Becoming a holistic teacher: Discovering our practices through action research

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Some key questions for teacher professionalism

- How can we gain more holistic and rounded perspectives on what we do as teachers in the classroom?

- How can we continue to extend and develop our professionalism as English language teachers?

Some key questions for teacher professionalism

- How can we develop a 'life-long learning' attitude to our professional practices?

- How can we maintain our curiosity about how we teach and how our students learn?

A starting point for becoming a holistic teacher

Nowadays… teaching is seen more as a holistic activity in which teachers constantly try to discover things that work, discarding old practices and taking on board new ones though a process of decision making, reflection, analysis and assessment….

A starting point for becoming a holistic teacher

They should conduct action research, reflect on their teaching and on their students' learning, and use their knowledge and experience.

(Santana-Williamson in Edge, 2001, p.35)

What is action research?

- What does action research mean?

- What do you already know about it?

- Have you tried it out? On your own? With others?

I'm a teacher not a researcher!!

- Teachers are trained to teach!
- Teachers are interested in practical classroom things...not theory!
- I don't get paid to do research!
- Teachers shouldn't be experimenting on their students!
- Research? That's scary!!!!!

But, do you want to...?!!

- be a reflective teacher?
- share ideas with your colleagues?
- learn more about teaching?
- understand your students better?
- improve classroom experiences for yourself and your students?
- know what drives your teaching?
- learn more about research?

What teachers say about AR

"AR encourages teachers to reach their own solutions and conclusions and this is far more attractive than being presented with ideals which cannot be attained." (Australia)

"I will continue doing AR. I have no doubt about the advantages of an AR approach for my teaching although it is also not easy to conduct it consistently"." (Indonesia)

"The action research model gave me the courage to cross the border from technician to professional." (USA)

The action research tale of 'Miss Yasmin'

- Year 3 class in a public high school in Indonesia

- Low achieving school and low student attendance (5 students often absent)

- Miss Y. identified problems of:
  - slow progress, low motivation
  - poor discipline, 'laziness'
  - difficulties in classroom management

(Rochantiningsih, 2005)

The action research tale of 'Miss Yasmin'

...there are so many things I would like to solve and improve. But I feel powerless.

The action research tale of 'Miss Yasmin'

Research aim:

To investigate new teaching strategies to overcome the problems of poor attendance, laziness and passive attitudes.

The action research tale of 'Miss Yasmin'

Miss Y. decided to talk openly with her students about these challenges. She invited them to share their ideas about teaching and learning in her class.

Negotiating the lessons with the students means involving them as members of a team. And this means giving them trust and responsibility as well.

The action research tale of 'Miss Yasmin'

Collecting information for her AR:

Questionnaires asking them to state class activities

Students wanted:

4. More variety in teaching materials and activities.

5. More "interesting materials".

6. Different class locations.

The action research tale of 'Miss Yasmin'

She agreed with the students to:

- Hold class in different locations (under teak tree behind classroom, hall, library)

- Keep to 'class rules' for getting to class on time and not disturbing other classes

- Choose their materials but vary her approach and get their feedback

The action research tale of 'Miss Yasmin'

After this discussion

...the good atmosphere in my class was inspiring!

What happened next?

Lesson 1: Students worked together under the teak tree discussing vocabulary and answering questions on the topic

Reactions: Most students worked well; some were distracted.

Miss Y. reminded them of the class rules and asked students to use them next time.

What happened next?

Lesson 2: In the library Miss Y. taught a song. Students read the words, listened, did a cloze exercise, sang the song.

Reactions: All students attended (even the missing 5!). Very positive atmosphere.

Miss Y. continued with new strategies, surveyed the students for feedback, and kept an AR journal.

Miss Y.'s conclusions about her research

Negotiating the teaching-learning process with the students improved the unfavourable class situation...Since the negotiation provided me with data of student preferences, it helped me to become more relaxed anf coused to prepare teaching. I could also expand my roles as a teacher. Now I could place myself as a friend in teaching; not only as the one who always orders and instructs. Positioning the students as "humans" and not as "objects" made my work lighter and easier.

AR: Some definitions

AR involves a self-reflective, systematic and critical approach to enquiry by participants who are at the same time members of the research community. The aim is to identify problematic situations or issues considered by participants to be worthy of investigation in order to bring about critically informed changes in practice. Action research is underpinned by democratic principles in that the ownership of change is invested in those who conduct the research.

(Burns, cited in Cornwell, 1999)

What AR does not do

- Set out to prove/disprove a hypothesis
- Establish control/experimental groups
- Rely on pre-test/post-test methods
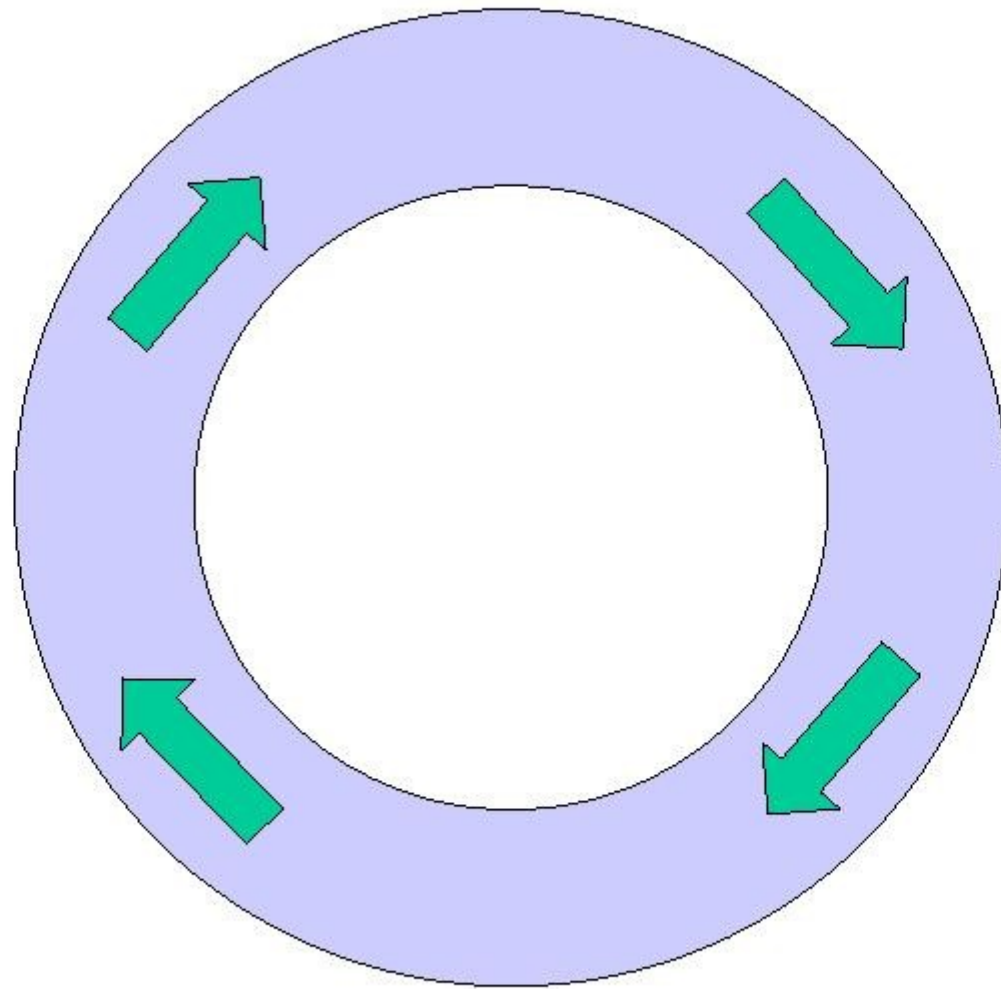- Use statistical analyses
- Produce generalizable findings

In other words, AR is exploratory research, not research in the positivist, scientific tradition

So, how do we do AR?

- **Plan** - develop a plan of critically informed action to improve what is already happening
- **Act** - act to implement the plan
- **Observe** - observe the effects of the critically informed action in the context in which it occurs
- **Reflect** - reflect on these effects as the basis for further planning, subsequent critically informed action, [etc.] through a succession of stages.

(Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988, p. 10)

Reflect

Plan

Observe

Act

Reflect

Revised
Plan

Observe

Act
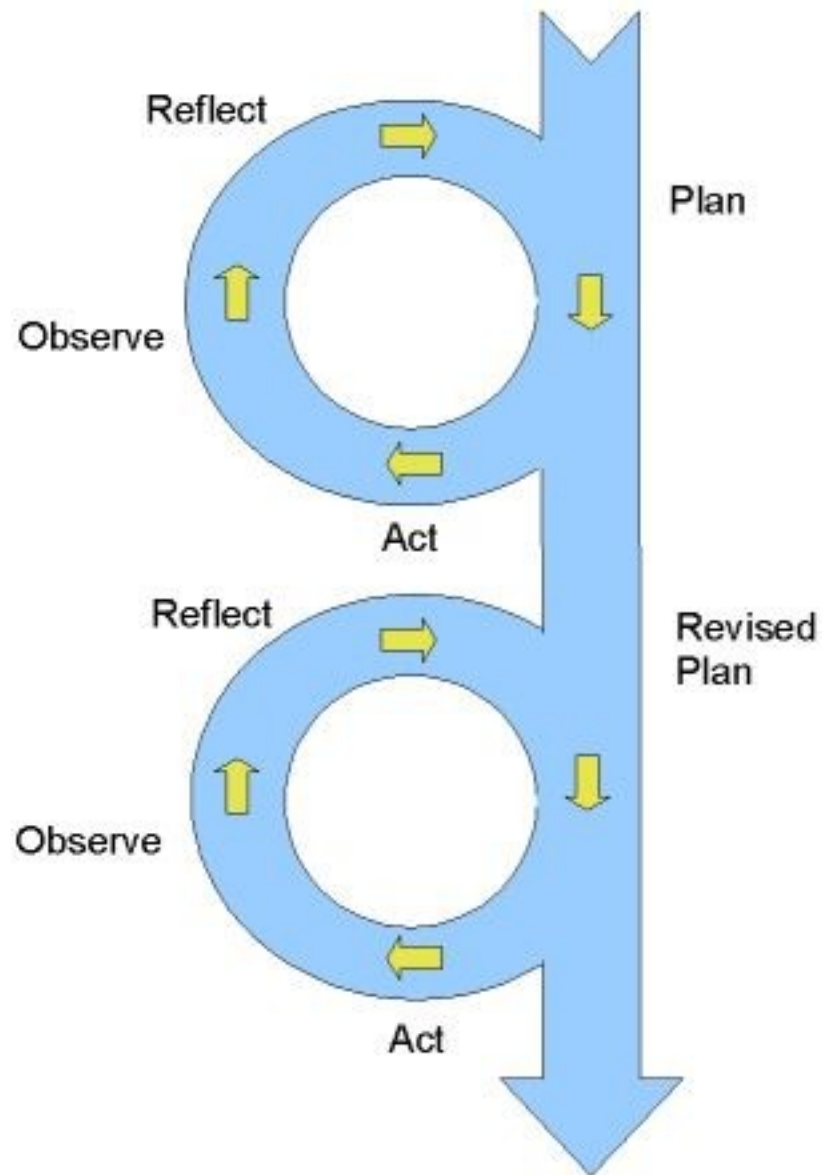
Characteristics of action research

- focus on a particular social situation

- collaboration/dialogue with others to identify the issues and to collect and analyse data

- deliberate intervention into the operation of the status quo

- processes of research lead to the construction of knowledge and theory (and critical action)

Finding a focus for AR

The first step is to find your general focus or topic

TASK

How will you do this?

Finding a focus for AR

- Keep a diary for a specified time
- List things that have puzzled/intrigued you
- Make a mind map and connect ideas
- Read an article and develop questions from it
- Finish statements (*I don't know enough about..*)
- Observe a situation in your workplace
- Survey colleagues on "hot teaching issues"
- Look through recent journal for key topics

Finding a focus for AR

TASK

What topic(s) are you interested in researching?

How did you identify these topics?

Why are they of interest to you?

AR topics chosen by teachers

- A: teaching speaking outside the regular classroom
- B: Increasing students' motivation through games
- C: Choosing teaching materials for a tired teacher
- D: Optimising brainstorming in teaching speaking
- E: Using transln. to improve SS's reading comprehension
- F: Improving SS's ability to identify ideas in main paras.
- G: Preventing cheating and promoting SS's motivation
- H: Negotiating lessons with SSs
- I: Improving SS's preparation for tests
- J: Increasing SS's motivation through games

Defining the scope of the study

Ask yourself:

- Am I interested in individuals or groups?
- What resources will I have? (time, materials, resources, funding?
- Who else do I need to include (managers colleagues, students, parents)?
- What ethical issues must I consider?

Considering ethical issues

Relate to the quality, value and democratic worth of the research.

Three key questions:

- Whose permission/consent is needed?
- Who will be affected by the research?
- Who should be told about the research when it is completed?

Refining your focus and developing questions

Questions should be:

- Clear: unambiguous and understandable
- Specific: can see how to answer them
- Answerable: can see what data are needed
- Relevant: worthwhile for the context
- Interconnected: form a coherent whole

But…not all AR has to start with fully developed questions!

Deciding on your data sources

TASK

Consider your AR focus and questions:

- What are the main actions you will put in place?
- What data do you require to document the actions and answer your question(s)?
- What method(s) will you use for collecting the data?

Develop your plan of action and collect data

Two main sources of data collection:

Observational (what people do)

Non-observational (what people think)

Collecting observational data

- Observation (watching a social situation)
- Field notes (factual accounts of events)
- Recordings (audio or video, MP3)
- Transcripts (documenting interactions)
- Photographs (snapshots of context)
- maps/diagrams (layout/interactions)
- documents (texts produced in context)

Collecting non-observational data

- Journal/diary (recording ideas/thoughts)
- "Jottings" (memory aids)
- surveys/questionnaires (closed, rank option, open questions)
- interviews (structured, semi/unstructured)
- narratives (autobiography/life history)
- discussions (conversations/focus groups)
- protocols (think-aloud commentary)

Strengthening validity in AR

Validity (ie research quality) is achieved through:

- Triangulation (multiple data perspectives)

- Testing through practical action

- Ensuring research aims are compatible with educational and democratic aims

- Ensuring research design and data collection fit in with teaching

(Altrichter, Posch and Somekh, 1993)

Analysing the data

Data analysis in AR is dynamic and recursive and occurs throughout the AR process!

It includes and relates to:

- practical action

- unbiased reflection/dialogue

- (re)experimentation and (re)application

- what the data are telling you

- open-mindedness

The last word!

"I like the cycles in AR. The stages of planning,action, monitoring and reflection enabled me to evaluate and modify my teaching strategies." (Teacher H)

"Never did I have to look at my teaching this way." (T.D)

"Usually we were the object of study and were evaluated by the researcher. AR is different." (Teacher J)

The last word!

" I am proud of myself since what I taught was understood by my students and the process of teaching and learning was more fun." (Teacher I)

"What I learned from AR was that it helped me to help my students… I could feel that their motivation was increasing, as they believed they were capable." (T.B)

"Implementation of AR in my class has solved my problems." (Teacher A)

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To find out more

and to download this presentation, go to…

www.professoranneburns.com

Appendix:
More about AR in Indonesia

- Collaborative AR (CAR) project - 10 teachers and a facilitator in Surakarta, Central Java
- Aims: To explore teachers perceptions of :
  - whether their involvement in AR enhanced PD
  - whether their involvement in AR influenced their classroom practice
  - whether their involvement in AR influenced student learning
  - the difficulties they encountered as they did AR
  - the support structures they needed for AR

Collaborative AR in Indonesia

- The teachers
  - Ages 33-54
  - High school teachers
  - 3 male and 7 female
  - 7-25 years' experience
  - Teaching Yr 1-3
  - All unfamiliar with AR

(Burns & Rochsantiningsih, 2006)

The AR processes

- Workshops and other activities over six months to introduce teacher to AR

- Indentification by teachers of own research areas and focus

- AR by teachers for 14 weeks in Term 3

- Journals kept by teachers and facilitator to record events and reflections

- Teacher reports and poster displays at AR seminar held at one of the schools

Case study: Teacher E

- **Situation:**

Low ranking high sch./challenging, low achieving students

- **T's attitude to AR:**

Very sceptical and doubtful about effectiveness

- **Personal situation:**

Lack of enthusiasm for teaching (15 yrs), bad early teaching experiences, responsible for sick mother

- **Classroom issue/situation:**

Low level of S participation, unfriendly relationship with SS

Teacher E's voice

"I taught my students because that was what I had to do as a teacher. I did not really care whether they learned something from my lessons."

"The classroom atmosphere was not relaxed. I did not make any efforts to be friendly to my students. In the class I taught unhappy faces. I knew quite well that my students talked behind my back and called me a mean teacher."

Case study: Teacher E

- **Teaching responsibilities:**

Taught reading, structure and vocabulary in four Year 1 classes; syllabus and texts mandated by school

- **AR plan:**

Use translation as pre-reading activity, try different ways to interact with SS

- **Data collection:**

Kept notes in class and wrote diary of activities and events

Teacher E's voice

"The students' motivation is very low. They did not show active participation in my class…"

"The failure in teaching reading was because students could not comprehend the meanings of the words or phrases well, answer the questions or complete the tasks. They had difficulties in understanding the questions, especially if they related to the skill of deducing meaning or reading between the lines."

"My students are very dependent on the teacher. I am thinking of asking them to translate next week's reading at home so they will be more ready in class."

Case study: Teacher E

What happened when he tried out his AR:

- T.E told his SS to do translations before coming to class.

- He rewarded those who did the translations with scores.

- In the first two lessons, 2-5 students did not do the translations.

- In lesson 3 all students did the translations, there was better comprehension, question asking and task completion. T. E noticed S motivation was increasing.

- In lesson 4, SS did group translations, checked in class.

- The SS showed even less difficulty in completing tasks, enjoyed retelling texts and motivation increased again.

Teacher E's voice

"In translation in groups, the students helped each other so that their translation was better and more contextual. In addition by checking it in the class, it reduced the time of correction."

"When the students were motivated, the class atmosphere was more alive. Some students asked me if they could practise English with "real people". They also asked me to conduct a speech contest, which was then conducted twice."

Case study: Teacher E

- Outcomes
    - The SS motivation and involvement increased considerably
    - SS suggested extensions to the activities which T.E took up - two speech contests, visits to tourist sites to practise English
    - Test achievements increased
    - The teacher's relationship with his students improved dramatically
    - SS expressed their appreciation of their teacher explicitly
    - T.E's enthusiasm for teaching was rejuvinated
    - He was keen to continue the processes he had learned about in AR

Voices from Teacher E's situation

"In the classroom I tried to make conversation with my students, offered more help for difficult words or questions. I spoiled my students by trying to fulfil what they wanted in class." (Teacher E)

"If T. E hadn't let me know about his students, I wouldn't have had any idea that they used to be passive in class… After the contest, many asked me questions about how to study English successfully and effectively." (Facilitator)

Voices fromTeacher E's classroom

"English and Teacher E is the best!!!" (Student exam sheet)

"I can do it because my teacher." (Student exam sheet)

"This is my last test in first class. But it will be OK because of you, Teacher E... Yesterday.... I hate you!!!! But now and forever... I ♥ U. Thank you. Bye." (Student exam sheet)

AR helped Teacher E "grow my enthusiasm again".

How CAR empowered the teachers in the project

- tested practical knowledge and theory by feeding them back into changes in practice
- evaluated changes to practice through further cycles of action and reflection
- opened new theories and knowledge to wider scrutiny through report writing, information presentation and dissemination
- enabled them to offer examples for other teachers in similar situations to apply
- increased professional development

How CAR empowers teachers

Central concepts are:

- empowering participants in a social situation
- moving towards "a better world" for TS/SS
- self-consciously criticising what exists through awareness of givens and assumptions that shape the social situation
- enhancing awareness of one's own subjective, intersubjective and normative frames of reference
- working to confront inequities in the system
- working to transform the social situation

Undertaking collaborative action research

Key issues

- Who will you involve?
- What issues/questions will you focus on?
- What steps in the process will you put in place next?
- How will you collect data/information?
- How will you track/analyse it/identify emerging issues?
- What resources do you need?
- What skills/knowledge do you need?