Editorial: Virtual Issue on the theme of ‘creative expression’ in action research.

Last year at the CARN Conference in Braga, Portugal we started a new tradition by launching a Virtual Special Issue (VSI) of Educational Action Research (EARJ) at the Conference which brings together a collection of articles previously published in the Journal which cluster around a particular theme. The VSI is free to download and is a general resource for action researchers, practitioners and students. The articles are indicative of the conversations that action researchers have developed around the theme in EARJ since its inception. They do not represent the whole conversation but offer us insights into the areas our colleagues are exploring and suggest further lines of inquiry.

This year we were inspired by a discussion that started on the CARN ListServe about the use of poetry in action research. We started off framing the issue as the use of creative arts in action research but as the articles were selected and the reasons for their choice made apparent that phrase became too restrictive – many of us do not feel ourselves comfortable with claiming we are using the ‘arts’ in our work (although many of us do) but rather, inspired by Helen Burchell in this collection, we have used the term ‘the use of creative expression in action research’ as it felt more appropriate. As ever in action research this decision in itself opens up more creative dialogue…which we look forward to having at CARN events in the coming years.

We hope you enjoy this year’s selection. The articles have been chosen by members of the CARN Co-ordinating Group (Ruth Balogh and Una Hanley agreed the 4 papers on their behalf ) and by members of EARJ. After a brief overview of the contents of the article a short rationale is given for their inclusion.

If you have an idea about a theme for VSI in coming years please do post us your thoughts on the special discussion board that will be at the CARN Conference or contact the Editors at EARJ.


Overview

In this article Burchell explores her role as a leader of an action research project using poetic expression which she defines as seeking to write from within the feelings, thoughts, hopes and fears associated with being involved in research. She explores the significance of writing in a way that is very different from conventional descriptive and analytic accounts of research. In doing so she exposes the limitations of written, conversational, accounts of practitioner or action research. This poetic style is specifically illustrated through the writing of her own poetic text as a practitioner-researcher, entitled ‘A Gossamer Thread’. The article illustrates how poetic expression is valuable in surfacing tacit dimensions of practice, enabling the researcher to engage with them more consciously and draw on them to strengthen the research.

Ruth Balogh (CARN CG): The use and exploration of the term ‘poetic expression’ for me opens up the possibility of framing creative and arts-based action research outside of the rigour implied in the otherwise problematic notion of ‘doing art’. An invitation to create a ‘poem’ brings with it a requirement to enter in to the world of literary / art criticism and
appreciation, with its own contested and evolving values and discourses. And although I take part in this world with great – and in my terms, critical - interest at the sidelines, it is not a world in which I feel competent to make a creative contribution. But I can feel competent to take part in 'poetic expression' and to use 'poetic form'. Burchell's paper gives me permission to do this, and it does so by exploring a different 'way of knowing'.

Her reflections, poetic expression, and theorising lead us into an accessible exploration of the emotional and imaginative 'substrates' of experience and the conflict that is inherent in what Dewey called the 'expression' rather than the 'discharge' of emotion. The idea that 'finding a place of reverie' might enable one to honour a deeply felt but as yet inarticulate feeling provides an important basis for recognising the power of the subconscious and its potential to inform our action research.


Overview

In this article a group of immigrant Latina women (Latinas) from the Caribbean and Central America use community-based theater as a method to mobilise diverse audiences against discriminatory practices and policies. The authors present two interrelated arguments. First, Latinas' knowledge construction in multiple arenas counteracts gendered and racialised immigration discourses while leading to fundamental sociocultural transformations. Second, deeper epistemological rigor is needed in feminist action research to uphold Latin American women’s agency while countering pervasive discrimination.

Ruth Balogh (CARN CG): This paper shows how participatory theatre can help 'dismantle gendered and racialized discourses' among Latina immigrants in the USA, one of that country's most oppressed and marginalized groups. I regard it as important not just for the way it demonstrates the practice of action research for social justice through community arts-based means, but because its epistemological roots lie in Augusto Boal's challenge to the very concept of theatre - and by implication other art-forms. The way that 'art' as a series of disciplines is understood is central for this Special Virtual Issue, and in my view would be incomplete without Boal's contribution, for its radical redefinition of art as the means to change the world.

Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal 1979) proposes an understanding of theatre that goes beyond Brecht's attention to the 'fourth wall' – i.e. the 'wall' between actors and spectators – to transform spectators into 'spect – actors' who then use theatre to better understand their own oppression and challenge power relations. 'The bourgeoisie already know what the world is like, their world, and is able to present images of this complete, finished world ...the proletariat and the oppressed classes do not know yet what their world will be like, consequently their theater will be the rehearsal, not the finished product' (ibid p 120). On more than one occasion at annual conference, CARN has enabled a Boal-inspired theatre group of people with 'learning disabilities' to demonstrate how this has enabled them to use their intelligence for social change over important social issues such as sex education, workers’ rights and research ethics, see http://www.thelawnmowers.co.uk/
By showing how theatre enabled participants and researchers to ‘reframe damage-centred theories of change’ together, this paper invites us into a space where the internalization of such framings can be creatively disrupted, and where spaces of resistance can be developed.


Overview

Gillie Bolton’s article examines the role and power of storytelling by practitioners—using examples drawn from the health profession. Narratives of vital or key areas of professional experience can be communicated and explored directly and simply through expressive writing. These might be expressed fictionally; each story stands metonymically for that clinician’s practice. Uncritically accepted metaphors, with deep impact upon practice and experience, can also be noticed and evaluated. Exploring the use of confidential, facilitated groups for professionals to exchange their narratives and stories, she concludes that the process offers practitioners insight into their practice and a stronger grasp of the sociopolitical context in which they work.

Ruth Balogh (CARN CG): Although this paper is brief, it is full of useful insights and references to the role of story in critical reflection. In recent years the notion of ‘telling my story’ (as if there were ever only one) has gained such currency in dominant discourses that it has been all but robbed of the profound significance such processes hold for effecting change. Bolton’s paper reminds us that while we perceive our lives as narrative, there are never any ‘true’ accounts, and we are barely aware of much of our storytelling. Life-as-lived is not like a story, and we are somehow always in the middle of it. She argues for a critical approach to professional practice development which draws on fiction rather than on attempting to work within the impossible ‘straightjacket’ of ‘what really happened’. Thus when working with medical practitioners she shows how fiction can enable the imaginative entrance into the world of an *other*, as a fellow human being who experiences the same range of emotions as all of us do. And she further shows how the open-endedness of story offers opportunity for yet more insight as such stories are discussed, shared reflected upon, opened up, continued.....


Overview

In this article Titchen and McCormack offer an interplay of story, metaphor and poetry as a means of developing a methodological framework for critical creativity - professional artistry and transformational practice. They define critical creativity as a synthesis linking critical social science with creative and ancient traditions. Their action research is informed by educational theory, as well as holistic theories of reflexivity that, they suggest, offer the means of developing embodied, imaginative reflection that generates insights and possibilities for action. Within their evolving framework, they focus on conditions and principles that enable our worldview of critical creativity to be used in action research and practice development.

Una Hanley (CARN CG): This was a complex paper for a newcomer to these ideas. I had reached the point where cognition, by which I mean the rehearsal of ideas in a context recognised as ‘rational’ or overtly-of the-known-mind, couldn’t ‘say it all', and had
encountered theorising which moved to include a bodily knowing, as it were, and engagement with ideas rather more spiritually. All this is difficult to consider employing the vocabulary readily available to us, and the language (and described experiences) used here are intricate and personal to the authors, even although illustrative. So, the customary difficulties around language which always misses what it intends to grasp, was readily experienced here. Perhaps that is one of the article’s strengths, movement and ‘dancing’, rather than ‘grasping’.

However, the concepts and the convictions, even when addressed through ‘article’ filters, were a challenge, but one where I recognised some ‘shapes’ and experiences which flitted across my awareness as I read this. There was resonance and recognition then, rather than knowing. I felt a particular empathy with the aims of the authors. The philosophy and approaches offer a wonderful challenge to the status quo of the work place.


Overview

This paper describes the rationale for, processes of and outcomes behind an action research project focused on the impact of arts-based teaching (ABT) on students described as at-risk. The students, from three urban public schools in southern California, USA, were identified by local school districts as having scores in English and Mathematics examinations below their respective grade levels. Whilst this definition located at-risk in a particular form of main-line academic achievement, included in the student group were young people who had experienced various forms of serious disruption and disturbance in their own lives. Xi Lin and colleagues suggest that ABT programs have had striking success with such at-risk students, improving educational attainment particularly through generating motivation and engagement. The action research project reported in the paper was designed to investigate their own practice as educators using ABT and its impact on the student they were working alongside. Whilst short in its time period the project had what they term ‘surprising results’, not only on the motivation and engagement of students but also on their academic performance. In addition, the research also had long-lasting impact on the teacher-researchers who described themselves as motivated, energized, and renewed from the process of this study.

Franz Rauch (EARJ): This paper offers lively stories of action research of three teachers working with at-risk students by using arts-based teaching in the context of high-stake measurement. I chose this particular article as it shows practically in a reflected way the positive potential of art to make a difference in the school life of children at risk. The paper shows the power of seeing students as creative actors rather than as deficit receivers of a curriculum.

Overview

In this paper Barry Percy-Smith and Clare Carney discuss the learning from a project that set out to explore how the general public, and then particularly children, perceived the value of public art installations in the context of the regeneration of a city centre space. The project deliberately set out to challenge and interrupt conventional ‘ways of seeing’ about urban design and redevelopment to provide what they term ‘a creative action space’ for public involvement. Whilst not set up explicitly as an action research project, forefronting critical and disruptive participatory engagement as a key element of learning and taking action demonstrates how projects such as this can be understood and valued as action research processes and how they engender new possibilities for seeing and doing.

Andy Townsend (EARJ): The use of art in this urban planning project shows how multiple groups can participate in wide developments through a shared creative process. It is a challenge to naive notions of consultation and demonstrating the broader benefits of more sustained, creative, models of participatory change.


Overview

Published 11 years ago this paper was written with the intention of generating reflection about relationships between practitioner and practise-based research. The reflection process, brought about through a set of educational action research projects was carried out by three experienced art teachers and/or teacher trainers undertaking Masters and Doctoral programmes. An evaluation of their work leads Mason to question why artists and educational researchers, who both engage in qualitative problem solving and may use the same kinds of materials and tools, might develop different kinds of hypotheses, look for different sorts of evidence and apply different quality controls. Often finding ‘artistic action researches’ presented at educational conferences unpalatable because researchers seem to be manipulating artistic symbols whilst lacking the necessary skills to craft aesthetic-qualitative products, she considered why her students had not capitalised methodologically on their artistic expertise. Analysis of commonalities in practitioner-based research in education and practice-based research in art and design revealed significant differences in these two paradigms leading Mason to be sceptical about encouraging art teachers to engage in ‘artistic’ action research: she was not convinced at that time that the two paradigms could be compatible. The paper ends, however, with a question about how the emergence of new forms of critical qualitative inquiry and ways of understanding might provide fruitful spaces for new forms of dialogue and engagement.

Lonnie Rowell (EARJ): The reason for this selection is two-fold: 1) it provides a useful overview of commonalities in practitioner-based research in education and practice-based research in art and design. Has action research in the arts
changed much since this article’s publication more than 10 years ago? Do the three practitioner-studies included in the article now seem out-of-date? Or, are we still waiting for two paradigms to find a common meeting ground? Interesting to consider these questions.

2) I believe it is the first article published by EAR on action research and the arts, and I believe it is important to find a balance between looking to the past, living in the present, and anticipating the future in any profession.

Concluding thoughts...

The articles selected above raise some very important issues in action research philosophically, practically and politically. Taken as a group they demonstrate the potential of different forms of creative expression to make a difference in the lives of both individuals and collectives. They find ways to explore our practice in ways that transcend the constraints of formal language and explore tacit dimensions of our experience, ethics and values that are enabled through the rich variety of ‘methods’ offered here – theatre, dance, narrative story-telling, art installations and poetry.

Arts based education has been recognised over time by educational theorists and scholars as having a central role in learning. Given that learning, particularly shared learning, is considered fundamental to creating conditions for action in the practice of action research, engaging with more creative approaches to generating data has been demonstrated, through the project described above, to provide a fertile context for change. As Penketh (2016) points out, arts based learning offers something particular and essential to the development of the individual that positions “art as a means by which we might know the world and understand our experiences of it” (p4) and that art “ promote movement between the structures and boundaries that affect our ways of being in, and experiencing, the world” (p2) and as can be seen, for some groups the potential change has been more profound when creative methods are embedded in the process and practice of action research for social justice. Mason (this VSI), like Penketh, invites us to reflect how the use of arts and creativity affects its impact. Her work disturbs any comfortable rhetoric we may hold about the use of arts/creative practices as a mere tool in research and encourages us to consider the ongoing development of creativity as a holistic rather than technical approach.

Together the papers in this issue offer a range of approaches that demonstrate ways of embedding creativity, creative methods and expression as a positive means of disrupting linear traditions of research, bringing with it uncertainty and ‘mess’ in the research process. Such disturbance is critical to providing the punctum points, the points in research when our usual understandings have been ‘pricked, disturbed and wounded’ (Cook 2008) to offer new insights into our practices. Creativity in process and method also enable an important ingredient – having fun - which is powerful in creating conditions for enabling the hard work to happen en route to seeing things differently.

Carol Munn-Giddings and Tina Cook on behalf of the EARJ Editorial Collective. November 2016.


Last year our conversational theme was ‘Methodological Issues’ in Action Research you can still download the virtual issue at: http://explore.tandfonline.com/content/ed/rea-c-vsi-2015