Facilitating collaborative action research: Some insights from the AMEP

Abstract

This paper explores collaborative action research processes in the AMEP over the last decade. It refers first to some of the major projects undertaken nationally and describes the steps involved in identifying and conducting these projects. Its main purpose, however, is to describe a recent project whose aim was to identify some of the factors that need to be taken into account when AMEP professional development personnel initiate action research projects at the local organisational level.

Background

Over the last few years action research as a means of developing reflective practice (Schön 1983; Cruickshank 1985; Zeichner and Liston 1996) has increasingly been advocated in the second language teacher education literature (Nunan 1989; Richards and Nunan 1990; Allwright and Bailey 1991; Richards and Lockhart 1994; Freeman and Richards 1996). It has been viewed as a way of facilitating the professional growth and development of second language teachers (see Burton, this issue). While many of these publications provide discussions of principles and procedures for conducting action research and make suggestions for undertaking small-scale action research projects, relatively few have explored how processes of action research are initiated and evolved or how action research is sustained and supported over a period of time (but see, for example, Burton and Mickan 1993; Allwright and Lenzuen 1997). In addition, there is even less discussion of what conditions militate against initiating action research in teaching organisations, and what measures can be taken to counter this situation (cf Crookes 1989; Brindley 1991; Burns 1999; but see Tinker Sachs, this issue). Moreover, in most accounts published in the literature already referred to, action research, while sometimes characterised and labelled as ‘collaborative’, is invariably represented by case studies involving individual action researchers working alone (Richards and Freeman 1992; Burns 1999; but see also Burton and Tinker Sachs, this issue).

The main focus of this paper is on a recent project which explored the process of setting up and facilitating action research at the local level by eight AMEP personnel responsible for professional development. It draws
on discussion data recorded during three workshops held at NCELTR during the research process, as well as on the final written accounts given by the participants. These accounts illustrate some of the key factors that emerged for these professional developers in facilitating action research locally. They also suggest to what extent the participants felt they had effectively begun the process of offering action research as part of their local professional development programs.

What is action research?

Action research involves a self-reflective, systematic and critical approach to enquiry by participants who are simultaneously members of the context in which the research takes place. The aim of action research is to identify ‘problematic’ (in the sense of areas that can be problematised) situations or issues that participants consider worth investigating, and to undertake practical interventions in order to bring about informed changes in practice (Cohen and Manion 1994).

Put simply, the action research process occurs over a number of steps or phases which progress as a spiralling and evolving process. Kemmis and McTaggart’s (1988) ‘classic’ model of this process includes four steps:

❖ Planning — a problem or issue is identified and a plan of action is developed in order to bring about improvements in specific areas of the research context
❖ Action — the plan is put into action over an agreed period of time
❖ Observation — the effects of the action are observed and data are collected
❖ Reflection — the effects of the action are evaluated and become the basis for further cycles of research.

To this model, I would add a fifth step — dissemination — where the results of the research are made known through presentations and publications to a wider audience.

Several essential features distinguish action research from other more traditional forms of educational research (Burns 1994):

1. It is small-scale, contextualised and local in character, identifying and investigating teaching-learning issues within specific situations.
2. It involves evaluation and reflection aimed at bringing about continuing changes in practice.
3. It is participatory, providing opportunities for communities of participants to investigate collaboratively issues of concern within their social situation.
4. It is based on systematic data collection and analysis which become the basis for changes in practice.
But perhaps one of the most important features of action research is that it is underpinned by democratic principles; significantly, ownership for changes in practice is invested in those who conduct the research (Carr and Kemmis 1986). It differs, therefore, from the type of educational research that is conducted along more formalistic and scientific lines, and which may be removed from direct classroom application. I would argue that action research enables teachers to take a central role in the identification and exploration of curriculum and other professional issues, where they can test out and refine, often in partnership with academic researchers or curriculum writers, key questions of practice. Boomer (1987) refers to this difference as ‘owned research’ rather than ‘disowned research’.

The practice of action research in the AMEP

In the AMEP, action research has been adopted extensively within a series of annual national research projects, coordinated between 1988 and 1999 by the National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR). It has been seen as a way of making direct links between curriculum theory and practice within the AMEP and addressing changes in government policy impacting on the Program. The major principle underlying this approach is that it enables AMEP practitioners to have direct involvement in identifying relevant areas, conducting research and being part of the dissemination of the outcomes of national projects. AMEP personnel are therefore likely to feel a greater sense of ownership of changes in practice or program delivery arising from the projects.

During the 1990s there were a number of significant social and political changes that had a major impact on curriculum development and program delivery in the AMEP. These included:

- A reduction in the annual intake of immigrants
- A greater focus in the adult education area on vocationally oriented programs
- The refocusing of the AMEP, from a broad-based ESL program including workplace and employment oriented courses, to the settlement language needs of immigrants within the first three years of arrival
- A move to competency and outcomes-based curriculum delivery
- Government tendering for delivery of AMEP services, which introduced new players, including private as well as public service organisations, and increased the overall number of AMEP service providers.

The majority of projects have arisen in response to these shifts in program delivery, curriculum practice and government policy (see Burns and de Silva Joyce 2000 for further discussion). Various areas for national
research were identified: investigating the teaching of literacy in adult ESL programs (Hammond, Burns, Joyce, Gerot and Brosnan 1992); ethnographically oriented research on spoken discourse, which involved collecting and analysing natural language samples and exploring their use in classroom tasks for learners at different levels (Burns, Joyce and Gollin 1996); researching changing course design processes in a national move towards competency-based curriculum (Burns and Hood 1995); investigating the teaching of disparate learner groups (Burns and Hood 1997); and exploring new practices in teaching vocabulary (Burns and de Silva Joyce, forthcoming).

The projects referred to here were conducted following a series of integrated stages, which were intended to address local organisational needs as well as national priorities. These stages were as follows:

1. Areas for research were nominated to NCELTR by all AMEP organisations nationally. These arose from both consultation at the local level among teachers and program administrators, and at the national level among AMEP organisations and NCELTR, and therefore reflected both local interests and government policy agendas.

2. Areas which received nominations from a number of AMEP organisations were developed further as collaborative action research investigations through national NCELTR projects. Once these areas were selected, calls for teachers’ participation were made through the local, state or organisational professional development networks. Typically, six to eight teachers volunteered to form a collaborative research group within a state, and this group was linked through the NCELTR researchers, to groups in other states (online contact is increasingly playing a part in networking such groups; see Hyde, this issue, for discussion of online professional development in the AMEP). Each of these groups was coordinated by a local professional development person in each state. Generally these personnel were known to each other through their participation in national forums and seminars conducted each year by NCELTR, and this contact formed a further national network.

3. A project timetable was developed by the project coordinators, including periods of time for reading the literature, holding workshop discussions, collecting data, analysing data, and report writing. While there was some uniformity in the way the timeframe was initially developed — typically over a period of six months for each project — it was subsequently negotiated locally with the research groups to account for programming arrangements and other demands on teachers’ time.

4. An initial workshop was held for groups in each state, where the research coordinators provided input on action research, and methods and procedures for carrying out projects. The teachers then embarked
on a more individual process of identifying focused issues or questions related to the overall research area. After attending the workshop, the teachers began investigating their chosen topic in their own classroom contexts through observation, discussion with their learners, and other forms of data collection, such as surveys, interviews or audio-recordings (see Burns 1999 for extended examples).

5. A follow-up workshop was held where teachers return with reports of their initial investigations. This was an important point in the research, as the issues being investigated are often further focused and refined as a result of the group discussion and suggestions from other members. The period following this workshop was often characterised by a cycle of data collection and follow-up discussion, which may have been repeated as teachers investigated more deeply, and/or broadly the issues they were researching.

6. The next stage involved the teachers in analysing and interpreting their research and identifying its overall outcomes. This was undertaken both individually by each teacher, and also through further group discussion. The outcomes from individual projects served to build up a picture across the group of common themes and findings. These group analyses fed into the national networks built up by the project, as typically the research conducted within one group connected with investigations taken up within others. Thus, at this sixth stage, the projects began to reorient back towards the national level and the broader implications of the research for the AMEP.

7. The final stage continued the process of broader analysis and dissemination. It involved written reports and oral presentations of the research to local and national audiences. The teachers’ written reports were made available to the wider AMEP audience through publication in the NCELTR Teachers’ Voices series. For example, a forthcoming collection documents three teachers’ investigations of learners’ reading practices, and describes the work of other AMEP teachers who researched classroom strategies for extending the teaching and learning of reading (Burns and de Silva Joyce, 2000). The teacher-researchers involved in these projects also made presentations on their research to local colleagues, or at state and national conferences or national AMEP professional development forums.

Table 1 (p 28) summarises a typical structure for the workshop program held during a project.

**Evaluating action research**

Increasingly, during the various projects referred to above, AMEP teachers and the professional developers who coordinated the research locally
Table 1: The timeframe and structure of the project  
(Burns and Hood 1997: 8)

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<th>Event/process</th>
<th>Timeframe</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
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| Workshop 1    | 1 Day       | • Introducing research context and model  
• Discussing issues  
• Focusing research and data collection techniques                                      |
| Research      | Approximately 3 weeks | • Reflecting  
• Collecting and documenting data  
• Clarifying focus  
• Discussing with colleagues                                      |
| Workshop 2    | 1/2 Day     | • Reviewing focus for research and data collection methods  
• Discussing early reflections                                                              |
| Research      | Approximately 4 to 6 weeks | • Collecting data  
• Reflecting and interpreting  
• Intervening and collecting more data  
• Discussing with colleagues                                      |
| Workshop 3    | 1 Day       | • Presenting interim report  
• Discussing each other’s research  
• Interpreting, problematising findings                                                  |
| Research      | Approximately 3 weeks | • Collecting additional data, to confirm interpretations or identify other issues         |
| Workshop 4    | 1/2 Day     | • Planning final written report                                                                 |
| Report writing| Approximately 3 weeks | • Drafting final report  
• Discussing with colleagues                                                               |
| Workshop 5    | 1/2 day seminar | • Presenting written reports  
• Present short informal seminar on research                                                  |

reported that they see collaborative action research as a very positive form of professional development (see Burns 1999). The participants also gained experience in exploring and identifying the national, local and individual structures that facilitate action research.

A recent AMEP action research project, conducted during 1997–98 over a period of nine months, explored in more detail some of the factors involved in setting up action research locally. It involved eight AMEP personnel responsible for developing professional development programs in
different states. These participants worked as a group with two researchers from NCELTR (myself and Susan Hood), and agreed to initiate action research projects at the local level on topics perceived to be useful and interesting locally. (For example, in AMES Victoria the research focused on the role of teacher mentors in supporting other teachers in their centres, while in Queensland the teachers involved chose individual projects based on their current classes and teaching interests.) In essence, the project conducted action research on the process of facilitating teacher action research initiated at the local level.

As the projects proceeded, the professional developers systematically monitored the factors involved in the implementation of the projects. As the professional development participants instigated action research locally, they documented the processes through journals, administrative and other materials (letters, expressions of interest and so on) produced for the project, and their own reflective reports. A further source of data was the recordings made of three group discussions held at approximate intervals of three months with the project coordinators at NCELTR.

**The findings: Key factors in facilitating action research at the local level**

Since the number of participants involved in this project was very small, the broad trends which emerged can only be seen as suggestive and exploratory. Nevertheless, overall, the research suggested that, within the particular context of the AMEP, action research continues to be viewed positively by those who become involved at the local level. It is seen as valuable in simultaneously drawing on and contributing to current interests and broad changes in policy and practice. A comment from the Queensland participant summarises this general view:

> Through involvement in the projects the notion of action research along with understandings of its underpinnings and value in assisting change processes were further developed. System and individual outcomes from these projects were extremely positive. (Eady 1997: 1)

Several issues also emerged as important for the effective facilitation of local action research. Four of the most significant factors that emerged from project discussions and the reflective reports written by the participants will be briefly outlined below.

First, it became evident that the specific action research ‘models’, timeframes and processes initiated locally need to be negotiated very flexibly so that they ‘fit’ within the organisational culture, needs and constraints. The funding, timing and duration of the research in relation to the length and intensity of courses, course types and teachers’ availability and interest were all practical factors that had to be negotiated. In other words, there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach. The organisational complexities involved are captured in this comment from one of the groups:
The timing of the project proved problematic. During the first term, I sent out a memo to all teachers asking for expressions of interest; sixteen teachers responded. Due to a variety of circumstances, the project was put on hold before the initial meeting could be held. A second memo was sent out in Term 2 and a meeting organised. Ten teachers came to the meeting, only a few of whom had expressed interest. However, no proposals for research were received from these teachers and it later emerged that the timing was once again not appropriate. Teachers had not started their new classes and there were no pressing issues that they wanted to explore. The project finally started in the middle of the third term, which was not ideal timing. (Hamilton 1997: 2–3)

A second issue identified as important was the level and nature of organisational support needed for the teachers carrying out research. Practical support, such as teacher release time, provision of accessible readings, ‘hands-on’ collaborative workshops, input into action research processes and research tools, guidance in writing up reports and formally recognised opportunities for presenting the outcomes of the research to others were considered important. In this context, public commitment on the part of the organisation to the ‘ownership’ of the project was seen as a vital element. As one participant commented: ‘All action research projects need a[n organisational] project coordinator or “driver” to ensure the greatest outcomes are achieved’ (Eady 1997: 10). Such an investment in resourcing was seen by participants as a way of validating and recognising the research efforts of teachers and professional development staff:

For action research to succeed, teachers need to feel that they have the support of the management and that what they do is valued. Teachers need support in the process of research ... and need to feel comfortable about contacting the coordinator [in this case Hamilton herself] for help throughout the project. (Hamilton 1997: 5)

These findings support those of Brindley (1991) who noted that organisational support and recognition motivated teachers to conduct research.

A third insight gained from the project was that action research was received most positively when teachers could self-select to be involved. In one locality, where there was a negative history of teachers being required to undertake action research, the local project did not eventuate. The person who had nominated to facilitate this project had commented at the first project workshop, even before the research had begun:

We’ve actually had some negative experiences in the past with action research. As one teacher said to me, ‘I like the action, but I’m not keen on the research’ ... so it’ll be interesting to see whether we can make it different this time ...

In the event, it appeared that the previous negative experiences of being required to be involved in action research outweighed the attrac-
tion of a further opportunity for teachers to volunteer for a local project. In contrast, participants who self-selected appeared to be more personally committed and motivated, and informed or included other colleagues who were not directly involved as researchers:

Teachers self-selected for the project and they in turn through their enthusiasm involved staff at their work location. It is hoped that through the reports on the projects and as staff discuss their involvement others will see action research as an option. (Grieve 1997: 8)

Self-selecting to be a research participant also appeared in some cases to lead to a longer term personal interest and involvement in research, as well as other forms of professional growth:

The benefits of action research are not confined to improving classroom methodology and teaching strategies. VH recently talked to staff about the spin-offs for her since her involvement in the 1995 project [Burns and Hood 1997] ... These included: participation in the 1996 project as a mentor/facilitator; presentations at various conferences in Melbourne and interstate; the impetus to re-enrol in her Masters’ degree; the development of new skills such as public speaking and confidence in giving presentations and talking about teaching. (Hamilton 1997: 5–6)

The fourth key issue raised by the project was the importance of teachers' perceptions of the relevance of the areas chosen for research both to themselves and to the organisation. It appeared that the relevance or otherwise of the research topic chosen was a major factor affecting teachers' willingness to be involved. For some local groups, having a common focus area met their purposes and encouraged participation:

AMES Victoria has based its Professional Development Strategy on the Key Curriculum Areas document ... An area which is not described in the document, but which we know through anecdotal evidence is a major source of workplace professional development, is mentoring. On the basis of the insights gained through an action research project we hoped to include this as one of the Key Curriculum Areas. Eight teachers self-selected for the [mentoring] project. (Grieve 1997: 1–2)

In other cases, however, the relevance of the area chosen was not clear to teachers, thus impeding the initiation of action research:

The diversity within my department proved to be the first challenge in terms of finding a common theme that would encourage participation from across the department. I initially put forward the theme of 'dealing with difficult student behaviours' as this was a major professional development focus for the year ... However, this was interpreted quite narrowly and proved to be a disincentive for participation ... There was a tension between the self-selection of participants and their immediate issues of concern ... For this project, I decided to abandon the common theme and go with the individual issues of the three teachers, which were quite diverse. (Hamilton 1997: 2)
Discussion

This investigation, with its links to previous AMEP action research initiatives, reconfirms that, in general, action research is valued by teachers and professional development staff as a way of exploring professional practice. When the research is conducted collaboratively by groups of teachers and professional development staff, and teachers are provided with a strong sense of institutional support and validation, the additional work created is viewed as worthwhile: ‘It takes time, but you get a huge return on your investment’, as one teacher pointed out (Burns 1995).

Previous studies suggest that participation in collaborative action research can have a positive effect on individual teachers’ professional growth and increase their job satisfaction (Brindley 1991). At the organisational level, the practical recommendations that emerge from teacher-conducted projects can be used by teachers and program administrators to bring about improvements in educational practice (Burns and Hood 1997).

Having a pool of teachers with research experience can also form a valuable professional resource for the organisation. Some individuals who have participated in AMEP collaborative projects have gone on to take leading professional development roles within their local teaching centres, as well as research roles in other projects. Undertaking action research thus appears to have unforeseen professional growth consequences, as in the case above of the teacher who reported a number of personal ‘spin-offs’.

Final comment

Van Lier (1994: 32) has pointed out that if action research is to enrich teachers’ professional lives, it should not ‘make us more exhausted than we already are’. Such evidence as exists in the ESL teaching field seems to point to the capacity of collaborative action research to reduce teachers’ isolation and to help them to generate rich insights about classroom practices and to enhance their own theories about teaching and learning (see Burton, this issue). The brief examples presented here illustrate some of the factors that play a role and, therefore, need to be taken into account when professional development personnel facilitate action research as part of the professional development opportunities that can be offered to teachers within their own workplace.

References


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