Exploring Action Research as an Approach to Interactive (Participatory) Evaluation

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Introduction

This investigation seeks to understand 'action research' as an approach to 'interactive form of evaluation'. The first half of the investigation illuminates the approach with the help of the selective body of literature and the second half draws attention to its application in the field with the help of an authentic evaluation plan.

Part 1: The Approach and Its Theoretical Inspiration

Evaluation is the systematic assessment of the worth or merit of an object (The Joint Committee, 1994). 'Evaluate' or its root word 'value', finds its origin in the old French 'value' and 'valoir' and the Latin 'vale´re', which had the meanings of 'to be worth (something)' and 'to work out the value of (something)' (Stufflebeam and Shinkfield, 2007; Mark, Greene and Shaw, 2006). Action research, our subject in this paper, embodies 'evaluation' as an integral component in its conception. In this context, the phenomenon 'action' denotes flexibility and participation in its process of introducing change and improvement, and 'research' indicates quality data and correct interpretations to document this knowledge. Action research as an interactive or participative approach to programme evaluation has gained the attraction of evaluators and is being increasingly 'adopted and adapted' into evaluation practice to answer the needs of the practitioners in the context of site-level improvement and local control (Owen, 2006; Rogers and Williams, 2006; Reason and Bradbury, 2001). Interactive evaluation (participatory evaluation) occurs during the delivery of a programme and provides knowledge for decisions regarding continuous improvement by involving programme providers in the evaluation process (Owen, 2004). Action research evaluation has also been used as practitioner research (Zeichner and Noffke, 2001), teacher research (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999), insider research (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000), and if applied on one's own practice, self-study research (Zeichner and Noffke, 2001).

Although participatory or interactive forms of inquiry have ceaselessly remained contributing to human cultures forever, it has lived as a formal field of practice for a very short time. To suggest a coherent history of action research as an approach to interactive evaluation is not easy. As the tradition exists, action research traces its

origin back to the work of John Collier (Commissioner for Indian affairs) in the 1930s, and the social experiments of Kurt Lewin at Tavistock Institute in the 1940s. Its origin may be linked to the modern critique of positivist science, in the movement to search new epistemologies of practice, and also in the feminist theories. The roots can be located from Marxist saying 'what more important is not to understand the world but how to change it' through theorizing of Gramsci (Italian, political theory) to Paulo Freire's (a Brazilian educationist) dialogue, praxis, i.e. action that is informed, voice, experiences of participants in educational activity. As well, the spiritual teachings from Buddha (a spiritual teacher from ancient India) and Abu al-Mughith Husayn al-Hallaj's (a Persian mystic) *Ana al-Haq* 'I am the Truth' to Gurdjief's (Armenian-Greek mystic) 'Life is Real Only Then, When I Am' can also contribute to our understanding of the inquiry. John Dewey (American educational reformer), who wrote extensively on democratizing education, can also be seen relevant in this respect. Thus the ownership is wide.

In general, action research draws its sources of theoretical inspiration on pragmatic philosophy (Greenwood and Levin, 1998), critical thinking (Carr and Kemmis, 1986), the practice of democracy (Toulman and Gustavsen, 1996), liberationist thought (Borda, 2006), humanistic and transpersonal psychology (Rowan, 2006), constructionist theory (Ludema, Cooperrider, and Barrett, 2006), systems thinking (Flood, 2006), and more recently, complexity theory (Reason and Goodwin, 1999). Now action research has been widely established as a form of professional learning across the disciplines. At this stage it would be appropriate to encapsulate the previous discussions into establishing a basic idea of action research (Table 1). Action research, therefore, is

> a collaborative research, centred in social practice, which follows a particular process, espouses the values of independence, equality and cooperation, and is intended to be a learning experience for those involved, to produce a change for the better in the practice and to add to social theory (Orton, 1992, p. 222).

And more specifically, action research is

a systematic and orderly way for teachers to observe their practice or to explore a problem and a possible course of action (McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead, 1996).

Table 1: The basic idea of action research (Adapted from Whitmore and Cousins, 1998; Patton, 2002).

Principal author/s	**Primary Technical Goal/Functions**	**Control of Decision Making**	**Desired Results**
Whyte (1991); Argyris and Schön (1991)	Practical/philosophical: improve practice while simultaneously advancing scientific knowledge	Balanced: researcher (evaluator) and practitioner as co-participants in research (evaluation process)	Immediate action; solving problems as quickly as possible
Key Assumptions	**Selection for Participation**	**Depth of Participation**	**Publication Mode**
People in a setting can solve problems by studying themselves	Primary users: most often programme implementers, although can be open to beneficiaries and others	Extensive: participation in all aspects of the research	Interpersonal interactions among evaluator and practitioners; informal, generally unpublished

Conventional Evaluation VS Action Research Evaluation

Frederick Taylor, in 1920s introduced an influencing concept of 'scientific management' i.e. people's work could be judged by a manager holding a stopwatch (McNiff and Whitehead, 2006). In other words, people were assumed to be automata and their productivity could be assessed in terms of 'how many tasks, in how much time'. This view, with its evident influence on various social systems entered the field of evaluation too where implications slotted in the idea that an external

evaluator makes judgements about other people's practices, and the 'stopwatch' as argued by McNiff and Whitehead, is still visible though in modified form, as 'checklist'. This denotes the peripheral nature of practitioners where an evaluator functions as 'in-charge' and practitioners as 'subordinates' in the evaluation process (MacBeath, 1999; Cousins and Earl 1995; Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Table 2: Conventional and participatory evaluation (Adapted from Estrella and Gaventa, 1999).

	Conventional Evaluation	**Action Research Evaluation**
Who	External experts.	Evaluators as facilitators; community members.
What	Pre-set indicators of success, principally cost and production outputs.	People set own indicators of success, which may include production outputs.
How	Distancing of evaluators from other participants for 'objectivity'; standardized, complex procedures; delayed, limited access to results.	Self-evaluation; simple methods adapted to local cultures; open, instant sharing of results through local collaboration and involvement in evaluation process.
When	Usually upon completion of project or programme; sometimes mid-term.	More frequently, small-scale evaluations.
Why	Accountability, usually summative, to find out if funding carries on.	Improve practices of local people to initiate, control and take corrective action. Rightly said: knowledge produced in this practice is verb rather than a noun.

As shown in the Table 2, action research evaluation, contrary to the traditional evaluation practice, challenges and shifts the paradigms by centralizing the practitioners in the 'knowledge' production and by equalising the powers between evaluators and practitioners, thus strengthens 'voice, organization and action' (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2006; Neuman, 2003). Sutherland (1995) also advocates the idea of collective knowledge production and considers it fairly deeper, more enriched and useful. Burke (1998) furthers this by outlining the key principles of

action research evaluation as: the evaluation involves and is useful to the programme's end-users with respect to their contexts, concerns, interests and problems; acknowledges and extensively benefits from the knowledge and experiences of key stakeholders; endorses the collective methods of knowledge creation in contrast to authoritarian, single-handed conclusions for others to follow for future planning; and finally, shares powers and outcomes with the stakeholders.

Action Research in Education and Teaching

Action research in the field of education specifically in the teaching profession entered in 1950s. The concept of teachers as in-charge of their own practice was developed by John Elliot and Jack Whitehead and legitimized the idea that teachers should understand their work from their own perspectives. Many educators have viewed reflective practice as a crucial component of teaching and teacher professional development, and action research is just a form of practice that addresses this characteristic of teaching, and professional development (Bullough and Gitlin, 1995; Norman, Sprinthall, and Thies-Sprinthall, 1996). The act of teaching, in a way, is the act of doing action research. For a typical teaching session, a teacher diagnoses learner's needs, plans and implements her lesson, evaluates her teaching, and as a result of this evaluation, improves her own practice and students' learning from the knowledge produced. This exactly is what evaluators using action research do. With the constructed knowledge as a result of evaluation, they not only improve the participants' practices, but also report the findings to add to existing body of knowledge.

The Process of Action Research

Various authors have illustrated action research method through a range of cyclical models depending upon their use in different contexts (Table 3). The common elements in the process of these models are: an evaluator negotiates with the stakeholders the purpose of the evaluation which is based on a 'problem' or an 'area of focus' (identification of an area of focus), observes practitioners' practice (data collection), synthesises information gathered (data analysis and interpretation), and

takes some form of action which invariably spirals evaluator back into the process repeatedly (development of an action plan).

Table 3: The cyclical models of action research evaluation.

Author	Action Research Evaluation Processes
Stephen Kemmis (1988)	… General Plan … First Action Step … Monitoring … Evaluation … Revised General Plan … Second Action Step … Monitoring … Evaluation …
Emily Calhoun (1994)	… Select Area … Collect Data … Organize Data … Analyse and Interpret data … Take Action …
Gordon Wells (1994)	… Act … Observe … Interpret … Plan Change …
Y. Wadsworth (1997)	… Act … Observe … Reflect … Plan Change …
Jeffrey Glanz (1998)	… Select a Focus … Collect Data … Analyse and Interpret Data … Take Action … Reflect … Continue/Modify …
Richard Sagor (2000)	… Selecting a Focus … Clarifying Theories … Identifying Research Questions … Collecting Data … Analysing Data … Reporting Results … Taking Informed Actions …
Earnest Stringer (2004)	… Look … Act … Think … Act …
John Creswell (2005)	… Identifying Problem … Locating Resources … Identifying Information … Collecting Data … Analysing Data … Developing a Plan of Action … Implementing Plan … Reflecting to See Difference …
Cher Hendrics (2006)	… Reflect … Act … Evaluate … Reflect … Act … Evaluate …

Thus, as illustrated by the above models, the key features of action research process that clearly distinguish it from other improvement-oriented evaluation methods are as follows.

- The process is cyclical, evolving, rigorous, and collaborative (Rogers and Williams, 2006).

- the process is participatory which keenly involves all the important stakeholders in the decision making which includes time frame and the mechanism for evaluation, the selection of methods to be used, the collection, analysis and reporting of data, and the decision making for putting results into practice (Feuerstein, 1986).
- The process recognizes and attends to inequalities of power and voice among participating stakeholders.
- The process uses promiscuous approaches to codify data to make them coherent with the local contexts and particular groups of people (Chambers, 1997).
- The process uses reflection i.e. a careful, purposeful thinking to understand experiences which assists the knowledge construction process (Jonassen and Reeves, 1996).
- The process is educational so that practitioners could learn collaboratively from the strengths and the weaknesses of one another, about techniques to improvise their programme and about 'understanding and intervening their social reality' (Tandon, 1988).

Action Research and Data Collection Methods

Some qualitative researchers (e.g. Zeni, 2001) insist on using qualitative data only; however, there are many (e.g. Greenwood and Levin, 2000) who give first thought to resolving problem rather than to debating method choices; thus, stress on qualitative, quantitative or both type of data: "… action research is inherently multi-method research … to address the problem at hand. Effective action research cannot accept priori limitation to one or another research methodology." The mixed-methods not only give way to creative potential, but also let evaluators to triangulate, i.e. to enhance the validity or credibility of evaluation findings by looking at the problem or the situation from several angles for fuller and more comprehensive study (Bamberger, Rugh, and Mabry, 2006; King, Keohan, and Verba, 1994). According to the situation and context, Garaway (2004) has suggested a long list of instruments of data collection that may be used in programme evaluation (Table 4).

Table 4: Instruments of data collection in action research

Surveys Interviews Audio and video recordings Analysis of records and reports Unobtrusive measurements Individual and community drawn pictures Mapping Problem stories using fictional characters	Problem stories using real events, evaluated as a group Tests Participant observations Diaries Case studies Group meetings Focus groups

Limitations or Challenges of the Approach

The aspects of legitimacy and validity of this practice - especially its dual role 'action' and 'research' have received most criticism. In general, some critics have labelled it as 'not publishable … only a means of professional development (Clifford, 1973; Good, 1963); unable to replicate at other sites as it concerns only the participants who conducted it; less rigorous at standards (Foshay, 1994; Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995); and a bit messier (Sansone, Morf and Panter, 2004). Specifically, critics hold that evaluators and practitioners may be research 'subjects' and consumers of research findings but not producers of worthy educational knowledge (Lagemann, 1996). Secondly, time that it needs to build trust, say and relationships to address needs of different partners in the evaluation activities makes it more costly. Moreover, circumstances, like finding alternative methods of disseminating information owing to stakeholders' low literacy levels (Gardner, 2004) and absence of participatory role of female practitioners or stakeholders due to societal 'taboos', would demand high standards of crisis management, critical thinking, interpersonal, and social skills. Thirdly, ability to rise above the internal and external biases, distortions and delusion will be a huge challenge for evaluators (Huberman, 1996).

Part 2: Application of Action Research as an Approach to Interactive Form of Evaluation

In this section, we have prepared an exemplar to illustrate how this approach to evaluation can be put to practice as a site-level measure to directly assist the provision of better learning and development to teachers.

The Context, the Issue and the Purpose of Evaluation

CTEPP (Certificate in Teacher Education and Professional Practice) is a six week long teacher education course offered by a local university in Pakistan to both in-service and pre-service teachers. This course has successfully completed four years of its presence in the field and has attracted teachers from all over Punjab. However, there are always calls from the field about the course being too tightly structured and delivered through top-down teacher training strategies. The key aim of this evaluation, therefore, is to transform this course into a more learner-centred, socio-constructivist experience for teachers. Through this immediate improvisation in the already operating programme, teachers will adopt an active role in their learning process, reflect and see new content in relation with their own teaching experiences, hold dialogue with their colleagues and learn from their experiences. Thus, the purpose of the use of action research evaluation is to stimulate and affect the delivery of this teacher education course by taking site-level measures and directly assist the provision of better education and training to teachers. Action research evaluation in this respect will best serve the purposes of all – *practitioners,* in learning how to deliver the course effectively; *participants*, in meeting their learning needs; *commissioners*, in utilising the findings to direct the programme to reach its desired goals. The tables (Table 5 and 6) below summarise the evaluand and the stakeholders.

Table 5: The evaluand.

Evaluand	Teacher education course: CTEPP
Unit of Analysis	Teacher educators
Development State	Operating programme
Programme Type	Educational
Purpose of Evaluation	Improvement in course delivery with a focus on instructional strategies being used
Evaluation Time	During implementation
Evaluation Form & Approach	Interactive evaluation: action research

Table 6: The stakeholders.

Stakeholders	**Group Description**	**Relationship to Teacher Education Programme**	**Use of Evaluation Findings**
Primary Stakeholders (A)	CTEPP teacher educators	Course deliverers/ facilitators	Will use the findings to learn how to deliver the course effectively.
Primary Stakeholders (B)	University administration	Funding body	Will use the findings to: o understand how the course is being delivered. o ensure that the funds are being spent appropriately and effectively. o bring about any changes in the course to make it more effective for future implementation.
Secondary Stakeholders	Teachers	Course Participants	Will meet their learning needs in a better environment.
Tertiary Stakeholders	Universities and Post-Grad colleges	Participants' parent workplaces	Will increase their trust in the usefulness of the course for their teachers.

The Major Evaluation Questions

The specific questions in this evaluation study have been given in the table below along with their theoretical premises. In addition, the evaluators on the site can further negotiate with the commissioners if there are any local questions that may be incorporated in the evaluation.

Evaluation Questions	Theoretical Premises
1. How do trainers (in this particular setup) direct their teaching to support and enhance sociocultural learning?	*Adult learners not only learn by themselves but also from others. They construct their knowledge by communicating, analysing problems, identifying solutions, and meeting goals together as a collective activity - sociocultural learning (Dobrovolny, 2006).*
2. What strategies do trainers use to facilitate reflection?	*Adult learners learn from self-assessment and self-correction – metacognition i.e. knowledge of our strengths and weaknesses as a learner (Grabinger, 1996; Schraw, 1998).*
3. How do (through examples and analogies) trainers integrate new information into learners' previous knowledge and experiences?	*Adult learners construct new information on the basis of their prior experiences (Dewey, 1938; Merriam and Caffarella, 1999), and these previous experiences act as a base line against which they compare and contrast new information.*
4. How do trainers engage learners to utilise their new knowledge to find ways to answer their day-to-day problems in their professional practices and settings?	*Adults learn best through authentic experiences i.e. opportunities to practice their new knowledge and skills – also real world, task-centred learning (Clark, 1996).*
5. How far trainers are interactive, and facilitate active participation of learners in their learning process?	*Adult learners do best when are exposed to active learning environments (Wittrock, 1992) where trainers act as facilitators and do not merely supply information but actively engage them in the construction/generation of their own meanings and relationships through various activities (Grabowski, 1996).*

The Project Approach:

This evaluation is a qualitative study and will employ action research approach to interactive evaluation. This approach is ideal for the improvement of the delivery of programmes by improving the practices of their participants. The evaluators work closely with stakeholders to negotiate the purpose of evaluation which is based on a problem or an area of focus (identification of an area of focus), interview participants and observe their practice (data collection), synthesise information gathered (data analysis and interpretation), take some form of 'action' which invariably spirals evaluators and participants back into the process repeatedly (development of an action plan). The results are then reported to its stakeholders.

Data Collection Methods and Procedures

This evaluation study will employ three tools for data gathering:

1. Open-ended questionnaires to seek feedback from the programme participants.
2. In-depth interviews with key stakeholders.
3. Participant observation

The procedures for data collection that the evaluators will follow have been explained as follows.

1. An open-ended questionnaire will be distributed among teacher educators and course participants and they will be asked to respond to it in as much detail as possible. The data generated through the questionnaires will be collated, analysed, and processed carefully to a) seek basic familiarity with the respondents; b) understand their experiences and views on effective programme delivery; c) understand the nature of the problem or discrepancy; d) decide how much and what kind of efforts might be needed for action planning.

2. One-on-one interviews with the teacher educators will be organised to a) discuss their own responses in the questionnaire; b) discuss and explain discrepancy to them; and explain what they are expected to do; c) discuss in detail how they can transform their practice by moving from teacher-centred to learner-centred approach to teaching.

3. The evaluators will organise a day workshop to collaborate and share and discuss with the teacher educators the learner-centred teaching strategies. This workshop will be designed in such a manner that it will be in itself an exemplar and a good practice for teacher educators to observe and experience themselves how an adult learners' classroom and teaching look like. This practical demonstration will help teacher educators in the planning of their own teaching and learning in the course.

4. The evaluators will observe participants' classes to determine whether teacher educators are successful in introducing learner-centred approach to their teaching and what needs further improvement. The evaluators will prepare careful, objective notes about what they observe, recording all accounts and observations as field notes in a field notebook. Informal conversation and interaction with course participants will also be valued and recorded in the field notes in as much detail as possible.

5. The field notes will be collated, analysed, and processed to generate insights that may suggest themes, trends or understanding not previously envisaged. This detailed analysis will help evaluators to identify what is going well and what needs further improvement. Through a careful and objective analysis a new action will be planned to improve the discrepancy.

6. The evaluators will collaborate again with the educators in one-on-one interviews to plan new action. They will discuss with educators the participant observation findings and will take their opinions about how they see the situation. Further changes and options for options for improvised

action will be thoroughly studied and suitably incorporated in their course delivery.

7. The evaluators and the teacher educators will enter in the second spell of action research i.e. the teacher educators' teaching will again be studied, data will be collected, analysed and discussed with them.

Dissemination of Findings

The results of this study will be disseminated to its key stakeholders: the University and the CTEPP administration and the CTEPP teacher educators. The forms in which these findings will be received and how they will be utilised have been explained with the help of the table as follows.

Table 7: Dissemination of findings

Who will receive the evaluation?	In what form?	How will reporting ensure use?
University and CTEPP administration	1. Working sessions 2. Final comprehensive report including recommendations 3. Executive summary	Systematic interpretation of the findings illustrating how the site-level intervention improved the delivery of the course, and how the results of the evaluation can further guide any changes in the course or its implementation in future.
CTEPP Teacher Educators	1. Up to the point working sessions 2. Executive summary	Up to the point findings of the evaluation shared with the participants will improve the teaching practices of the teacher educators, in general, and improve the delivery of the course, in particular.

Codes of Behaviour

The evaluators' sustained and intensive presence in the field will certainly raise ethical issues. This evaluation, relying heavily on human interactions, will be vulnerable to misunderstandings, conflict of opinions, embarrassment, and anger. Any signs of uneasiness, resistance, or other indications of emotional or psychological distress will be recognized and promptly addressed by negotiating them with the participants. The evaluators will ensure maximum confidentiality and no information shared will be disclosed to any unauthorised party. All the personal data that will be provided or displayed in the evaluation report will remain behind a shield of anonymity i.e. the identity of participants will be disguised with the use of pseudonym and the individuals will only be recognised by their position or title. The in-depth interviews, when necessary, will be tape-recorded by seeking permission from the participants. This practice will a) ensure accurate record of the interviews; b) make evaluators hold a good eye contact with the interviewee; make evaluators sensitive to any anomaly that may need to be addressed at once.

Timeline and Budget

1. **Timeline**

Schedules of the CTEPP course to be evaluated and the planned evaluation have been presented in a table form (Table 8 and 9) below:

Table 8: Schedule of the CTEPP course to be evaluated.

Course start date	Course end date	Meetings/week	Sessions/meeting
July 01, 2011	August 08, 2011	Two	Two sessions of 3 hours each

Table 9: Timeline for evaluation

Stage	Tasks	Timeframe
Pre-Evaluation	Approval of evaluation plan by the commissioners	June 6, 2011
	Development of evaluation tools - questionnaire and interview questions with the primary stakeholders	June 20
	Scheduling interviews and classroom observations	June 25
Field Work	Conduct preliminary meetings/interviews with the teacher educators	29 and 30 June
	Administer questionnaires	1st week of July
	Conduct workshops	1st week of July
	Conduct participant observation	2nd week of July
	Conduct one-on-one interviews (2nd spell)	3rd week of July
	Conduct participant observation (2nd spell)	3rd week of July
	Quick one-on-one sessions (2nd spell)	4th week of July
	Finalise fieldwork	1st week of August
Post-Evaluation	Finalise analysis of acquired evaluation data and field notes for comprehensive reporting	25 August
	Preparation and presentation of evaluation report	15 September

2. Evaluation Budget

The evaluation budget will accommodate the labour and other direct costs needed to complete the evaluation. The priority areas where spending would be made are:

a) evaluators and evaluation staff
b) boarding and lodging
c) travelling to and from site
d) equipment and stationery
e) telephoning, printing, mailing, and copying
f) printing of report and dissemination
g) miscellaneous including emergency expense

Final words

Teachers are always expected to grow and develop in their own profession not by studying their own practices or experiences but by studying the findings of those who are not themselves school-based teachers (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993). It is, therefore, very important that teachers take a lead and adopt active roles in their learning and development and create a different knowledge base by acting not just as objects of study, but also as architects of study and generators of knowledge (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993). Thus the hallmark of action research - research, education and action, transcends it from the traditional line of evaluation approaches and presents it as a way more befitting and more coherent to attend to the issues of not only programme improvement, but also the needs of teacher growth, development and renewal in this challenging era. Its procedures may be time consuming, costly, complicated, and challenging but, for sure, the alternative will be less rewarding.

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