Plan 2012–2016) but we need to think carefully about what an evidence-based approach to learning and teaching actually means. Biesta, (2007) has put forward the argument that such an approach ignores the moral and political consequences of educational research. This is difficult terrain but one we should not

shrink from as psychologists, as academics and as educators. I will return to this later when I discuss praxis.

Let us imagine that instead of any of the above options, Sam takes an action research approach. This would afford her a very different set of insights which would potentially affect both her own teaching practice and her students' learning experience. I do not think I am overstating it to argue that pedagogical action research might be transformative in the way Sam thinks about psychology as a subject, her students as learners and herself as a university teacher in the UK higher education system. In the rest of this paper, I want to explain why.

What is (pedagogical) action research?

Pedagogical action research is a specific form of pedagogical research and a specific form of action research. Pedagogical action research is carried out in an educational context (usually but not exclusively in tertiary education) by ourselves as academics who teach and/or support student learning. It has the express aim of improving our own teaching and assessment practices and our students' learning:

'The fundamental purpose of pedagogical action research is to systematically investigate one's own teaching/learning facilitation practice, with the dual aim of improving that practice and contributing to theoretical knowledge in order to benefit student learning.'
(Norton, 2009, p.59)

However, action research is not without its critics. One of the reasons why it is viewed with some suspicion is due to the fact that it is very difficult to define, and there appear to be a number of different 'camps' with their own philosophical and moral imperatives. Some commonly cited definitions include the following:

- The 'classic' definition of action research. *'Action research is simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the*

situations in which the practices are carried out.’ (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p.162)

- **Practitioner** action research.

‘Action research is a term which refers to a practical way of looking at your own work to check that it is as you would like it to be. Because action research is done by you, the practitioner, it is often referred to as practitioner based research; and because it involves you thinking about and reflecting on your work, it can also be called a form of self-reflective practice.’ (McNiff, 2002, p.6).

- **Participatory** action research.

‘It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.’ (Reason & Bradbury, 2005, p.1)

To further complicate matters, action research is not a single research approach but a broad umbrella term for what is actually a wide range of research paradigms and processes, each with its own philosophies and rationales. While action research is generally attributed to Kurt Lewin (a well-known American psychologist in the 1940s) it has evolved since then with different emphases depending on the researcher’s purpose. Historically there have been two distinct traditions:

1. Education-oriented linking research to improvement of practice (British);
2. Action research linking research to bringing about social change (American).

Improving practice

What is crucial about action research in general and pedagogical action research in particular is that it is a way of doing research and acting to change a situation at the same time (the interaction of practice with theory). The key question referred to by Whitehead (1989) is *‘How do I improve my practice?’* If we return to Sam and her problem with students who appear to be rejecting psychological approaches to people who have emotional difficulties, then

she might decide to carry out a pedagogical action research study in which she discusses with her students their reasoning and perceptions of the role of psychology in this field. The insights she gets from these discussions (research interviews) might lead her to change the way she is teaching while the research is still ongoing and in the middle of the course. I am aware that such curriculum and assessment changes often are all but impossible mid-course due to quality enhancement or quality assurance stipulations, but I have always believed that we do have a certain amount of autonomy in how we teach our students. It might be that Sam consults her students and together they organise a debate where clinical psychology is pitted against talking therapy which might then rekindle their understandings of the importance of evidence-based theory-practice links in an applied setting such as counselling. This would be a form of participatory action research where students become co-researchers. Of course, this is a hypothetical situation and would be only one of numerous ways in which Sam might react. The course of action research cannot be predicted from the outset. It is a process that has much in common with complexity theory where what happens in action research is emergent, and non-linear (Phelps & Hase, 2002). Some have called it messy research and indeed Cook (2009, p.227) has suggested that mess is essential:

‘Investigations into the ‘messy area’, the interface between the known and the nearly known, between knowledge-in-use and tacit knowledge as yet to be useful, reveal the ‘messy area’ as a vital element for seeing, disrupting, analysing, learning, knowing and changing.’

For those of us who have been educated in a scientific approach to research, this naturally seems well out of our comfort zone and not ‘proper’ research at all. It was many years before I could move away from what had been inculcated in me as a psychology undergraduate and then as an academic psychologist, to experimenting with these ‘looser’ ways of carrying out research into

my teaching and assessment practices. I continue to struggle but I am increasingly aware of the rich insights and understandings that working in the ‘messy area’ can bring.

Methodology

Because action research is not a specific method of data collection, choosing our method, which can be anything from positivist experimental design to autoethnography (Starr, 2010) should be based and justified to suit our own specific learning and teaching context. Often, pedagogical action research sits comfortably within a multi-methodological space, but that does not mean that rigour is sacrificed (Kember, 2000). It is important that we make our subjective decision-making, collection of data and interpretation completely transparent. As such, we should include reflexive accounts of our own enquiry and the research process we have chosen as well as reflecting on our pedagogical practice. Pedagogical action research is not just reflective practice, however, nor is it simply a form of curriculum development (typical of a scholarly approach to learning and teaching). It becomes real research when we open up our investigations and findings to peer scrutiny and review (informally in departmental or institutional based seminars, and formally in conferences and peer-reviewed journal papers).

In writing this paper, I am aware that to some extent I am mirroring the non-linear approach of action research by moving backwards and forwards in what is sometimes conceptualised as overlapping cycles, as I want to return here to its underlying philosophical rationale (in terms of research, pedagogy and more widely to the social world itself). There are as many different schools of thought about the underpinning theories of action research as there are methods, ranging from the praxis-inspired philosophy as propounded by Paulo Freire (a Brazilian educator 1921–1997) with its emphasis on the political and challenging

the status quo, to the pragmatic epistemological position of Hammond (2013, p.613) who suggests that this is particularly appropriate for educational action research because:

‘...pragmatism tells us that what we know is provisional and arrived at through a transaction between agent and environment. Action research finds further methodological support in the pragmatic position that knowledge is generated within indeterminate situations, requires habits of reflection and analysis and results in warranted assertions which attend to the social and moral consequences of action.’

Praxis is a fusion of theory and practice; it is seen as theory plus action. According to Tierney and Sallee (2008), praxis refers to a particular philosophy used to guide and conduct research. It involves the community or group under study in the research process and has the explicit goal to empower marginalised peoples and help them challenge their oppression. As the Freire Institute proclaims:

‘It is not enough for people to come together in dialogue in order to gain knowledge of their social reality. They must act together upon their environment in order critically to reflect upon their reality and so transform it through further action and critical reflection.’

This might seem far-fetched in the confines of university education but we only have to think about the current emphasis on widening participation, welcoming diversity and propounding inclusivity. Is it too big a step to think of disadvantaged students as oppressed by our current education systems? Even if we disagree with the term of ‘oppression’, we may well be interested in working alongside our students as co-researchers in a more equal relationship in which we as teachers can more clearly understand the students’ experience as learners. Bovill and Bulley (2011) have done some impressive work with students as active participants in curriculum design and there is an increasing number of papers that report research projects with students as co-researchers

(see, for example, Allin, 2014; Butcher & Maunder, 2013; Hill et al., 2013). There is also a paper in this Special Issue which has been co-written by students, (Lintern et al., 2014). The advantage of students as change agents through being researchers includes giving them a voice, although this does not always mean empowering them to change unfair educational systems as the Freire Institute urges. Welikala and Atkin (2014) found that the experience of making multiple meanings of the research data can bring about an epistemic shift for students having gone through the process. However, they also point out some of the challenges when working with students as co-researchers such as the unequal power relationship and the complexity that attends changing of student identities.

When I began my involvement with pedagogical action research, I was looking to see how I could improve the written feedback I gave on my psychology students' essays and I took a straightforward pedagogical intervention approach (Norton, 2001). I designed an intervention where the feedback I gave was one of three types and then I evaluated whether one type of feedback was more effective than the others in terms of students' self-reported questionnaire responses to questions about academic self-esteem, motivation and overall usefulness following the feedback; somewhat disappointingly I found no differences. However, the reflections that I carried out following my findings led to modifications in my feedback practice as well as to a whole series of further action research cycles. In this very early action research study I clearly aligned myself with the positivist paradigm and never even thought to question it or to see if an alternative paradigm and methodology would be a better fit. To do so would have been a risk and put me at the very margins of the discipline, which at that time was not where I saw my career going. According to the International Benchmarking Review of UK Psychology (2011) educational, applied and organisational psychology is not well-

integrated with mainstream psychology, and indeed it was seen as one of the weaker areas of UK psychology. There is clearly more work to be done in this respect. Closer links between educational research and mainstream psychology research would bring useful synergies and multiple understandings which would certainly promote a wider acceptance of pedagogical action research.

In terms of methodology, evidence-based changes to learning and teaching fit well with our training as psychologists; we believe in a scientific approach, our methodological skills set help us to feel comfortable in that area, however, evidence-based decisions have been critiqued on the premise that what works in one context may well not work in another (Cartwright & Hardie, 2012). Biesta (2007) argues that the '*what works approach*' is too simplistic and will not work because of a need to widen our thinking about the relationship between research, policy and practice in education. If we focus just on the technicalities of finding out what works then we are ignoring the questions of the ends themselves such as the moral and political questions about what we should see as educationally desirable. Re-reading that early research report on feedback, I now see how limited my action research approach was but I also recognise how it was the first step in what has been a long and increasingly adventurous process. For that very reason, I would not hesitate to welcome positivist research within the action research family, and if it encourages psychology colleagues to take those first steps, then that is very much a desirable state of affairs. Each one of us makes our own decisions about how far we want to go but the process of carrying out pedagogical action research inevitably means we scrutinise our professional practice more closely.

Over the years, as I have read and learned more about action research I began to find myself moving towards a more praxis-based view where the aim of action research is not just to find out what works but is to actually question the whole way in which we

teach psychology and perhaps even the discipline of psychology itself. This has not come overnight, nor am I insensible to the ethical and moral difficulties such an approach poses. Instead I prefer to value and respect all approaches to action research whether positivist intervention testing, collaborative or participatory research where students become co-creators of knowledge. Each method has something of value to add to our understanding of learning and teaching both generally and in our own specific discipline of psychology and its allied subjects.

The link with reflective practice

One of the reasons why action research may be misunderstood sometimes is that it can look as if it is simply a process or a procedure but this is not the case. Following a procedure on its own is not action research; there needs to be some commitment to change and this is why I find it so appealing. I want to change some aspect of my own practice based on researching the problem and looking for multiple explanations, but at the same time I want to contribute to our knowledge of learning and of teaching. To do this it is important that I go beyond the actual research and reflect on my findings in relation to my practice. In pedagogical action research, a reflective stance is integral and essential. Reflection is not always comfortable. My favourite and often repeated quote comes from the American philosopher and educator John Dewey (1859–1952) who said: *'reflective thinking is always more or less troublesome... it involves willingness to endure a condition of mental unrest'* (Dewey, 1910). I like this quote very much as it is when things trouble us that we begin to look more critically at what we do. This means looking at how we teach and assess psychology and how our students learn. Being reflective is in itself of little use if it only serves to reinforce our tacit assumptions. Common examples of assumptions that can exist about students include they are not as able, motivated, interested, academically literate or numerate as they used to be. A more specific example is the

frequently heard comment by academics that students are not bothered to collect feedback but are only interested in their grades. Many years of research have challenged this 'assumption' and given us a whole new pedagogy related to the purpose of feedback, its timing and the need for it to be more dialogic (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Nicol, 2010) and yet the assumption persists. Why?

To be a real agent of change, our reflection must be directed outwards not inwards. By this I mean we need to test out our assumptions and our thinking either with colleagues informally or through the more formal processes of peer review. Where pedagogical action research contributes to reflection is that it enables us to base our reflections on a systematic process; it also encourages us to look at the wider context and perhaps even question or challenge the status quo (praxis). For example, why do we still commonly use the essay as a typical assignment when assessing psychology students? Is it because we have always done it like this, or this is what the external examiners expect? What would be the consequences of replacing essays with assignments that are more 'authentic'? Whitelock and Cross (2012, p.6) give examples of authentic assessments such as 'a test of how well the student thinks like a practitioner (is 'in-tune' with the disciplinary mind)' or an assignment that 'uses resources taken specifically from real-world case studies or research'. In this way reflection may drive an actual transformation of our assessment perspective.

The effects of pedagogical action research on teaching psychology

Conventions in how we teach and assess psychology today appear to be remarkably similar to how they were decades ago. Hartley (2012, p.7) in reflecting on 50 years of teaching psychology in a Special Issue of *Psychology Teaching Review* suggested *'...that not much has fundamentally changed in our approaches to the teaching of psychology... we appear to use the same methods... content is*

changed... but we still appear to teach in the same way.' Entwistle (2012, p.13) in a response paper added *'that the additional pressures being faced by colleagues in all departments makes it difficult for them to justify the time and effort required to make significant changes in the curriculum or experiment with more innovative ways of teaching.'* It is these two observations that I believe can be addressed by pedagogical action research.

1. Teaching psychology 'in the same way'

The importance of reflective practice was highlighted by the work of Schön, (1983) and is now considered to be a crucial part of a professional approach to university teaching (Brockbank & McGill, 1998; Light, Calkins & Cox, 2009). As I suggested earlier, if we simply engage in untried introspective reflection it might lead to erroneous thinking and consequent changes in our practice that are not necessarily beneficial. Alternatively, it might lead us to thinking that no real change is necessary. Colucci-Gray et al. (2013) argue that action research links research with everyday professional activities and can therefore be a tool to explore some of our 'taken for granted' practices to build knowledge in the personal, professional and political realms. The assumptions and beliefs that we may hold dear cannot be challenged, however, unless we are willing to make our thinking and our actions more open to professional peer challenge. This, in essence, is the fundamental aim of doing pedagogical action research (Norton, 2009).

2. Time and effort

Psychology academics are busy people facing a number of different pressures. We are expected to be subject experts, active researchers, excellent teachers and sometimes, income generators. In view of these demands it is scarcely surprising that there is not much time or energy left to devote to learning more about teaching better. A pedagogical action research approach puts us in charge of our own learning about

psychology pedagogy. It addresses very practical needs and it is done in order to address a learning and teaching issue that is of relevance to us when we are undertaking the investigation. Crawford (2010) writes about the complex interplay between structure (the educational context) and agency (the individual's sense of enactment) and highlights how an academic's professional background and allegiance to the subject and subject-related bodies also needs to be considered when thinking about academics' perceptions and attitudes to their own professional development.

In this paper I have argued that carrying out pedagogical action research in psychology draws together reflective practice and engagement with the relevant literature in a way that contributes both to pedagogical theory and to improving our own learning, teaching and assessment practice. It can also be a springboard to establishing a track record in psychology education research. By serving several needs at once, such an approach makes good use of the scarce resource of time and effort. Returning to Sam, we could advise her that taking a pedagogical action research approach may launch on her a path that has many unforeseen benefits for both her teaching and her research that will extend far beyond the original 'problem'.

Final reflection

Any research initiative which steps outside conventional practice is bound to be speculative, so it requires a certain amount of courage as the rewards are not always immediately obvious in terms of career progression. However, in terms of personal satisfaction and for those who are motivated by the aim to improve their students' learning and to move pedagogy forward, pedagogical action research can be very satisfying. In my own academic career, I have considered pedagogical action research to be one of several strings to my research bow. While the publications understandably bring me satisfaction perhaps the biggest personal

reward has been the opportunities it has afforded me to share pedagogical insights and enthusiasms with like-minded psychology academics along the way. In the same spirit I hope this paper will encourage readers to explore its potential for themselves.

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Invitation

Participants at that workshop have contributed to this Special Issue and are in the process of establishing a community of practice in pedagogical action research. New participants would be most welcome. Readers who are interested in joining this network can contact Sophie Cormack (sophie.cormack@sunderland.ac.uk) who has set up a discussion board – <http://www.universityteachingofpsychology.net/forum/>

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