Adding to Your Teaching Repertoire: Integrating Action Research into the Lesson Plans

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As today's students become more technologically savvy, social, and collaborative using social media, there are new and innovative techniques educators can use in the classroom. For example, action research is a newer technique using collaborative group processes, drawing upon the experiences of the individuals to promote positive results. This article will provide an overview of action research theory and demonstrate how action research was used to help faculty and teachers learn how to put this theory into practice by developing lesson plans in a variety of disciplines. At the 25th International Conference on Teaching and Learning in March 2014 at Jacksonville, Florida, data was collected on ways educators may use action research in the classroom for the purposes of this research paper. While other educators may use action research differently, the results here show some ways educators can use action research in the classroom..

Throughout educational professional development offices, there are plans to mentor faculty, teachers, full-time instructors, and adjunct instructors regarding incorporating newer strategies to developing lesson plans and to address a variety of learning styles while teaching (Sandford, Belcher, & Frisbee, 2014). Gone are the days of purely traditional lectures in education as today's students have become increasingly socially connected in nearly every aspect of their lives, including through online learning (Hannon, Riddle, & Ryberg, 2014) and use of social media (Yadav, 2015). The basis, or underlying philosophy, of social media is collaboration between individuals to have conversations about experiences of mutual interests (Weber, 2009).

While there is no "social media" teaching strategy, per se, the principles and philosophy of action research strongly resembles the underlying principles and philosophies of social media. Action research can be defined as a "family of related approaches that integrate theory and action with a goal of addressing important organizational, community and social issues together with those who experience them" (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014, xix). Since students are actively using social media in their daily lives, engaging students through social media, such as with Facebook and Twitter in libraries, is becoming more commonplace (McGough & Salomon, 2014). There is little research for action research as an emerging technique in educator professional development (Bradshaw, Gallastegi, Shohel, & Younie, 2014), but hopefully this research will further that line of academic inquiry.

At the 25th International Conference on Teaching and Learning in Jacksonville, Florida in March 2014, a featured workshop was held on integrating action research into lesson plans for educators, mainly community college faculty. The design and intent of the session was two-fold: (1) to educate the audience on the theory of action research and appreciative inquiry and (2) to demonstrate applications of action research during the session. It was intended for the audience members to leave the session actively engaged with examples of how to apply action research into their own lesson plans, based upon their own experiences, which they derived during the three-hour session. This paper is an overview of that session, shares the data derived from the session, and presents examples of how action research can be integrated in a variety of different curriculum subject lesson plans from the experiences of the attendees.

BACKGROUND AND THEORY OF ACTION RESEARCH

The term "action research" is generally credited with Kurt Lewin, although the style of research he coined had been conducted for decades (Koster & Lemelin, 2009). Action research focuses on collaborative solutions to problems (Richer, Ritchie, & Marchionni, 2009). Using action research often provides a mechanism for change and that focusing on positivity creates positive change (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Some would argue to the contrary we should focus on "what is going wrong" in order to create positive change but action researchers, and more precisely appreciative inquiry researchers, would follow that focusing on negativity will only yield negative change and negative attitudes (Koster & Lemelin, 2009). Further, by creating positive change through collaborative problem solving, action researchers posit that "buy-in" is much greater since there are more people involved in the process (Waters & White, 2015).

Action research started to lose popularity after World War II (Masters, 1995). The ideology itself was resurrected and rebranded as a new line of research in the 1980's by David Cooperrider as "appreciative inquiry" (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Only this time Cooperrider extended the action research process into a revised version or process to guide the problem solving development framework for organizations based upon a sociorationalist vision of science (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). A sociorationalist perception seeks to use symbols and experiences to guide conceptual change to social order (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Cooperrider's version stated the action research based-appreciative inquiry process should first seek to establish a conceptual or contextual framework for the discussion, which is known as the "dream" phase. In this step, the participants look to begin with very positive, reaffirming visions of the task. Next, the "discover" phase seeks to find ways to link reality to the dreams noted. This will add intensity to the process and task. Moreover, the discovery phase is intended to connect the whole reality to the dream, thereby allowing the "true" tasks to emerge while controlling and allowing those tasks under the guise of "dispassionate inquiry" (or those tasks containing bias) to be dismissed. In doing so, the positive values of the group emerge in this "design" phase with a common group-building language. Finally, this process allows the group to extend the possibilities of these ideas by "deploying" the plan created collaboratively by the group. These four stages (dream, discover, design, and deploy) have formed the basis for the Cooperrider version of action research known as appreciative inquiry.

Since the first article by Cooperrider in 1987, a web search using Google Scholar with the key phrase "appreciative inquiry" has shown there have been more than 1,600 articles. Moreover, a collection of appreciative inquiry-related research can be found within the Appreciative Inquiry Commons website (see http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu). Here, a virtual library of research, completed projects, and discussions on the use of appreciative inquiry in a variety of settings can be used to help create new projects.

THE SESSION DESIGN

The authors designed this session not only to educate participants about action research-based appreciative inquiry and how it can be used in lesson plans to more adequately address the affective domain of Bloom's Taxonomy, but to provide them with training through hands-on, learning-by-doing experiences within the appreciative inquiry framework. While traditional lesson plans providing lecture and assessment tend to address only the cognitive domain of Bloom's Taxonomy, it has been found that many students are more interested in learning through affective domain exercises including applying, analyzing, evaluating and creating (Forehand, 2005).

OPENING AND CLOSING ACTIVITIES: THE KOOSH BALL

The basis of the sociorationalist vision includes a dream component, which helps to set a positive mindset for group processes. The authors have used several different icebreaker exercises over the years to help set a positive mindset for action research-based appreciation inquiry exercises. "An ice breaker is an activity, game, or event that is used to welcome and warm up the conversation among participants in a meeting, training class, team building session, or other event" (Heathfield, 2015). One activity that has proven to be useful throughout the years, whether in class sessions or conference forums, is the "Koosh ball" activity, especially to open and/or close sessions lasting more than an hour. A Koosh ball is a ball of rub-

ber strings but any ball, fixture, or any soft item can be used (see Figure 1). This activity is designed to have the participants stand up in a circle and discuss something. The science behind this active learning activity is such that standing helps to keep the blood flowing (Chrastil & Warren, 2012). The reality behind this activity is it forces the participants to put down their smartphone or laptop and concentrate on the activity.

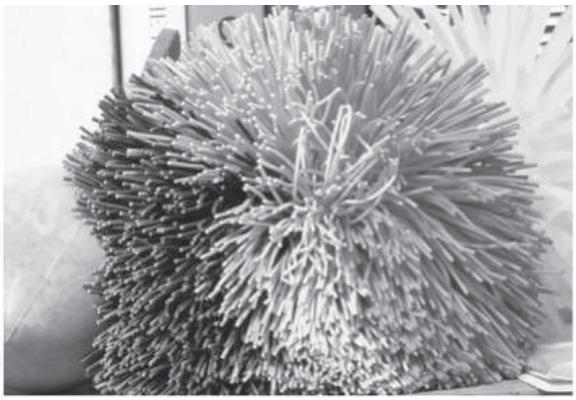

Figure 1. A Koosh ball. (George & Gerbis, 2013).

While in the circle, the rules can be as simple or as complicated as needed. First, the individual with the Koosh ball controls the conversation or replies to a question from the proctor. One preferred question to use is to have the person "describe briefly something that happened recently at work or home that makes you very proud or happy." This is a way to cleanse the mind or purge the mind of troubles that may be plaguing the individual and to have them prepared and ready to be involved. A proctor may open with "tell me your name, what you do, and where you are from." These are merely icebreakers. When a person is done speaking, they toss the Koosh ball to another person. In this session, the authors asked the individuals to say, "Who they were, where they are from, what they teach, and what they may know about action research and appreciative inquiry."

The Koosh ball activity can be elaborate, making rules such as "dropping the Koosh ball, incurs a penalty"; "you cannot pass the Koosh ball to someone who already spoke" (forcing them to remember); or even "you cannot repeat something someone else has already said" (in a recall exercise). The Koosh ball has infinite possibilities for adaptation in the collaborative classroom environment; however, it does not work well in sessions an hour or less in duration. In this session with 15 participants, an icebreaker and closing Koosh ball session could span 15-20 minutes for each, consuming 30-40 minutes of an hour session and thus would leave little time for activities in between.

Finally, at the end of the session, a proctor may use the Koosh ball activity as the authors did – as a reflection activity. The person with the Koosh answered one of these questions briefly, "What is one positive takeaway from today's session for you?", "what most intrigued you today?", "What did you learn that may have surprised you?", or "What do you now know about action research?"

COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITY #1: DEFINING "EFFECTIVE TEACHING"

In this conference session, the 15 participants were allowed to self-select one of two groups with a goal of trying to keep the groups about evenly sized. Without further encouragement from the moderator, seven went into one group and eight into the other. The participants were told each group would be conducting the same research on defining effective teaching. For the first activity, the groups were told to think back over the years to the teachers they have encountered and then to to brainstorm within the group, using short two to three word phrases, as many characteristics of effective teachers as they could. Afterward, both groups were told to "now discuss among themselves which are the top three characteristics and to rank-order them." The participants were additionally instructed to not create "super-categories," or combine several categories into one category with several characteristics from the phrases.

The first group, with seven participants, identified "effective teaching" as being (1) student-centered, (2) reflective, and (3) engaged in life-long learning. The second groups with eight participants similarly identified "effective teaching" as being an individual who is (1) passionate, (2) attentive/adaptable, and (3) a great mentor/coach. Although in this latter group, being a mentor/coach did not evolve from the brainstorming session but from the ranking session. All characteristics recorded are listed in Appendix A.

COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITY #2: DEFINING "EFFECTIVENESS" IN CERTAIN ROLES

In the second activity, the groups were given

specific topics to brainstorm and rank. At the 2013 Community College Futures Assembly, research from focus groups identified multiple critical areas for research into effective faculty. This research identified the development of effective leadership of teaching and the development of effective Science-Technology-Engineering-Mathematics (STEM) teaching as the areas crucial for development by administrators for the future for community colleges (Basham, 2013).

Therefore, in one group, the participants were asked to deduce the "characteristics of effective leaders of teaching" and deduced effective leaders of teachers are (1) representative, (2) experienced, and (3) well-rounded. All characteristics recorded of effective leaders of teachers are listed in Appendix B. In the second group the "characteristics of effective STEM teachers" were found to be (1) having a desire to teach, (2) very inquiry-based/hands-on teachers, and (3) very innovative in their teaching approach. All characteristics of effective STEM teachers recorded are listed in Appendix C.

COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITY #3: IDENTIFYING METHODS TO APPLY ACTION RESEARCH IN LESSON PLANS

In the third activity, the authors asked participants to disband from their groups, choose a partner whom they did not know, and ask one another how they think they could use these techniques in the classroom. Then, the participants as a whole shared what they had learned from their partners about using action research-based appreciative inquiry in the classroom. To paraphrase a participant, she said it would be great to use with students in her English literature class to help them brainstorm ideas they had after reading books and to deduce the central themes and analyze the characters. Another said they could use it in their math class for brainstorming ideas how math problems could be used for "real world" applications. Finally another participant said the icebreakers would serve as a great way to do first day of class exercises instead of the normal "stand up and introduce yourself."

FUTURE RESEARCH

For future research or activities, we think it would be interesting to replicate this session with a larger group of teachers. For example, it would interesting to have groups repeat this exercise within departments to see if there are more discipline-specific traits that could be deduced or to see if culture had an effect on answers. For example, if all teachers came from one institution would the groups tend towards similar items and rankings? This could make for a useful activity during an in-service day to define the tendencies of the teaching staff and to identify strengths and areas for improvement. It could also be used to improve communication processes between administration and teachers by examining certain elements within and between groups.

The first exercise could also serve as an introspective exercise for professional development. The authors imagine someone sitting down and brainstorming as many characteristics of effective teachers as they could from their experiences. Then, the participants would pick out the top characteristics they admire and aspire to the most. From there, the person could define their individualized professional development and growth plan based on where they currently are and where they would like to be in a year or more. In the second activity, the authors suggest repeating this exercise using a variety of other topics including remedial education, adjunct instructors, management of teachers, online teaching, orany other critical issue facing faculty and administration. Exploring how to integrate adjunct instructors into departmental activities would be compelling. In the third activity, the authors are reminded of the usefulness of positivity in the classroom. There are many possible derivatives of this work, including everyday comments and grading assignments. For example, instead of "here is where you went wrong" with a problem, an instructor could instead say, "Your reasoning was sound up until this point." Positivity yields positivity. Instead of "you forgot to change the number sign," instead say, "You're almost there with your problem solving; just remember to flip the sign the next time." Instead of "you shouldn't" learn to say, "Have you tried…" The participants and/or students will react in a friendlier manner and instructors should see the results improve according to the theoretical foundations of action research-based appreciative inquiry.

While the authors have noted there are more than 1,600 articles on action research-based appreciative inquiry, there is still much that researchers can do to further the academic body of knowledge in this line of inquiry. From a theoretical stand-

point, skepticism still exists about action research-based appreciative inquiry (Koster & Lemelin, 2009); however the authors feel this session adds to the existing academic body of knowledge by demonstrating the effectiveness of action research-based appreciative inquiry sessions for researching critical issues in teaching and teacher leadership. Moreover, this research has seemingly inspired more than a dozen teachers in community colleges on how to adopt more active learning-based exercises on an action research-based appreciative inquiry framework. Whether or not this inspiration followed the participants to the classroom and into their lesson plans was not researched.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the session was very engaging, from the Koosh ball opening and closing to the collaborative activities in-between. Participants said the three-hour session seemed to "fly by" in their evaluations of the session at the closing Koosh ball exercise. The session covered the basic tenets of action research and appreciative inquiry and allowed participants to practice engagement through action research-based appreciative inquiry during the session. The participants also conducted self-reflection to deduce how they could integrate action research-based appreciative inquiry into their lesson plans, thereby providing them with practical and active "takeaways" from the session. In this day where students have become more integrated, collaborative and connected through social media, it is important for teaching to evolve to become more integrated, collaborative, and connected through activities in the classroom, such as using action research-based appreciative inquiry.

Appendix A

Collaborative Activity #1 Brainstorming Session Items

Qualities of Effective Teachers

GROUP 1

- Advocate for students
- Hold students responsible
- Take appropriate responsibility
- Enthusiastic
- Provide an example-modeling
- Student-centered (#1)
- Organized
- Staying current with technology and brain research
- Collaborative with colleagues
- Reflective (#2)
- Willing to change/adapt/revise
- Patience
- Accessible
- Content knowledge
- Life-long learner (#3)
- Establish rapport-know students (empathy)
- Use best practices
- Care about students learning

GROUP 2

- Communicate clearly
- Motive the learners
- Knowledge of subject
- Enthusiastic
- Humble
- Attentive to learning styles
- Organized yet flexible
- Good listeners
- Innovative
- Open to change
- Aware/attentive (#2)
- Enjoy teaching/passionate (#1)
- Be human/individualize
- Patience

Appendix B

Collaborative Activity #2 Brainstorming Session Items

Qualities of Effective Leaders of Teachers

- Approachable
- Open
- Transparent
- Able to identify constructive, authentic criticism
- Flexible
- Servant
- Politically savvy
- Objective/unbiased
- Good listener
- Compassionate
- Observant
- Good coaching skills
- Humble (not afraid to ask questions)
- Budget management skills

- Knowledgeable
- Balanced
- Good decision making skills (put words into action)
- Insightful/reflective
- Consensus builder
- Resource conscientious
- Good communication skills
- Representative (#1)
- Evaluative
- Decisive
- Collaborative

Appendix C

Collaborative Activity #3 Brainstorming Session Items

Qualities of Effective STEM Teachers

- Hands-on
- Backward design/refinement; lead to big picture
- Student-centered
- Rigor
- Solving a problem
- Real world application
- Inquiry-based/collaboration (#2)
- Standard/content knowledge
- Research/current
- Integrated curriculum
- Objectivity
- Communication skills
- Mentor/retain students/relationship building
- Investigating/desire to teach (#1)
- Knowing what comes before and comes after/holistic
- Innovation (#3)
- Teamwork

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