

# Problems in Making Significant Changes in Teaching Practice Through Action Research

**Branko Bognar**

Faculty of Philosophy, University of Osijek, Croatia

## Abstract

There is a growing literature about conducting an action research that could help achieving significant changes in teachers' practices. Although an action research can contribute obtaining improvements, this process is not straight-line and without obstacles. The text elaborates three problems the author faced with while dealing with the action research in his practice. Firstly, he realized that teachers can hardly become the agents of change without the assistance of others. Actually, teachers who got used to working in a traditional school find it hard to make the first step towards professional emancipation without an experienced leader – be it school pedagogues, advisors, experienced teachers, or even university professors. However, their role is not only to teach teachers how to make changes, but also to be actively involved, as practitioners, in the process of change and in their own learning. Second presumption was that the learning communities can encourage teachers to change. However, the author realized that despite the positive influence the learning community can provide imaginary safe haven to those who are not ready for assuming an active role in the process, hoping that there will always be someone else who will take the initiative. In addition, the sequential process of change, which started with the professional development in learning communities, then continued by introducing changes through action research, and finished with the presentations of good-practice examples and publishing the research results, appeared to be insufficient for accomplishing significant changes. Instead, it is much better to start immediately with making changes through action research, and during the process to intensify the education and critical friendship. In this case, learning communities have much more impact. Finally, author inferred that it is not easy for the teachers to assume the role of a critical friend or an action researcher. The process of casting off the old roles and assuming the new ones takes time and patience and has to overcome the resistance within others, but primarily within ourselves. However, it would be wrong to expect that teachers develop all the necessary competences first and then begin with their research. On the contrary, the action research is an excellent opportunity for learning in different ways. In spite of the problems experienced, the new roles for teachers as critical friends and action researchers could be fruitful in making significant changes. This requires the active involvement of different social factors. Although assuming those new professional roles is not easily achievable, it is worth trying.

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# Problems in Making Significant Changes in Teaching Practice Through Action Research

**Branko Bognar**

Faculty of Philosophy, University of Osijek, Croatia

## What Are Significant Changes in Teaching Practice?

The idea of action research appeared as an answer to practitioners' need to monitor the direction and intensity of changes. Kurt Lewin, one of the initiators of the idea of action research, highlights the importance of research:

We need reconnaissance to show us whether we move in the right direction and with what speed we move. Socially, it does not suffice that university organizations produce new scientific insight. It will be necessary to install fact-finding procedures, social eyes and ears, right into social action bodies. (Lewin, 1946, p 38)

If a practitioner does not have, at his/her disposal, research procedures for the analysis of the results of his/her actions, according to Lewin, he/she feels like a captain without navigation instruments.

When it comes to teachers, action research enables them, in specific conditions of their professional actions, to obtain feedback on time, and correct their behaviour accordingly, in order to achieve desired changes. Also, teachers can make the results of their actions available to wider professional audience. The changes the practitioners wish to introduce, however, cannot be defined as research procedures, since they depend on values, or to be more precise on educational philosophy<sup>1</sup> that they wish to promote in their teaching practice.

In my efforts, first as a school pedagogue, and then as a university professor, to help teachers to make significant changes in their teaching practice, I have noticed the way they made the change from teacher-centred to learner-centred teaching. Basic differences between these two approaches are presented in Table 1. It needs to be pointed out that the changes were never complete – they were in a continuum between

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<sup>1</sup> Individual values can be completely understood only if we consider them in the framework of overall approach to thinking that we may call educational philosophy.

the school focused on the activities of teachers and the school where learners are active (Figure 1).

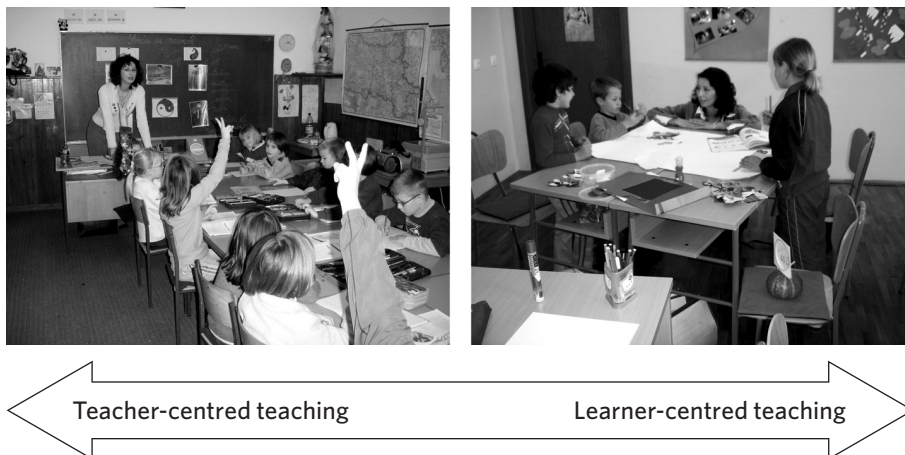


Figure 1. Teacher-centred and learner-centred classroom

**Table 1.** The difference between the traditional teaching and learner-centred teaching (Ivić, Pešikan i Antić, 2001, p. 207).

<b>Gaining knowledge</b> in individual school subjects	<b>Goals</b>	<b>Encouraging the development and enriching the experience of children</b>
<b>Prescribed</b> with little space for variation	<b>Programmes</b>	<b>Flexible</b> - the possibility of adapting to children's needs, and connecting different subjects into integrated thematic units
<b>Lectures and receptive learning methods</b>	<b>Teaching and learning methods</b>	<b>Active methods</b>
<b>Extrinsic:</b> grades, rewards, punishments, external control	<b>Motivation</b>	<b>Intrinsic:</b> children's interests, participation in engaging activities
<b>Classic school grades</b> that determine the level of attainment of the programme	<b>Assessment</b>	Sometimes the <b>lack of assessment, Individualised assessment, monitoring the progress of every individual child</b>
<b>Lecturer</b> , teacher in a narrow sense, <b>assessment</b> of learner's achievements	<b>Teacher's role</b>	<b>Organiser</b> of the lesson, <b>partner</b> in the teaching-learning process, <b>motivates</b> , teacher as a personality

## **Problems in Making Significant Changes in Teaching Practice**

Besides the fact that changes were never complete, different problems appeared during their implementation, partially caused by my exaggerated expectations. These exaggerated expectations could be ascribed to my prejudice about how the process of change should look like. Some of the preconceptions I will deal with in this text are the following:

- teachers can be change agents without assistance of others,
- learning communities encourage teachers to change,
- teachers can easily assume the role of a critical friend or action researcher.

### **Preconception one: Teachers can be change agents without assistance of others**

During my professional practice I have always advocated the role of the teacher who is capable of creating school fit for children. Ten years ago, however, I started doing it systematically – through action research. In the first manual I prepared for the teachers that agreed to participate in my first action research project, among other things, I wrote the following:

Up to now, teachers were required to fulfil other people's ideas, and realize educational goals by following more or less clear instructions. Their role and main task was merely to use their skills to teach in accordance to the set plan. In that system, if things were changing, it was because someone else made that decision somewhere outside the school, and then it was transferred to teachers in a hierarchically arranged system of in-service training.

An important precondition for introducing democracy to school is communication between all its "participants" – children and adults. Only open and symmetric communication can result with individual and common needs, while agreement and cooperation are the ways of finding how to satisfy these needs. Thus a teacher stops being a clerk and becomes an autonomous person responsible for his/her own personal development and the development of learners. Self-induced professional development can be achieved by assuming the role of an action researcher. (Bognar, 2000, p. 17)

The former quote clearly illustrates the commitment to the new role of the teacher that should „replace hierarchical, authoritarian, standard-

ised and conformist model of education with *emancipatory, empowering and democratic process*“(ibid, p. 6). Using these ideas as the starting point in my professional context I have always managed to attract teachers who found them appealing.

However, despite the initial enthusiasm and efforts to create collaboratively a school that is different, a significant number of teachers gave up after some time or did not really get involved into making significant changes. Therefore, at the beginning of the action research I began in 2005, the purpose of which was to help teachers to assume the role of an action researcher through e-learning, there were 33 participants at the beginning, and only 15 of them stayed in the project until the end.

The participants were teachers from six schools not very close to one another, so we established five learning communities whose facilitators were mostly school pedagogues. In the three learning communities whose heads stopped participating, almost all teachers also gave up, and at the time I was worried about the future of the whole project. This is clear from the transcript of a telephone conversation with one of the project participants – Marica Zovko:

Branko: Well, it’s about what I see as a problem, that is, I am worried whether it will survive at all.

Marica: What?

Branko: Well, all the thing – our story. What I’ve come to realise – it will live only in schools where pedagogues take the initiative, where someone acts as the leader. (personal communication 23 October 2005)

In other words, based on the above-mentioned experience, I’ve realized that teachers who got used to working in a traditional school find it hard to make the first step towards professional emancipation without a leader. However, the role of the leader is rarely mentioned in a part of the literature on action research. McNiff and Whitehead (2002, p. 15) claim that „action researchers enquire into their own lives and speak with other people as colleagues. Action research is an enquiry by the self into the self, undertaken in company with others acting as research participants and critical learning partners.” Although it is obvious that action research should be done in cooperation with other people, McNiff and Whitehead claim that it is individual responsibility of every researcher to involve other people (e.g. associates, critical friends, validators, validation groups, interested observers) into their

research (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006, pp. 84-86). The role of a leader, moderator or facilitator mostly is not mentioned.

On the other hand, Carr and Kemmis (1986) claim that members of collaborative, self-reflective community can exchange in the role of the facilitator, while the role of an outsider as permanent facilitator could undermine the collaborative responsibility of the group's members for the research process:

The role of facilitator in a generally collaborative group is one which can, in principle, be taken by any member of the group; an outsider taking such a role persistently would actually undermine the group's collaborative responsibility for the process. However, outsiders can legitimately take a kind of facilitatory role in establishing self-reflective communities of action researchers. Werner and Drexler describe the role of the 'moderator' who helps practitioners to problematize and modify their practices, identify and develop their own understandings, and take collaborative responsibility for action to change their situations. In short, the 'moderator' can help to form a self-critical and self-reflective community, but, once it has formed, it is the responsibility of the community itself to sustain and develop its work. Any continuing dominance of a 'moderator' will be destructive of the collaborative responsibility of the group for its own self-reflection. (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, pp. 204-205)

Therefore, according to Carr and Kemmis, the role of the moderator, especially an external expert, is justified only when a self-reflective community is being established, and later the participants should equally and independently assume the responsibility for their action research<sup>2</sup>. But my personal experience has taught me that teachers at this very point need support from persons who have sufficient knowl-

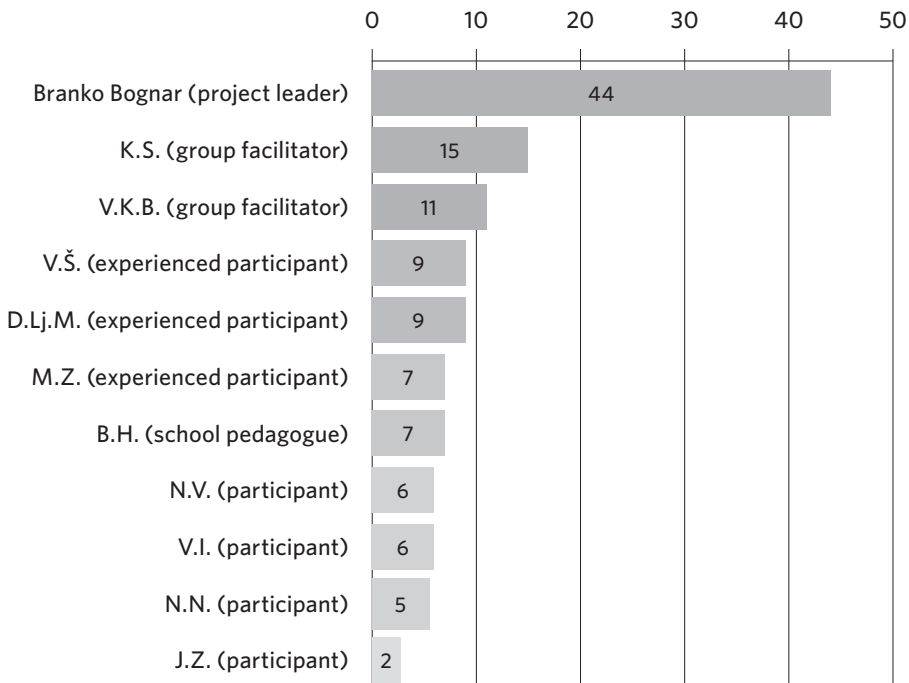
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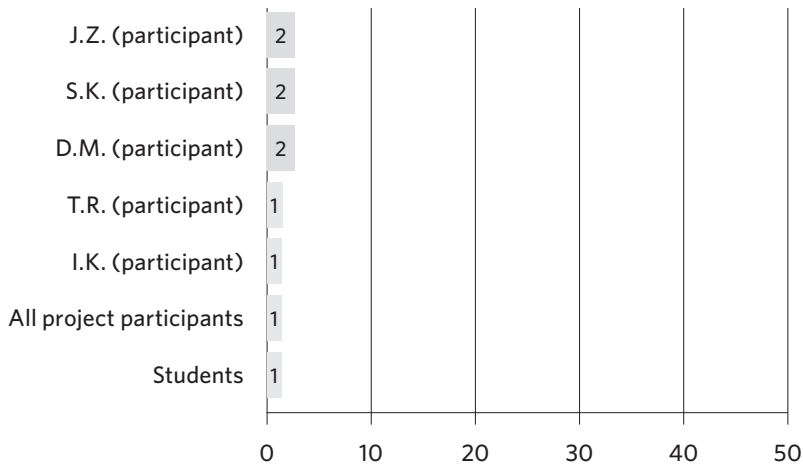
<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to see how the advocates of the idea of the harmful role of an outsider as the facilitator in their later work modified their opinion to some extent:

Similarly, in action research for community development in some parts of the world, outside researchers have often been indispensable advocates and amateurs of change and not just technical advisers. It is clear to us that some of these amateurs have been heroes in social transformation, and we must acknowledge that many have lost their lives because of their work with dispossessed and disempowered people and communities, struggling with them for justice and democracy against repressive social and economic conditions. (Kemmis & Taggart, 2005, p. 570)

edge and experience of the process of action research – be it school pedagogues, advisors, experienced teachers, or even university professors. Their role is not only to teach practitioners how to make changes, but also to be actively involved, as practitioners, in the process of educating other members of collaborative communities and in their own learning.

Figure 2 clearly illustrates the importance of facilitators and experienced teachers in assuming the role of an action researcher. At the end of the project, in which fifteen teachers did action research and collaborated on the forum set up on Moodle e-learning system, the participants were asked to name four people that helped them do their action research, ranking them according to importance. The participants said that I, as the project leader, helped them most. After that, the 2nd in importance were the facilitators of small groups of teachers who cooperated on the forum, and then the teachers who already had experience with participating in action research projects. In other words, although the teachers who were project participants were encouraged to work collaboratively, the support of the facilitators (mostly school pedagogues), and more experienced teachers was crucial to teachers who were learning how to assume the role of an action researcher.





*Figure 2.* People who provided help in doing action research

On the basis of my decade-long efforts to help teachers make significant changes through action research, it seems to me a bit naïve to expect that teachers will have the capacity to do it on their own, motivated only by new ideas they read in literature or information they heard during their in-service training. It is more realistic to expect that they will begin creating learner-centred school only if there is a well organised support system that will scaffold their efforts, and the facilitators of research groups or collaborative communities have a crucial role in it.

It is important, of course, to bear in mind what the real purpose of the support system is, and that is, primarily, to build the teachers' independence and empower them to make their teaching creative, and not to set limits and impose models that fit the theoretical underpinnings of the facilitator, or the goals set in the programmes of formal in-service teacher training. In this process, the facilitators are the people who are trying to help those who are beginning their action research process. The facilitators need to have an open mind for originality of other participants, and be ready for learning.

In Croatia, the support to teachers in improving their teaching practice through action research can be provided by school pedagogues, which is, I regret to say, still very rare. Therefore, as a part of my work at the university, and the responsibility for educating future school pedagogues, I try to promote this role of pedagogues, in which they will help teachers in making significant changes, rather than control the teaching process.



## **Preconception two: Learning communities encourage teachers to change**

From the very beginning of my efforts to help teachers in making significant changes, I thought it was important to create a supportive social environment. I believed that a learning community has an important role in changing a teacher's role from a passive implementer of someone else's ideas to an active participant who is looking for his/her own pedagogical path (Stoll & Fink, 2000). The purpose of this community is to support teachers in their search for the means of improving the teaching and learning process and create an environment that enables free exchange of ideas and feelings<sup>3</sup>.

In my first action research (Bognar, 2003), the problem was formulated into the question „How can I help primary-school teachers to assume a new professional role and become reflective practitioners capable of improving their teaching practice through action research?“ I worked with teachers in a learning community whose meetings were held every two weeks in the school where I worked as a pedagogue (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5cCX3c5U-Xo>). I prepared ten workshops for the teachers, with the aim of presenting, through experiential learning, the potential of creating learner-centred school and to help them begin their action researches. As long as I was facilitating the workshops, the teachers were satisfied and active. However, when they had to take on the responsibility for designing the work and facilitating the learning process, the problems emerged. It turned out that teachers have had difficulties in assuming a proactive role in creating and facilitating a process of learning and developing their research plans, and some stopped participating in the project. At that time, apart from one participant, no one was ready to take on the responsibility for designing the activities and active participation in the project work. Some of them ascribed the blame for this situation to the process that became “too diluted” and some openly blamed the project leader.

Based on the analysis of the data and my own reflection of the whole process I noticed the following problems related to the role of the learning community in making significant changes through action research:

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<sup>3</sup> The group shares feelings, and encourages each other to grow in understanding through working together for the common, but individual, good, rather than working competitively on their own. The teacher is in a relationship towards the group which explores meaning through dialogue, and does not present knowledge as fixed and given. (Evans, 1995, pp. 27-28)

- The group were mostly teachers who were not ready to begin their action research. So, the participation of the most of group's members in planning was merely formal. The group lost its main purpose, and that is to support one another in a critical-emancipatory way. On the contrary, the group's influence under such circumstances was not stimulating even for the teachers who wanted to participate actively in action research.
- Action research presupposes personal engagement and the responsibility for the defining and implementing one's action research. The meetings of the research team and their discussions provide an imaginary safety to those who are not ready for assuming an active role in the process, hoping that there will always be someone else who will take the initiative. If they are asked to do something they always find an excuse, either they do not know how, or they are too busy.
- It is partially true that the participants did not know what to do, since there are little published works in Croatia that could be used as good practice examples on how to do action research in schools. Examples from schools abroad often do not fit our context and could additionally confuse Croatian teachers.
- No one in the group had previous experience with action research, what was additionally aggravating, since the majority of the participants were not ready to assume the role of an active researcher.
- The example of our group confirmed the claim of Barica Marentič-Požarnik (1993, p. 352) that teachers and school pedagogues generally have a low level of personal responsibility for their professional development, and in-service training courses mostly reinforce it, because they predominantly consists of lectures, with little opportunity for discussion, give direct advice, criticise, provide detailed instructions for some procedures (e. g. detailed lesson plans), lesson plan templates, lesson observation from the perspective "only one approach is correct" etc.
- My expectations that the role of the facilitator in action research will be a minor one proved wrong. The facilitator's role was important, moreover, I believe that teachers who do action research for the first time cannot go through the process without a mentor, at least not the teachers like the ones who were involved in our project.

Despite the problems, I continued believing that learning communities play an important part in making changes in teaching practice. I

thought that teachers should be made aware and prepared for new approaches to teaching before they begin trying it out in their classrooms. Therefore, all projects I initiated began with the teachers' professional development in learning communities, then continued by introducing changes through action research, and ended with the presentations of good-practice examples and publishing of the research results (Figure 3).



Figure 3. The structure of the process of introducing change

The project *Developing Creativity in Lifelong Learning of Teachers* had a similar structure. There were around thirty participant teachers from three schools from different towns. From January to June 2008, teachers participated in the learning communities that I was leading together with Verica Kuharić-Bučević, a school pedagogue, Marica Zovko, a teacher, and Vesna Šimić, a school principal. Again, the teachers were very active and happy with the workshops prepared for them. The reaction of Nataša Stanković, a technology teacher, testifies to that:

The first thing I wanted to say is that I'm tired, I work all day, trying to be creative and it's very educative....I have a feeling that we're not doing something so difficult, we haven't brought much, we get papers and pens, but in the end we have done so much, and I find it very educative. I think I can do the same in my lessons, with my students. It means that I've learned something. The other thing is, related to these (creative) ideas, I am very glad that we have said it like that, because I personally, being a teacher of technology, have dreams that my technology classroom will one day be an entrepreneurial centre. (N. Stanković, personal communication, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AuKnY2O6tB8>)

The following school year (from November 2008 to April 2009), with assistance of group facilitators in learning communities and the participation on the forum (<http://kreativnost.pedagogija.net>), the teachers were working on their action researches, and the aim was to encourage creativity of students. Despite several-months of the professional development in learning communities, the first videos of lessons do not show a lot of creativity, neither of students nor of their teachers. A good example is the video recording of the lesson given by a teacher Nataša Stanković (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TAX9YR80aVM>).



*Figure 4.* Learners' activities in the lesson given by a teacher Željka Lovrić (2009)

Very soon, I realized that despite her participation in the professional development in the learning community, the teacher Nataša still did not know how to make her teaching more creative. Although, I have to point out that the teachers had plenty of opportunity to see examples of creative teaching in their learning communities, but at that time it was not expected from them to apply it immediately in their practice.

In order to motivate Nataša to make changes, I sent her, through the forum, the photos of the lesson where active involvement of students were obvious (Figure 4), and the action research report written by Željka Lovrić (2009) who was dealing with the same issue, but with a bit younger learners.

Also, my comments to Nataša on the forum aimed at encouraging her to move from traditional way of teaching technology, which is making the same objects following the rules set in the textbook:

Most pupils were very active and they made many windmills according to the same design plan. You and author of the school-book could be satisfied, but I am wondering if it is necessary that pupils all the time made the same things. I am not sure that making the same things represents creativity. The creativity implies originality that is opposite to producing the same things... I am wondering if it is possible that you allow pupils to make different things, especially creative ones, or even, if it is possible that they try to invent something? (B. Bognar, personal communication, 10 February 2010 <http://kreativnost.pedagogija.net/mod/forum/discuss.php?d=116>)

Nataša wrote in the draft version of her report that, on the basis of my critical suggestions on the forum and the commentaries of other participants, realised that her teaching can be different: „I saw happy faces and children actually working something out themselves. Then I realised that my classes could become more creative. I just had to figure out how to do that“ (N. Stanković, personal communication, 17 June 2009). The summary of the video (<http://www.vimeo.com/6740349>) taken at the end of Nataša's research shows significant changes in her teaching: Learners are in small groups designing and making their original products using element that were primarily envisaged for making a model of a boat. While they are working on their objects, soothing music is in the background, and sometimes the teacher's voice, giving positive feedback to learner's work can also be heard. At the end of the video, we can see the exhibition of students' works that are all different from one another and the results of their creativity.

The example of the teacher Nataša Stanković shows how the exposure to good-practice examples cannot automatically lead to change in teaching practice. Unfortunately, many in-service teacher training courses in Croatia mostly present to teachers the possibilities of change, but when teachers come back to their school usually nothing happens, or the teachers feel confused because advertised procedures do not function in their context. This is not the case in Croatian in-service teacher training system only, as this example from foreign literature illustrates:

Where the short two-day course provides practical tips for immediate implementation, the longer courses (e.g., master's degree

programs) provide bouts of theory and “what the research says,” but rarely do either find a place for teachers’ practical wisdom. Instead teachers are initiated into research typically done outside the context of the classroom, and they too often return to the classroom wondering either what is wrong with them as teachers or their students as learners when prescribed treatments fail to work. (Hollingsworth & Socket, 1994, p. 2)

However, when teachers decide to begin introducing changes, good-practice examples, and even formal in-service training can be very stimulating. Since action research is directed to improving teaching practice, it is an excellent means for learning from one’s own and someone else’s experience. Examples that teachers-action researchers can find in the reports of other teachers-action researchers are very motivating for them.



*Figure 5.* Interrelation between change, education and reflection in the framework of action research

Nataša's example made me realise how the model showed in Figure 3 does not completely work, i. e. that previous education of teachers does not make much difference. Instead, it is much better to start immediately with making changes through action research, and during the process to intensify the training and critical friendship (Figure 5). In this case, learning communities and online collaboration have much more impact, as confirmed by Mario Gavran, one of the project participants:

For me personally, this lengthy period of time was very strenuous but also very beautiful and exciting. I have gained priceless experience in terms of critical observing of other people's activity, along with a self-critical appreciation of my own professional activity through taking part in the learning communities. Conversations in the learning communities and on the web forum with my critical friends were valuable because I learned how to reveal myself through this communication with other people and how to share my thoughts and feelings. The hardest thing was to reveal my lessons, to watch myself in the process and to see all my flaws and imperfections. (Gavran, 2009, p. 319)

### **Preconception three: Teachers can easily assume the role of a critical friend or action researcher**

In my first action research the starting point was my belief that a teacher is capable of finding his/her own pedagogical path and critically examine all aspects of his/her professional actions, with the aim of continuing improvement (Craft, 1997). In this manner a teacher becomes a reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983, 1990) and action researcher (Altrichter, Posch & Somekh, 1993; Calhoun, 1994; Holly, Arhar & Kasten, 2005; Hopkins, 1985; McNiff & Whitehead, 2005; Milles, 2000; Noffke & Stevenson, 1995; Phillips & Carr, 2006; Pine, 2009; Stringer, Christensen & Baldwin, 2010). Although I was aware of difficulties that might impede assuming new professional roles, I believed that teachers, if they decide to do so, can easily become critical friends and action researchers.

In order to reach that goal, from the beginning of the project we organised peer lesson-observation. All teachers who were project participants could decide if and when they will agree to lesson observation. After every lesson observation we organised discussions with the aim to exchange experience, but also identify problems and ways to improve teaching practice. The teachers, however, were reserved



in giving feedback, and one participant raised this issue in one of our workshops: “I’d like to hear from you who were present at lesson observation both what you liked and what you didn’t like”. I believed that more open discussion will come with time when we become closer friends:

I think that the time will come when we will be more open to giving feedback to one another...In my opinion the term critical friend really means both, and when we really become friends... the critical part will follow naturally. (B. Bognar, personal communication)

Very soon I realised that making friendly relations, although important, is not enough for assuming the role of a critical friend, and the teachers, however reluctant to accept lesson observation, are used to different observers (school pedagogues, principals, educational advisors). This made me to conclude that assuming the role of a critical friend is not easy. Despite clear focus on collaborative observation and assuming an active role of a critical friend, old patterns of behaviour were still strong. This highlights the fact that it is not enough to advocate new values and reach consensus – it takes time for them to take root. The process of leaving old roles and assuming new ones takes patience and overcome resistance in others, but primarily in ourselves.

In my efforts to help teachers to assume roles of critical friends, I noticed that besides overcoming resistance they also need to develop some professional competences. During the project (Bognar, 2008) we initiated a couple of years later, in which teachers could discuss their teaching practice online, I’ve noticed that their comments were short, positive and mostly lacked suggestions how to improve teaching:

Dear V., I really liked the paced and encouraging style of your teaching. You pointed out that you wish to encourage your learners’ creativity and cooperation, and I could really see that when watching the recording of your lesson. I noticed how your relationship with the learners is based on mutual respect. I especially liked funny comments in some situations, because I think that humour often gives a bit of spice to daily life. I am sincerely looking forward to our cooperation; best regards. (J. N., personal communication, 17 November 2005)

Dear J., thank you for your comment that is always useful, whether in confirming something positive, or recognising something less positive, i. e. something that can be improved. I think it is important to do what you like and try to contribute to the growth of



what we love. I think our friendly analysis will speed the process. (V. Š., personal communication, 25 November 2005)

On the other hand, the comments of school pedagogues who were group facilitators and my comments were much more detailed and gave suggestions how to improve the practice. Those comments encouraged the teachers to reflect on their practice, and they were happy to hear them:

Branko, I was speechless after such a deep analysis, although I could expect it from such an expert like you. But something else surprised me, the sentence “An ordinary autumn day”, an expert and poet. This segment is the most impressive to me and helps me to overcome the fear that you talk about, and lurks in all of us (fear of the unknown) (S. M., personal communication, 20 December 2005).

Branko, thank you for the thorough analysis, you encouraged me and stimulated my enthusiasm. I will give you a better feedback when I analyse your suggestions. Here I'd like to repeat wise words of a prophet: “Good deed is the one that brings smile and joy to the face of another man”. You brought smile to my face, and here it is. 😊 (V. I., personal communication, 17 January 2006)

While talking with Danijela Ljubac Mec<sup>4</sup> I found out that, for the teachers-action researchers, the level of professional competences of critical friends is very important.

If you don't know some basic things, how you can recognise them. You have to know a lot in some areas, or at least have sufficient information about the issue someone is dealing with. Peer lesson-observation should not be perfunctory. What you are going to observe? What quality feedback you can give to help the person! (D. Ljubac Mec, personal communication)

Assuming the role of a teacher-action researcher is, in comparison to the role of a critical friend even more difficult. I see action research as systematic, creative acting that presupposes philosophical reflection of values, creative and visionary defining of new possibilities or challenges, active participation in implementing productive ideas, collecting data on the process of change, (self)-critical thinking about the

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<sup>4</sup> I was a critical friend to teacher Danijela Ljubac Mec during her action research *Encouraging the Autonomy of Lower-primary Students through Project Work*, published as masters dissertation (2008).

results achieved and finding ways to introduce this experience gained through participation and action into the culture of a narrower and wider community. All this is not possible without a high level of professionalism of action researchers.

The teachers who participated in the project in 2005 and 2006 (Bognar, 2008) and tried to do their action researches said that the following competences are needed for assuming the role of an action researcher: *willingness to change, collaboration, accepting new things, persistence, (self)-criticism, expertise, motivation for lifelong learning, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, taking risk, curiosity, communication skills, accepting mistakes, writing skills, patience, action competences, intrinsic motivation, creativity, freedom, empathy, tolerance, better competence in methodology*. Personally, I would add better knowledge of literature and higher competence in foreign languages and ICT literacy. All of this is not easy to achieve in the framework of informal education, so action research should be given more space in initial, graduate and post-graduate education of teachers.

However, it would be wrong to expect that teachers first develop all the necessary competences and then begin with their research. On the contrary, action research is an excellent opportunity for different ways of learning. During the decade of my involvement in action research I have developed various professional competences, e. g. by cooperating with my colleagues from abroad I improved my knowledge of English; by setting up preconditions for communication and cooperation of action researchers who live in different parts of the world, I learned to use and manage electronic systems, such as Moodle or Drupal, I've learned about different scientific paradigm and about different approaches to action research, and I learned how to lead projects and publish scientific papers.

## **Conclusion**

In the end, I can say that by doing action research I encountered various problems and personal prejudice, but I accepted them as an encouragement for creativity and learning, and as an indicator of the intensity of change. My belief is that change cannot happen without problems. Where there are no problems, there are no significant changes, but the problems themselves are not the most important encouragement for our actions, it is our vision for the better future.

Although I have realised that the process of change is a lot more complex than I expected at the very beginning, and despite the fact that

some of my initial expectations proved unrealistic, I believe that all of it contributed to making change and to personal learning. Therefore, the preconceptions or “prejudice” I began with are actually the vision I still believe in, and that is learner-centred school that can be created only by emancipated and creative teachers. By helping teachers in creating such a school, I realised that this will not be possible without understanding and active involvement of many social factors. I now understand that it is a complex goal that is not easy to achieve. Nevertheless, I am trying to contribute to this vision of a better school, not because it can be easily done, but because it is worth trying.

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