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ABSTRACT

The theory of action research is discussed in terms of how second-order action research can help theorists to clarify and deepen their understanding of action research. After a brief introduction, the paper examines methodological criteria governing a piece of action research conducted at an action research training workshop sponsored by the Central University of Venezuela in Caracas. The second section describes techniques for analyzing and collecting data about the facilitation strategies. The last section draws on diary entries by a participant in the program to demonstrate theorizing about action research through second-order action research. (SI)

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Introduction

Talk of promoting teachers' based action-research in schools as a process of educating teachers to be reflective practitioners is sweeping through faculties of education in universities across the world. Academic teacher educators now debate something called action-research theory, and there is a growing literature which attempts to establish the epistemological and methodological foundations of action-research.

Some of this philosophical and methodological debate is grounded in the experience of actually attempting to facilitate the professional development of teachers through action-research. But there are some who engage with the theory and not with the practice of action-research. In my view this is bound to distort the way action-research is articulated to teachers because it contradicts the theory of the theory-practice relationship which underpins action-research; namely, that theory is generated from, and interactively with practice.

The academic action-research theorist may well argue that s/he is not focusing on the practical theories which are generated via participation in action-research. S/he is concerned with generating a meta-theory of the enterprise as a whole. This kind of distinction between a posteriori and a priori theorising is in my view largely ideological, because it legitimates a theoretical hegemony between academics and teachers. It sanctions conceptual imperialism. The academic becomes the arbitrator as to whether teachers who may think they are engaged in action-research really are. In other words, teachers' self-understandings of their teaching as a form of action-research have to be placed against the meta-theoretical slide rule of the academics.

In a previous paper I attempted to demonstrate that action-research did not emerge in the UK from the application of a meta-theory of the theory-practice relationship generated a priori by academic educational theorists. It emerged in schools as a dimension of teachers' initiated curriculum change and development. What academics associated with the 'teachers-as-researchers' movement, such as Lawrence Stenhouse and I, did was to articulate the theory of the theory-practice relation embedded in the reflective practices of innovatory teachers in schools. This meta-theory, albeit unarticulated by teachers, was constituted by their practices. In other words, teachers generated a meta-theory of the theory practice relation through the development of a reflective practice of education; ie, educational action-research. Such a practice constitutes a form of professional learning. Therefore a theory of action-research is a theory of learning.

One can view the question *"how can I facilitate learning?"* as quite separate to the question *"what is the nature of learning?"* . The answer to the first is a practical theory and it can only be discovered by reflectively trying to improve one's teaching strategies as the means of facilitating learning. The second question is about the nature of the ends of teaching; how one defines them conceptually. It constitutes a conceptual, rather than a practical, form of inquiry. If we view the two questions to entail quite separate forms of inquiry, then the first is a purely technical question about the most reflective methods for achieving desired learning outcomes.

Now action-research theorists do not in the main accept this separation. They tend to endorse the Aristotelian, and indeed Deweyan, view that practical inquiry implies reflection upon means and ends jointly. With respect to education this implies that teachers clarify and develop their conceptions of learning by reflecting about the teaching strategies they employ, and in developing such conceptions become aware in turn of new strategic possibilities. On this account teachers doing action-research are also engaged in what Aristotle called practical philosophy. Reflecting about practice and the ends of practice are simply two aspects of a unitary process.

If educational theorists subscribe to this account of reflective teaching, then to be consistent they should also argue that theorising about the nature of action-research cannot be separated from reflecting about strategies for facilitating this kind of professional learning. In other words as a conceptualisation of professional learning action-research theory should be developed in conjunction with attempts to develop strategies for facilitating action-research amongst teachers. This implies that the context for developing action-research theory is itself a form of second-order action-research.

In my view academics, who teach and write about action-research theory, should see themselves as under an obligation to undertake second-order action-research into their own teacher education practices. Submission to such a discipline is essential if academics are to avoid perpetrating ideas which misrepresent and distort action-research in order to legitimate the hegemony of academics in their relations to teachers.

In the rest of this paper I want to illustrate how second-order action-research can help a theorist to clarify and deepen his/her understanding of action-research. The illustration I have selected is of a piece of action-research I conducted into my own teaching at an action-research training workshop sponsored by the Central University of Venezuela in Caracas. The membership of the workshop largely consisted of either teacher educators attached to the university or teachers and others undertaking post-graduate research in education. It was a good opportunity to explore the assumptions academic educationalists bring into an initial encounter with the idea of action-research. Indeed it was necessary for me as the facilitator and a fellow academic to reflect about the extent to which I reinforced or challenged these assumptions through the way I structured and conducted the workshop. The rest of this paper will be organised as follows:

<u>Methodological Criteria Governing the Conduct of the Workshop.</u>
<u>Techniques for collecting and analysing data about my facilitation strategies.</u>
<u>Understanding Action-Research: an emergent theme and issue for second-order action-research.</u>

Methodological Criteria

Contrary to customary practice when working overseas, there was no detailed initial plan for the workshop. Plans inevitably have to be modified and adapted as one goes along, but they have usually been produced for a number of reasons. Firstly, I am accustomed to doing one week workshops for about 40 participants with a team. Whenever possible I like to involve senior teachers who have first-hand experience of action-research in their schools. They give credibility to the exercise, especially when the participants are also school teachers. I have also involved other researchers within CARE, who have been involved in facilitating teachers-based action-research. Joint planning in this context is necessary because it enables team members to explore each other's understanding, experience, and skills, and to sort out the contribution of each to the total enterprise.

Secondly, our overseas workshops sometimes involve making very complex arrangements concerning the use of technology (eg, video-recording and play-back facilities), rooms, and even sites. With respect to the latter we have twice held one week workshops in Spanish schools to give participants a real experience of facilitating teachers' action-research in classrooms. One has to plan such a workshop in sufficient detail to negotiate acceptable periods for classroom observation, and interviews and meetings with the teachers in the school.

In the case of the Caracas workshop the pressure to plan was not so great. A CARE team would have been too costly for the Central University to host. I went on my own. Also the schedule I had been given - four hours a day for four days - suggested that there was going to be a time problem for the experiential learning workshops we were accustomed to leading. The effort of organising and utilising sophisticated technology for data collection would probably only exacerbate the time problem. I decided to wait until I had more details about the context before deciding how to handle the workshops. However, I did have some methodological criteria in mind, distilled from past experience. These criteria can be described as follows:

1) Provide opportunities for participants to reflect upon and share their actual experiences of teaching and learning situations.

   Such experiences can be recalled, documented and analysed in ways which develop participants' capacities for reflective self-analysis, and their understanding of key aspects of action-research.

2) Structure the workshop to provide participants with the experience of developing strategies for facilitating action-research with teachers, and opportunities to reflect about that experience.

1 and 2 mark a distinction between first-order and second-order action-research. The former refers to strategies of reflective teaching, and the latter to strategies for facilitating reflective teaching in others, which in themselves can constitute a focus for reflection.

3) Establish an interactive relationship, between presentations of action-research theory/methodology and participants' reflections and discussions about their experience of practical activities in the workshop.

> This interaction should consist of a number of cycles. In each cycle the presentation of ideas is followed by a practical exercise, where participants experience the ideas in a concrete form and then reflect about them in the light of the experience. Such reflection in turn will generate more theoretical/ methodological questions which become the focus for new theoretical input, and so on into the next cycle.
>
> 4) Refrain from attempting to establish a comprehensive system of surveillance and control over the development of participants' understandings of action research and the role of the facilitator.

Such surveillance and control prevents participants developing a critical understanding of the ideas introduced by the workshop leader, and transforms him/her into an authority figure whose ideas are not contestable. It inhibits dialogue between leader and participants and negates the former's role as a facilitator of reflective practice.

Workshops for potential action researchers and facilitators need to give participants opportunities both to reflect independently - out of 'ear-shot' - about ideas introduced by the leader, and to exercise a measure of control over the development of an 'issues' agenda. In this context the role of the workshop leader is to respond to critical issues initiated by participants. S/he must possess the ability to remain <u>in control</u> over his/her performance within a dynamic and fluid discourse without stifling it by resorting to strategies for <u>taking control</u> over its direction.

The criteria or principles listed above have been abstracted from concrete strategies I and my colleagues at CARE have used in conducting training workshops. They are process criteria, tacitly embodied in our practices as trainers, and gradually made explicit in a piecemeal fashion as we reflected together in prior planning meetings, de-briefings at the end of each day during the course of workshops, and summative appraisals at the end of them. In other words the principles governing our pedagogical practices in action research training workshops were articulated in a context of second-order action research where we deliberated about teaching strategies. They emerged as explicit principles interactively with practical experience and not in advance of, or in isolation from, it.

It is difficult to bring such principles to mind without also bringing to mind some of the concrete strategies in which they are embedded. Although I did not plan the Caracas workshop in detail in advance of my arrival, I did have certain strategies in mind. For example:

1) A strategy for implementing criterion 1) consists of placing participants in small groups and getting each to articulate and discuss in turn a practical problem they persistently experience in their teaching situation.

This strategy is usually linked with an exposition, at the start of the workshop, of the nature of action research as a process of both educational inquiry and professional learning.

2) The major strategy I associate with criterion 2, in a workshop context where participants are unable to return to their classrooms, or to work with another teacher in a school during part of the day, is to set up situations in which a number of volunteers teach their peers.

In an initial briefing conference participants are told that:

- this is a real and not a simulation exercise. Volunteer teachers should not pretend they are teaching children or students, and the other participants should not pretend to be children or students. The volunteers should teach something they are genuinely interested in, and would like to convey something of its interest to their peers.

- the volunteer teachers will have a period of time - 45 minutes to an hour - in which to plan their lessons. (Team teaching is not ruled out). They have access to certain teaching aids if they require them, eg. OHPs. The lesson length will be 30-45 minutes.

- during the preparation period 'the class' of each teacher will plan a data collection exercise around the lesson. The key questions to be addressed are:

i) what kinds of data would it be appropriate to collect?

ii) how do we collect and analyse this data? Who collects it? Using what techniques?

iii) how do we organise and assemble the presentation of data for the purpose of group analysis/discussion?

- time will be allowed for the collection of interview data before and after the lesson, eg.from the volunteer teacher(s) during the preparation period.

- the data gathering process should not be so intrusive that it prevents the teacher and majority of the classs from fully engaging with the subject-matter of the lesson.

- the group analysis/discussion of data will take place the day following the lesson to give people in data collection roles time to process information and prepare its presentation to the group.

- the experience of the practical exercise as a whole, which normally consists of 2 x 3 hr sessions, will be de-briefed in a subsequent session where the groups (classes) share their experience of the exercise and discuss emerging methodological issues and themes related to action research. The practical exercise is usually linked with an exposition of a methodology for action research and the sorts of methods/techniques which can be employed in implementing it.

3) The interactive relationship between presentations of action research theory/methodology, practical experiences, and participants' reflections about those experiences had become associated in my mind with something like the following sequence of activities:

Lecture + discussion:
the nature of the action research process

Small group exercise:
problem identification and articulation

Discussion of theoretical issues:
between leader(s) and participants

Lecture + discussion:
action-research methodology and methods

Group exercise:
data collection and analysis around a lesson

Discussion of methodological/theoretical issues

This sequence not only allows ideas presented in lecture form to be explored experientially but the discussion which follows the experiential component provides an opportunity for further reflection on those ideas in the light of experience. However, the experience of the Caracas workshop significantly modified my understandiing of these relationships.

4) One strategy restricting the degree of control workshop leaders exert over participants' thinking, is to provide plenty of opportunities for learning in small groups which the leaders do not directly monitor. They can be invited into a group to respond to particular queries or questions, but then dismissed to allow the group to get on with the assigned task.

The value of this strategy has been clarified for me by having to operate with participants who speak a language I have no knowledge of. By providing considerable time for group work in the native language of participants, the temptation to establish overt and covert mechanisms of surveillance and control over their thinking is something I have become more aware of, and therefore able to resist. Well briefed English speakers amongst the participants can function very well as group leaders and mediate any necessary transactions with the 'outsiders' leading the workshop.

Techniques for analysing and collecting data about my facilitation strategies

In the Caracas workhop I attempted to establish a process of action-research into my own practice as its leader. This was partly because I was aware that a lot was at stake. The person who had secured money and funds to bring me to Venezuela needed the workshop to be a success. And from the standpoint of CARE we were hoping to establish a basis for future collaboration with educational researchers and teacher educators in the Central University. So we needed the workshop to be a success. I was also aware that I was largely ignorant of the academic and cultural context of the workshop, and therefore unable to anticipate participants' needs. This called for an even greater degree of responsive decision-making on a day-to-day basis than perhaps one would engage in when operating in contexts one is more knowledgeable about. Finally, I had been allocated less than half the time I normally used to carry out the training workshop. I was going to have to exercise not only considerable flexibility in my decision-making but also handle a great deal of complexity in managing within a short timescale a process which was consistent with the principles outlined earlier.

In establishing a second-order action-research process into my own teaching strategies within the workshop I also wished to demonstrate a point; namely, that facilitating action-research as a mode of professional learning and inquiry constituted in itself a reflective practice. I knew that many of the participants were academic educationalists interested in exploring action-research as an approach to teacher development. My own action-research was, in part, intended to demonstrate the value of undertaking second-order action-research into the strategies one employs to facilitate others' capacities for reflectively improving their professional practices.

At the beginning of the workshop I outlined the action-research procedures I intended to adopt; namely:

- I would, at the end of each day, reflect about events in the form of a diary. I suggested that the workshop participants do likewise.

I explained that I would not only describe events but also the ways I subjectively experienced them; how I felt about and interpreted them at the time. The diary would also contain retrospective and reflective commentaries on these feelings and interpretations.

I emphasised that this kind of reflective writing (see Holly 1989) helped us to recall experience and explore its singificance for identifying, clarifying, and resolving practical problems in teaching.

- My two interpreters were also asked to keep a daily diary and at the beginning of each day to interview workshop participants about their experience of the workshop. They would then present me with summary accounts of the interviews, and in addition could volunteer extracts from their own diaries.

In this way, my own record of experience could be constantly compared and contrasted with records elicited from participants, and with records produced by two 'observers'.

This multi-perspective approach illustrates one application of triangulation methods of data gathering. It is an application which grounds a procedure for assembling subjective data for release to others in a procedure that enables individuals to recall and reflect about their subjective experiences in a 'private space', before it is released into more 'public space' via such methods as interviews. Intrinsic to this procedure is that it places individuals in a position to exercise a large measure of control over the release of subjective data and the ways it is represented to others.

I always make the point that diaries are confidential to their authors. What is disclosed from them should be under their control. Diaries can be drawn on in responding to interview questions of discussing one's practices with others. They can be released in whole or in part at their author's discretion. Reflective writing in private space protects the individual from tendencies which are activated in situations which require them to produce more public accounts of their experience. For example, there is a tendency for individuals to misrepresent and distort their experience in interviews in order to present it in a favourable light. The private context of diary writing allows individuals to reflect about their experience in a more detached, open, and honest manner. Reflective writing, in private, increases the capacity of individuals to engage in authentic self-disclosure in data

gathering situations which are directed towards some form of wider release.

- At the beginning of each day I would read from the diary entries made on the previous day, and compare them with the accounts of both participants and interpreters/observers. I would then invite participants and observers to discuss the issues which emerged.

In this way I hoped to illustrate how a teacher can use multi-perspective data as a basis for developing critical self-understandings of their own practices, and for involving students and professional colleagues as partners in the deliberative process of action-research.

Theorising about action-research through second-order action-research

The following account draws on my diary entries, those of my translators, and data supplied to them by participants in daily interviews.

Day 1

At the beginning of the second day I read out an account of my thoughts and feelings, both prior to the previous day's sessions, and retrospectively. The following extracts are pertinent to the theory-practice issue which subsequently emerged:

> I didn't want to simply begin with a lecture on action-research. Of course, they will probably expect this. Shouldn't the visiting expert tell us what he/she knows? But 'telling' has to connect with experience and assist self-reflection. I don't know, as the Americans say, where these people are coming from...Young Mi (the host institution's organiser and one of my observers/translators) told me they were mainly teacher educators/researchers in universities, but a few teachers, and also some master's degree students in education.
>
> So I need a lot from the group before I can judge which inputs will be best coming from me. I have to practice what I preach...I must teach through action- research. We must gather data throughout the workshop. I don't know what problems I will encounter, but I guess the problem of my authority in relation

> to their learning will crop up as a theme. Also the problem of communicating a different paradigm of research to the one they are familiar with.

It is clear that I was entertaining a departure from my normal sequence; namely, starting after the preliminaries with a lecture on the nature of the action-research process. And I was entertaining beginning with a practical exercise to dramatically de-stabilise expectations I anticipated a largely academic group of individuals would have of the workshop; namely, that it would emphasise theory and engage them in theoretical discourse about action-research as opposed to the practical discourse about how to do it.

The sequence of activities I finally settled on for the first morning were included in the diary:

> 1) Get them to define themselves as professionals to get an idea of the areas of practice they might wish to undertake action research into...(½ hour)
>
> 2) In threes, each person to articulate a problem area or area of improvement in their practice (whether school teaching, university teaching, or reserach). The other two should only ask questions, or seek clarification, elaboration, or explanation. Each person should have ten minutes. Then after each individual has articulated an area of concern the three 'problems' should be discussed for a total of twenty minutes. Following this discussion each individual should produce a re-articulation of their 'problem' on a large sheet of paper which is then posted on the wall. All participants will be asked to tour the posters and review their contents.
>
> 3) General discussion in whole group.
>
> 4) JE to give a lecture on the action-research process.

Things didn't turn out as planned, as my retrospective account of Day 1 records:

> I started to brief them on the format for the morning, explaining why I would not be giving a lecture on action-research. But in 'briefing' and 'explaining' I found an

opportunity to make some basic points about action-research. For example, I drew a distinction between: a) first and second order action-research, when explaining why I needed to undertake action-research into my teaching strategies within the workshop; b) theoretical and practical problems, when providing a rationale for the small group 'problem articulation' exercise; c) 'educational research' and 'research on education' when elaborating on the reasons for the practical exercise.

I spoke for around 45 minutes and didn't leave time for discussion. Young Mi reminded me that participants had not yet introduced themselves. I decided to incorporate opportunities for discussion into the period following the practical exercise. The introductions gave everyone an opportunity to speak, but they took a long time to complete.

Participants got into the exercise, after coffee, fairly quickly...They appeared very committed to the task and did not wnat to be rushed along on my time schedule. I allowed them more time but kept up some pressure. They stayed on 3/4 hour beyond the official closing time (12.30 pm) to allow for discussion after the exercise.

I asked them whether the group work generated discrepant views of each of the problems raised. Evidently it did. I built a point about action-research methodology on this in terms of developing a comprehensive view of a problem area by entertaining alternative perspectives.

I then asked how many groups attempted to achieve a consensus of view about the nature of the problems explored. Some groups evidently did while others were content to tolerate divergence. At this point I posed a fundamental theoretical question about the truth of accounts of social situations, and contrasted the consensus theory of Habermas with the interpretative hermeneutics of Gadamer. I was explaining clearly, although very abstractly. Yet I hoped the abstract issues would be understood on the basis of participants' experience during the practical exercise. However, I gained the impression that some were 'lost'.

I was asked to clarify the difference between the views of Habermas and Gadamer on 'truth'. My long-winded 'repeat' indicated my anxiety whether I was 'getting through'. Some people seemed worried by my expressed preference for divergent and diverse 'understandings', leaving the final assessment of what constitutes a valid interpretation to personal judgement. I felt accused of being a 'relativist' and 'subjectivist'.

In response I did not deny truth existed, but argued that we only partially and incompletely grasp it. Also I suggested, but did not clearly articulate, that the path to truth lies not in simplifying complexity and diversity but in facing diversity and incorporating it into one's understanding.

...I could have made my points more clearly, but I was thinking some of this out 'on the spot' in response to unanticipated questions which tended to assume objectivity equals objectivism, and that if knowledge is provisional then 'anything goes'.

...I suggest that this part of the session made some feel 'destabilised': assumptions were challenged. However, I could have done a better job in clarifying my own position on the nature of understanding. I was worried about losing those who were not interested in these abstract issues. Did I?

...When explaining Habermas' consensus theory of truth I cited the idea of a hierarchy of credibility in groups which prevents free and open discourse. I asked if anyone had experienced this phenomemon in the practical exercise. Some people started to smile and laugh knowingly.

By the end of the day a whole set of theoretical themes surrounding the nature of action-research had been explicitly placed on the workshop's agenda. But I was worried about colluding with those who wanted to operate at a purely theoretical level on the assumption that a theoretical understanding of action-research does not have to be grounded in reflection upon one's practical experience of it. If I succumbed to this temptation I would only reinforce a theory of theory and practice which legitimates hegemonic relations between academics and teachers. I felt that my intuitive resistance to starting with a lecture had been well-founded. However, the fact that I gave a lecture did not constitute a

total reversal in the plan. Theoretical distinctions and ideas were articulated in the context of briefing participants for a practical exercise in action-research, not in advance of the briefing or retrospective to it.

The form of my presentation - a response to a dilemma about whether to start with a theoretical input or a practical exercise - embodied a new understanding for me of the relationship between theoretical understanding and practice.

I always knew that teachers did not grasp theoretical conceptions of practices independently of implementing a form of practice which embodied them in concrete form. But I always felt that some prior presentation of theory was necessary as a broad orientation, however imperfectly they were grasped. Now I realise, since the Caracas workshop far more clearly than previously, that theory renders practices practically intelligible; i.e. in a way which enables people to participate in them confidently and competently. It is no good presenting the theory before the practice since one is likely to have little understanding of what is required to render it practically meaningful to others. And it is no good simply asking peopole to engage in a novel practice prior to theorising about it, since they cannot competently proceed with a practical assignemnt without reflecting about the ideas which give it form. So the ideas must be elucidated in the context of a practical discourse with participants about how they are to proceed with practical tasks.

Theorising about the nature and purpose of a practice is not a separate activity, albeit an interacting one, to reflecting about how to proceed competently with it. The latter must involve theorisings about the practical aims and principles which shape the practice. This understanding of the relation between the theory and practice of action-research was realised in the way I resolved my dilemma about how to begin the Caracas workshop. It has led to a considerable shift in my understanding of the third methodological principle governing the facilitator's role, as I outlined it earlier. Such an understanding is in my view less distorted by an ideological misrepresentation of the theory-practice relationship which functions to perpetuate the intellectual hegemony of professional educational theorists. This is why I became anxious after the practical exercise about being caught up in a process which dissociated the discussion of theoretical issues from reflection about the concrete experiences of participants. And my enriched understanding, realised in a concrete form of practice, also explains why at the end of my day I listed the following problems, as urgent matters to address in the days which followed:

1. Developing participant self-reflection about their experiences as a context for understanding action-research methodology.

2. Structuring work of a large group, with different interests and experience, in a responsive rather than highly predetermined manner.

3. Securing continuity of learning experiences.

4. Building on ideas by continuously spiralling back on them in new learning contexts without becoming repetitive.

These concerns were reinforced by the contents of the observers'/translators' diaries. For example:

> Obs 1: During the small group work, participants seemed pressurised for time and worried about what they were putting on paper. Whether it was any good. They want individual attention. I was wondering whether John would give enough time to follow through this exercise till Friday.
>
> I was concerned about the time because it was running behind the schedule. I did not comment because I thought I must respect his style.
>
> Obs 2: Time ran against us in this session. Important data based on participants' needs were not taken into consideration for reflection.
>
> The [practical] task was performed by all participants. Some were anguished, others confused; some had questions to be answered.

The interview with a group of participants indicated that they perceived the first day as a very experiential process rather than one focused on abstract theory. This perception surprised me. All is relative (perhaps to culture). Some appeared to approve of what they perceived to be an experiential learning exercise. Others were less happy.

> Yes, it made me think about myself. I realized that I had to go little by little to be a good professor.
>
> I do not disagree with the experiential strategy. But it will be very fruitful if we would take time to analyse critically the pros and cons of action-research for us in

> the following sessions. The activity is pretty and attractive, but it is important to discuss the problematic aspects of doing action-research in our context. Some authors criticise action-research because it is too pragmatic and only concerned with practical problems.

Day 2

I had intended to give a lecture on the logic and methodology of action-research. Old habits die hard. But I hadn't embarked on it for very long before questions came. I abandoned the straight lecture and went into a series of mini-lectures; each in response to a question from participants, but each was used to weave a pattern or framework of ideas concerning 'the logic'of action-research. I used the questions as 'hooks' on which to build the framework of ideas. The performance lasted for two hours, largely due to numerous 'action-research strategies' I told about classroom events in an attempt to contextualise the ideas, although I also linked the ideas to the practical exercise yesterday. The following diary extract illustrates something of this attempt to establish links between the experience of participants and the ideas I was elucidating:

> One piece of feed-back I received via my observers/interviewers was that yesterday the trios didn't have time to reconstruct their 'problem-articulations', and had indeed tended to state ideas for action-research rather than explicate the problems they experienced in realising them in practice.
>
> I attempted this morning to explain to the group that I had hoped the task would make them aware of the ideas (theories) which framed their articulations of problems and tacitly underpinned their practices. I then talked about the 'tacit theories' which underpin teaching strategies and how it was the task of action-research to explicate and test them. 'Tacit theories' were illustrated with two stories about teachers' definitions of the problem of handling reading materials in classrooms as a basis for discussion.

I attempted to extend the practical task of the previous day into 'what data do we need to collect to test these understandings of problems?' But given the difficulties they had experienced in problem articulation on Day 1 they lacked

the experiential foundation for the extended exercise. However, in spite of my dominance and the relative failure of the practical exercise I recorded in my diary:

> ...the atmosphere in the group was relaxed and humorous: as if many were now feeling they were grasping a framework which made the action-research process intelligible.

Some might argue that I had merely entertained. But I would argue that my mini-lectures were continuous with the initial strategy on the first day. They constituted the elucidation of ideas in portrayals of practical experience, both those of workshop participants and those of teachers whose 'realities' they could readily identify with and generalise (naturalistically) to their own experience. One observer's diary for Day 2 reinforced my own impressions of both the difficulties in the practical exercise and the influence of the mini-lectures in facilitating the development of a conceptual framework which rendered action-research a practically intelligible process:

> Two things I liked most about today's session were: John's diary and stories in order to make a point. All participants were concentrated, had shining eyes and laughed...All the things including the stories produced a strong impact on the participants and me because they seemed more relevant than the theoretical concepts.
>
> ...I noticed some frustration from the participants not being able to figure out how to do the task in the small group...The trouble they encountered was that the problems they stated yesterday were too vague, and needed to be modified as an initial idea to proceed further.

The other observer was more parsimonious in his interpretations:

> John lectured for a long period of time. He answered several questions.
>
> ...One group member attacked the way he developed yesterday's session. No group reaction.

Day 3

For the first time the 'time problem' began to vanish. The schedule of activities I had planned for that day the previous evening was implemented with only a few adjustments. It was as follows:

1. Read my Day 2 diary. In the event I didn't invite discussion of it. One has to make choices. I was determined to maintain the schedule.

2. Lecture on methodology and techniques of action-research. In the event I did not go into specific techniques in detail but looked at the rationale for triangulation as a broad strategy, and developmental stages for gradually involving teachers in a process of data collection and analysis which culminates in triangulation. Again I 'peppered' the presentation with stories and examples.

3. Continuation of exercise in determining methods of data collection around practical problems identified in the trios. In this exercise I wanted participants to draw on illustrative accounts of data collection strategies introduced in the lecture.

4. Preparation in four 'classes' for practical exercise in data collection and analysis around a lesson.

5. 'The lesson'.

6. Brief feed-back.

In the event 4 and 5 seemed to proceed so smoothly that I did not see much point at bringing them together at the end of the day. They knew how to proceed into the analysis on Day 4. I was developing the view that the time problem disappeared wnen most of the workshop participants had integrated theory and practice within their understanding. There was no longer a great problem for the majority about how to proceed with making action-research intelligible. They anticipated developing theoretical insights by reflecting about their experience of the practical assignments.

However, this integration of theory with practice in the thinking of the majority didn't occur with a minority. In my diary I wrote:

> I feel some people want more time to discuss theory with me. A few do not seem interested in the practical session...Others feel they already know the things we have covered so far. How can one overcome the problem of

> academics feeling they can teach teachers action-research without doing it themselves?

One of my observers also commented:

> Some university staff members seem more interested with theoretical aspects of the workshop. The evidence shows them looking for books and other written material. They do not get involved in practical group work.

Day 4

I was amazed by the fact that the vast majority of participants arrived before 9.30 am (the official start to the day) and without any prompting settled into their groups to analyse and interpret the data they had collected around 'the lessons' of the previous day.

Some of the participants had earlier in the workshop expressed a concern to know about and master the techniques for analysing data. They assumed that there existed an established body of 'objective' techniques and that doing action-research simply involved applying them. I had argued that there is no orthodox corpus of techniques; they have to be selected, and even invented, in the light of emerging definitions of practical problems. Since such definitions are not bias free, the application of techniques cannot be prescribed on the basis of objectivist dogma.

No doubt part of the motivation of the participants on this day was a search for the 'holy grail' of technique. But they were also on the point of realising that more important than techniques are the methodological insights they might develop through the group analysis exercise, i.e. development of an awareness of the principles which guide the quest for understanding.

I had briefed one of my interpreters to chair a period after coffee which was designed to enable participants to share the methodological problems and issues the data collection and analysis exercise had generated in their groups. This period was to proceed in a very rule governed way. Firstly, the members in each group were to be interviewed in turn by members of other groups. They were only allowed to respond to questions, and the 'interviewing groups' were only allowed to ask questions. During the interviews the chairperson should prevent any 'outbursts' of discussion from persisting. The idea was to get experiences articulated and publicly shared prior to any discussion. Each group was allocated about 15 minutes of interview time. After the interviews the idea was that the whole group should identify some key issues and

themes which had emerged from the data presented and discuss them.

Once this session had begun after the coffee break I used the other translator to 'clue me into' the topics which were emerging from the group interviews. I listed them as follows on the blackboard:

- Should data collection be negotiated with teacher?

- Should one discover student as well as teacher expectations of lessons?

- The problem of unstructured interviewing is one of feeling confident.

- Discovering discrepancies in triangulation data. Does this betray a negative bias which is threatening for the teacher?

- The difficulty of observing in a non-judgemental manner.

- Should feelings as well as views be elicited in interviews?

- Individuals (students) experience things differently in the same situation.

- Who defines the observer's categories?

- Do a priori categories restrict observation?

- The problem of subjectivity in observation. Can one get agreement on categories?

- Problem of reflexivity; participating and observing at the same time.

- Teachers get anxious about observers' criteria/categories of judgement.

- the problems of role-playing children and teachers of children.

- Is action-research too complicated?

- Conflicts over leadership roles in groups.

- Power relations between teachers and students.

In the discussion that followed all the participants focused in on a major theme which appeared to permeate many of the topics brought out the interviews. This was the problem of how one handled subjective bias as an observer in an action research facilitating role. Does bias have to be set aside for the sake of objectivity or is it a condition of understanding practice in any educationally meaningful way? Are biases things which those involved in facilitating action-

research must become detached from or are they 'tacit theories' which can be tested, modified, and refined in the light of observational data looked at from the standpoint of different biases to one's own.

And so we returned to our original theme about the nature of our understanding of educational situations and how we verify it. But this time it was not treated in abstraction from reflection on the experience of a second-order action-research process. What the experience had demonstrated for many participants upon reflection was that there was a very real problem about developing one's understanding of practical problems by attempting to eliminate one's biases.

The data collection/analysis and the inter-group exercise which followed it, provided a context in which many participants were able to deconstruct their conception of objectivity. Such a conception pre-supposed a dichotomy between theoretical understanding and practical knowledge and thereby legitimated the intellectual hegemony of the academic researcher. In beginning to reconstruct their concept of objectivity by reflecting about their attempts to facilitate the reflective practice of teaching through research, participants had also begun to reconstruct their theory of the theory-practice relationship.

It was only at the end of the workshop after the inter-group exercise that participants realised that they had learned how to analyse data; not by applying certain techniques but through a group process which had enabled them to identify a range of theories for facilitators of action-research and to discover the fundamental problem which underpinned nearly all of them. The problem lay in their ideologically distorted self-understandings of their practices as educational researchers. The problem which they unearthed was a problem about their own professional identitites.

I will conclude with a few extracts from the diary I produced on the final day, and from the diary of one of my observers:

> JE:
> I was delighted. Deep down I had feared that the practical exercise on data collection/analysis would descend into chaos. But it didn't...The groups stayed with the task in a highly motivated manner until 11am (coffee)...I stopped worrying about time. The problem may not exist if one is confident that the students are using available time well...I lost the temptation to insert a theory session today because I felt the participants could easily tolerate its absence given their immersion in the practical exercise.

The inter-group exercise worked superbly as a means of illustrating how experience can be shared and reflectively analysed. The credit must go to the participants and not the procedure. They generated and sustained a process of grounded theorising: eliciting experiential themes from their questions and then in discussion weaving them holistically into a key theme concerning the role of the observer and 'the problem of bias'. When I commented on this process I think they suddenly understood that they had been competently analysing data without realising it. Perhaps their hunger to encounter theory in abstraction from practice may lessen now that they are able to develop their theoretical insights through reflective forms of practice.

Observer:
I couldn't do any interviewing today. When I arrived in the classroom, almost all participants had arrived, and were working on the task...

When I checked each group they were all task centred. Participation was very high, and in some groups a confrontation of ideas prevailed and in only one group was the search for consensus leading their intentions.

...Participation was excellent during the inter-group exercise. I had a deep understanding of how theory can be constructed from data.

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REFERENCE:

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