

Collaborative Action Research: Continuing the discussion

PAC3 at **JALT** **2001**

**Conference
Proceedings**



**International
Conference
Centre**

**Kitakyushu
JAPAN**

**November
22-25, 2001**

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In 2000, four of the participants in this workshop (Anne, Steve, Ethel and Shin) worked together over the year to plan a joint plenary presentation at JALT2000 which focused on collaborative action research as a way of teacher learning about practice. We collected data from teachers working in Japan, who were attending workshops on action research (AR), through short surveys about their experiences—the challenges, the hardest things to understand about AR and the issues they had investigated for themselves.

During the conference in Shizuoka we had several discussions with the two other participants (Neil and Ian) who expressed their interest in joining the group. We planned this follow-up workshop as a way of continuing our own email conversations on collaborative AR and meeting at PAC3, as well as inviting others who are interested in AR to join us. We hoped to explore common issues and problems participants have experienced, either when thinking

about doing AR, or carrying it out either individually or with other colleagues. As our focus and interest are in a collaborative approach, we wanted to make the session as participant-based as possible. Collaborating to present and consider our ideas with others was the main purpose of our activities in this workshop.

The workshop format was planned over 2001 through our email conversations and the visit of one of the group, Neil, to Sydney. Neil and Anne had an opportunity to talk in more detail about possible ways of shaping the workshop. Although, different options were considered, our group eventually jointly agreed on the following format:

Overview of workshop

1. Introduction

Introduction by presenters:

- Brief outline of where they work and their main action research interests
- Summary of major themes (Anne Burns)

2. Exploring the issues

Discussion in groups according to one of the following interests:

- small (scale) projects (individual, including case studies, pilot studies, and/or simply gathering data through journals and field notes)
- collaborative or multi-organizational projects

(teacher to teacher(s), teacher(s) to student(s), NS to NNS teacher(s), teacher(s) to academics(s), teachers-researchers to administrators in the same or different organizations)

- never done a project (and/or have no idea how to get started)

3. Sharing experiences

Sharing of experiences and questions about AR:

- Discussion of issues/questions from facilitators' and participants' own experiences
- Discussion of group understandings of and strategies for these issues

4. Framing the issues

Drawing together the groups' key questions and their own solutions/understanding:

- Identification of major issues discussed and groups' responses
- Preparation of a "poster" for plenary session

5. Plenary discussion

Sharing insights and looking ahead:

- Group presentation
- Sharing of ideas for continuing the discussion
- Concluding remarks (Anne Burns)

Introductions

In order to provide an experiential base from which to stimulate the discussion, we began by providing brief introductions to our own backgrounds and experiences of AR.

In his graduate program, Steve took a required course, *Research in Language Teaching*, which exposed him to the idea that teachers could conduct research on their own classrooms. The concept of “disciplined inquiry” helped him see that we can’t just call anything we do in our classes “research.” There has to be a little rigor to our inquiry; there are methods and accepted ways of proceeding. Since then, he has participated in various action research projects and even interviewed some leading action research practitioners for *The Language Teacher* (see Cornwell, 1999). His most recent project, now in its second iteration, is looking at L1 usage in L2 classrooms, trying to find out why students use Japanese in English discussion classes. The students work as co-researchers to examine how to use more English in the classroom.

Neil has been an English teacher at Saitama University for several years and has completed several action research projects in that time. The most satisfying of these have been in teaching writing, because, he says, he been able to see real change both in himself and in his students,. Every year he has focused on one particular aspect of teaching writing, making real efforts to work

‘with’ students rather than ‘on’ them. Looking initially at feedback strategies, he has moved to doing small-scale case studies of both ‘good’ writers and novices. At the moment he is writing by email to a small group of volunteers who write a diary every week about their writing struggles - one issue that has emerged is how to use translation as a positive writing strategy rather than just as a strategy of last resort. It is this issue of the use of L1 in the writing process that he will next focus on as he enters yet another turn of the AR wheel.

Ian began teaching in Japan over 15 years ago. He wanted to learn how to become a better teacher, so joined an M.A. in TESOL program, where he became familiar with the concept of AR. He believes AR offers him opportunities to understand his teaching through systematic inquiry. His own research studies look into the benefits of discussions between NS and NNS teachers on issues of common concern in teaching, the relationship between learner and teacher development over time through interview-conversations, and the construction of narrative case studies of learners.

Ethel is presently involved in two AR studies at the private university in Tokyo where she works. One is an individual project attempting to understand and describe the language learning attitudes, practices, and beliefs of students as they engage in handwritten and electronic dialogue journals. The study views learning as a social practice and investigates the micro and macro

contexts of learning. The other is a collaborative project, a curriculum evaluation and development study, she is undertaking with colleagues at her university. In both studies she is interested in exploring the possible links between AR and sociocultural theory.

Shin spent 12 years teaching Japanese as a second/foreign language. He first encountered AR as a graduate student at the University of Hawai'i. When he started teaching at Nanzan University, he established a collaborative AR team with three other teachers of Japanese using teaching portfolios. This was very fruitful for their development as language teachers. In 2000, he published "Nihongo Kyooshi no tame no Akushon Risaachi". He has twice conducted AR: First, on "what should I do when students give me a correct answer orally? Second, on the "process syllabus" where students participate fully in determining content, pace, roles of teacher/students and evaluation. He has now introduced AR into a practicum course in Japanese as a second language, and is attempting to create a nation-wide network of AR for collaborative teacher development.

Anne summarised some of the major themes that emerged from these descriptions. One was that the entire presenter group saw AR as increasing their own empowerment as teachers. It's a way of bringing teachers into the research community and potentially providing them with a stronger voice in educational policy and decision-making. Several presenters highlighted the role

of AR in problematising (in the positive sense) things that had always intrigued or bothered them as teachers. They also referred to the important role AR has played in professionally developing their careers, as well as giving opportunities for breaking down the isolationism and individualism of most teaching situations through the collaborative work they have undertaken with teaching colleagues or students.

Exploring the issues

We then asked participants to form groups according to their experiences and interests in conducting action research. Serendipitously, we ended up with three groups each with about 10-11 participants!

Sharing experiences and framing the issues

Small-scale group

This group was facilitated by Steve and Neil. The participants were mainly working in Korea, Japan and Thailand. They ranged from people who had already done some action research projects to others who wanted to get started. Some of the issues raised included what to do with data once you get them, how to choose a project from many interesting possibilities, how to find co-researchers when everyone is busy, how to use action research as a staff development tool to encourage teachers to look at their classrooms, and how to keep motivated and manage the time needed. An observation

was made that every teacher should be looking at what goes on in the classroom - isn't that action research? One participant questioned people's motives to do action research. He voiced the concern that in the rush to get published, many teachers are jumping on the action research bandwagon.

Collaborative group

Shin and Anne were discussants in this group. Ten people also mainly working in Korea, Japan and Thailand joined in, ranging from individuals who had already conducted AR but wanted to get ideas for working with others, to people involved in large scale professional organisations and teacher education institutions. All were experienced in some form of AR and raised several interesting topics including L1 use by the teacher, voice modulation in teacher interaction, the influence of affective factors in learning (including learning about teaching), the motivation of Chinese students, the use of English in elementary schools, and writing development. Some issues raised related to larger-scale AR questions, such as: how AR differed from "reflective teaching" – were they different points on the same continuum?; how AR networks could be set up through which members could negotiate their own meanings as teachers and support each other; how AR could be used in a critical or political sense to subvert (official or unofficial) forms of "transmission" pedagogy.

Other issues were of a more practical bent: how to process large quantities of data (we agreed this applies generally to qualitative research); how to challenge your own assumptions about your questions or data; and how to be comfortable about exposing your teaching when you work with others.

"Beginner" group

Ian and Ethel facilitated this group. There were eleven participants, including two Thai teachers, two high school teachers (one JET) and most of the rest were working at the tertiary level. The Thai teachers are required to do research by their universities. A couple of teachers had started on their own, by keeping a professional journal or conducting a survey, but were left to wonder if what they were doing could be considered part of action research or not. Overall the group had mixed experience in doing research. They were not sure how to go about collecting data and there was no support system of like-minded colleagues nearby to help them get started and continue. The nagging and confusing question on all of their minds was "What is AR?". It seemed that each knew a part (problem, reflection, data collection) of the "cycle" of AR but wondered how it all fitted together. If you're a teacher educator how do you work with these varying "levels" of understanding? How do you start off if you have almost nil experience in doing research? What kind

of reframing do you need to do (or do you need it?) if you've already been trained in the "scientific tradition"?

Plenary discussion

Though there was a general consensus that AR offers teachers an effective way to develop professionally, there was also a prevailing sense of ambiguity and hesitation. The issues arose not only of how to get started—how to form focus questions that emerge from specific needs and conditions particularly when researching alone—but how to maintain the confidence to continue and develop the research. In other words, problematising our practice, addressing the "systematic" requirements of AR and collaborating with colleagues were three key issues on everyone's mind.

We all felt there was one possible solution that linked the issues we had discussed - collaboration with others. Although collaboration is not a panacea, working with others can be a superb way to initiate, manage, and sustain action research. Teaching itself can be very isolating and doing research can sometimes reinforce that. In contrast, regularly 'talking', through email or face to face, can be so helpful at all stages of research to maintain interest, to get help, or simply to find another friendly point of view. Participants seemed to agree and many decided to work together in the coming months before the JALT 2002 conference through an email network, which has now already begun, a week after the

conference!

The initial topic chosen was to look at L1 use in the language classroom, with participants mentioning such issues as translation strategies in writing, code switching by students, and giving teacher instructions. It will be exciting to see how this group can initiate, focus and sustain their enthusiasm as they support each other in carrying out action research through collaboration.

Concluding remarks

Inevitably, distilling what was an enlivening and engaging process (at least for the presenters, and we hope for the participants!) into this static account loses some of the flavour and atmosphere of the workshop. Nevertheless, we've attempted to capture the dynamic nature of our discussions. In writing this paper, we've tried to maintain our commitment to a collaborative process by exchanging our accounts of our own backgrounds and experiences and pooling our recollections of the issues the groups raised. We've also injected some of our own responses to the issues along the way. Perhaps we can use Ian's comments to summarise what we hope many of the participants felt about the tenor of this workshop:

Ultimately, I would argue that action research particularly helps teaching. Research in some form should have a place in the lives of all teachers, not just those who teach in universities. Involvement in some kind of research process allows us to

become revitalized, re-motivated, and to recapture the original enthusiasm that made us want to be teachers. As teachers' jobs become increasingly demanding and complex, the dangers of

burnout also become greater. Deeper understanding of our teaching and students' learning through action research is an effective way to minimize this danger.

Some useful references and resources on AR

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