

Action Research Reflection Paper

Looking back over the assignments and items associated with this compressed action research process, my over-riding feeling is that my response to the topic: *Helping each other prepare for the post-CCT future in which each of you attempt to create supportive community for your professional and personal development* was D.O.A.

By this I mean that although the scenario resonated with me, I did not immediately understand how it could be the basis for an action research project, or more precisely, how the scenario could lend itself to multiple ideas and proposals. My first reading resulted in thinking that response to the scenario would have to be a survey – e.g. of my classmates, of CCT graduates, or of CCT faculty in order to get input on, respectively, a) whether a post-CCT supportive community would be important to them; b) whether they had indeed formed post-CCT support communities for themselves; c) whether they had any experience, insights, or advice on post-CCT support communities. Ironically, my first reaction to the scenario – detailed in the Freewrite – was probably closer to the intent of the project than the direction I eventually took.

I dismissed the idea of a survey fairly early on because I did not feel that I could design survey questions that would provide meaningful information and receive answers back in the time frame we had for the project. I was also troubled by a lack of clarity about the scenario itself because it seemed to me to include an assumption that was NOT made explicit, to wit: the assumption that a ‘long-expressed’ need for community meant that the need for community was a given for all CCT students. The formulation “Ponder the claim that ‘a long-expressed need of CCT graduates is for community... to support their CCT-related steps in professional and personal development after they graduate,” leading to “what kind of actions could flow from this claim (if any)”, might have opened up the scenario to include the possibility that just expressing a need does not necessarily lead to action. I think that what I am trying to say is that the way the scenario was written foreclosed any tinkering or reflecting about the claim itself, leaving one to focus mainly on how to bring about this situation of a supportive community. Maho put her finger on this in an early class, although her survey questions: “What does creating supportive community for your professional and personal development mean to them? What kinds of support are they looking for? What are their purposes of looking for support (talking, meeting, or

learning)?” seemed to expect answers that would be answered in the affirmative – which they were, for the most part.

I also grappled with the scenario as action research by comparison with the definition of action research elaborated in Greenwood & Levin:

AR refers to the conjunction of three elements: research, action, and participation. Unless all three elements are present, the process cannot be called action research. Put another way, AR is a form of research that generates knowledge claims for the express purpose of taking action to promote social change and social analysis. But the social change we refer to is not just any kind of change. AR aims to increase the ability of the involved community or organization members to control their own destinies more effectively and to keep improving their capacity to do so. (Greenwood & Levin, 1998, p. 6)

It was this aspect of social change that I found lacking in the scenario as written. While developing or being a part of a post-CCT support community might be a worthy objective, I did not think that it approximated the kind of community-defined problem that action researchers embark upon because ‘...the first step professional action researchers and members of a community or organization take is to define a problem that they seek to resolve.’ On the other hand, I can see the CCT Graduate Program as a whole being a kind of action research because it does “... promote social change and social analysis ... and increase the ability of the involved community [CCT students] or organization members to control their own destinies more effectively and to keep improving their capacity to do so.” The limiting factor of just three weeks obviously meant that the scenario could only offer a very compressed taste of AR, so it is clear that it could not touch every base to the degree envisioned by Greenwood & Levin.

All of this is by way of explaining why I find it difficult to relate my AR experience to the readings on action research. While the readings all had something worthwhile to say about action research, I could not connect my project in any direct way to any of the readings for the following reasons:

1) Scale of project. My investigation into the *qualities, attributes, and dispositions of people who join or develop support communities* was undertaken as an independent researcher. This contrasts with the Calhoun book, which was how to implement schoolwide action research on a communally-chosen focus. I found the whole book valuable for solid, practical advice on how to build constituency groups and buy-in of the project. Her six tangible conditions and three

intangible beliefs that need to be established in order to support an AR project were obviously distilled from many years' experience in leading and conducting action research projects. I appreciated the emphasis she placed on incorporating professional literature into the "funnel" along with site-specific data. This phase helps to lessen the tendency to parochialize the effort and provide a conceptual base for the whole project. My research on qualities, attributes, and dispositions could have been part of a larger project that had as its focus the factors that need to be present in order to create a post-CCT support community, but it could not be considered an AR project on its own.

2) Scope of project. The CEDAC report depicted the wide ranging efforts and constituency groups that were required to turn around the economy in the Canadian city of York. The project, involving the crafting of a strategic plan by "cross-sector task forces" looked at multiple variables and was composed of multiple processes, including an ongoing implementation phase. I was particularly impressed reading about the workshops on the Vision, the Obstacles, and the Strategic Directions that the City of York identified as they tried to figure out how to address economic renewal of their city. These stages are familiar ones to anyone who has participated in a college-wide planning process, but – unlike the planning I have personally participated in – the results in York seem to actually have been implemented, rather than being bound in a nice volume that sits on the library shelves, leaving things pretty much as they were before the process began. Although I could relate to the CEDAC study from this perspective, again, it was difficult to see how it related to or informed my AR project.

3) Number of processes/phases that encompass the project. The Rokovich reading described the lengthy evolution of a model of staff development that changed from basically being in-service teacher training to a range of professional development activities and initiatives aimed at effectively educating educators. The San Jose Unified School District partnered with many diverse groups (universities and colleges, members of industry and business, individual school sites, school reform organizations) to gradually establish a Master Plan for Professional Development that was multi-year and multi-phased model. In the process of constructing this model, they learned valuable lessons about collaboration, resourcing, accountability, leadership, community-building and the necessity for tolerating a certain degree of messiness (the last also mentioned by Calhoun). By contrast, my project was restricted to a literature search and did not involve – or seek to involve – a constituency.

I did find the Madison Metropolitan School District's pages on Classroom Action Research to be very helpful in differentiating what action research is – and particularly what it is not:

Action Research **is** systematic and involves collecting evidence on which to base rigorous reflection.

Action Research involves problem-posing, not just problem-solving. It is **not** research on other people.

Action Research is **not** just about hypothesis-testing or about using data to come to conclusions. It is concerned with changing situations, not just interpreting them. (MMSD, 2001)

These points make it clear to me that my project was not full-fledged action research so much as it was information-gathering and hypothesizing about who would seek to join a post-CCT support community. The essential ingredient – the desire and need for change or improvement – was not group-generated; we each took individual angles on the claim that we could help *each other prepare for the post-CCT future in which each of [us would] attempt to create supportive community for [our] professional and personal development.*

I do not intend by these remarks to imply that I found the compressed AR project without value – it was of great value in making me really think about the whole process and analyze my part in it.

In the end, part of the discomfort I felt was also due to coming to grips with the KAQ(f) framework and its relation to action research. I believe that this is a valuable tool but I wonder whether it helped or hindered us in our action research projects. I was not clear about the relation of the KAQ(f) framework to the AR project as we undertook it from our various angles, including how to use the KAQ(f) on the wiki. Judging by how other students responded to the KAQ(f), I would say I was not alone in this regard. Maybe it is a case for demonstrating rather than saying/writing, because although I thought I understood the instruction that using "... this framework to spell out your thinking and expose it to the scrutiny of yourself and others is intended to produce critical dialogue and reflection in the first quadrant of the Action Research cycle," in reality I did not find it so. Does action research require this kind of tool or is it better used in cases or situations where there may be muddiness about knowledge claims, and the actions that flow from them? Even in these cases, though, I wonder whether all knowledge

claims automatically can or should lead to action. I think that the addition of a Brainstorming wiki page in which students throw up their initial ideas is a good one. It should help not only with clarifying the nature of action research but also make explicit the functionality of the KAQ(f) framework within the AR process.