

Qualitative approaches to educational evaluation: A regional conference-workshop

Grant Banfield

School of Education, Flinders University grant.banfield@flinders.edu.au

Ma. Socorro Cayago-Gicain

College of Arts and Sciences, Leyte Institute of Technology, Philippines

This paper reports on a conference held at the Leyte Institute of Technology, Tacloban City, The Philippines. Entitled: Qualitative Approaches to Educational Evaluation, it was a cooperative venture between the College of Arts and Sciences at the Leyte Institute of Technology and the School of Education at Flinders University. A central purpose of the conference was to introduce participants to the possibilities that qualitative approaches to research offer educational evaluation. However, it provided more than an opportunity to simply explore the application of qualitative techniques to educational evaluation. The conference situated those techniques within a broad, Action Research, planning framework so that by the end of the conference, participants would be able to design, implement, and manage entire evaluation projects.

Educational evaluation, qualitative research, action research

INTRODUCTION

The Leyte Institute of Technology in Tacloban City (The Philippines) was the site of a conference-workshop entitled *Qualitative Approaches to Educational Evaluation*. Over one hundred tertiary students and educators working in various professional and community settings attended the two days which were jointly organised by the College of Arts and Sciences at the Leyte Institute of Technology and the School of Education at Flinders University.

This paper is both a report of that conference and an explication of its content. As a report it serves to briefly document the conference process. In its content explication, the value of participatory and collaborative approaches to tackling educational problems generally and educational evaluation in particular is outlined. It begins with a consideration of Action Research: its historical origins and the social values that underpin it. Next, the relation between qualitative research and educational evaluation is explored. Emphasis here is given to the power of qualitative methods to contribute to a deep understanding of educational practice. Within an Action Research framework, qualitative evaluation can be used as a tool for socially progressive educational change. An important feature of the conference was that its own process followed principles of Action Research.

ACTION RESEARCH

The origins of Action Research are rooted in the community-based work of social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1946; 1948). While Action Research has certainly “become a generic term for a wide and even confusing array of related approaches” (Coglan and Brannick, 2001, p.3) it has retained

two ideas central to Lewin's work: collaborative decision making and a commitment to social improvement.

Lewin described Action Research as existing in a spiral of inter-related steps, or moments. In their adaptation of Action Research to educational problems, Kemmis and McTaggart (1988; 2000) describe the Action Research Spiral as consisting the following moments: Planning, Acting, Observing, and Reflecting.

The Plan, is constructed action and ... must be forward looking. It must recognise that all social action is to some degree unpredictable and therefore somewhat risky. The general plan must be flexible ...[and] help practitioners go beyond present constraints. It should help practitioners to realise a new potential for education action. ...

Action ... recognises practice as ideas-in-action – and uses action as a platform for the further development of later action ... plans for action must have a tentative and provisional quality; they must be flexible and open to change in the light of circumstances. ...

Observation, functions in documenting the effects of critically informed action ... it must be responsive, open-eyed and open-minded. ...

Reflection recalls action as it has been recorded in observation but also active ... it allows reconnaissance, building a more vivid picture of ... what might now be possible, for the group, and for its individual members as actors committed to group goals. (Kemmis and Mc Taggart, 1988, pp.11-14)

Action research offers a powerful and empowering approach to educational evaluation. It has a wide practical applicability from large-scale evaluations that span the entire organisations, to more modest evaluations of single programmes and the critical reflection on one's own work.

Importantly, Action Research is always an active partnership between researchers and the researched. Indeed, in Action Research, the researched are the researchers in much the same way that the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, described the pedagogical relation between teacher and student (Freire, 1972). Thus, in adopting an Action Research framework, educational evaluation is a collaborative project where research is 'not done on others' but 'done with others'.

Throughout the two-day conference, participants were encouraged to regularly reflect on their learning and discuss their perceptions with others. A conference booklet was produced to facilitate this. Not only was the booklet a source of content information but it was designed as a work-book to encourage reflection and the development of ideas. The interactive workshops and regular conference forums were also supported by workbook, or journal, reflections. Mirroring the principles of Action Research, the conference was developed on the assumption that the most effective and enduring changes to educational practice comes from ongoing reflection and collaboration.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AND EDUCATIONAL EVALUATION

Social research – the pursuit of knowledge about the social world through systematic investigation – is often divided into two broad traditions: positivism and humanism. The former is seen to use primarily quantitative methods to collect data while the latter employs more qualitative approaches. While this paradigmatic division might be overly simplistic (see Lincoln and Guba, 2000) it serves to situate different and often competing approaches to educational research and evaluation. According to Hitchcock and Hughs (1989, p.13):

... social research is neither simple nor uncontroversial. Social research, individual tools and techniques, and particular models of research have been the subject of many heated debates. These debates are not new and go back to the writings of the great

philosophers. The problems surround the ways in which we can produce knowledge of the social world, and the appropriate methods and procedures for the delivery of this knowledge.

The advantage that quantitative approaches offer educational evaluation is that they facilitate the wide collection of data. Survey instruments, like questionnaires, can be efficiently administered and give broad generalisable sets of findings. On the other hand, qualitative techniques can provide detailed knowledge of a small number of cases. Here the possibility of a deep understanding and rich descriptions of human action is greatly enhanced. This was the point of Sarvella and McDermott in their discussion of the qualitative evaluation of Health Education programmes

... there is a greater emphasis placed on holistic descriptions of various phenomena [and the examination of] the minute details of what goes on in a given environment. (Sarvella and McDermott, 1993, p.133)

In a similar vein, Bogdan and Biklen (1982) offer a useful summary of the characteristics of qualitative research. Their views are paraphrased as follows:

- Firstly, it involves a naturalistic setting wherein the context of activities is integral to the evaluation;
- Secondly, this does not ordinarily involve the reduction of data into numbers. In this, the data are transcripts of interviews, diaries, personal fieldnotes, photographs and even tape recordings which help convey meaning about the setting and places of study;
- Thirdly, it is conceived with process as well as product. In short, qualitative evaluation tries to identify the 'hows' and 'whys';
- Fourthly, qualitative approaches tend to involve inductive rather than deductive reasoning...data collection is done first, only after the investigator decides the relevant questions; and
- Lastly, the investigator's keen interest in understanding the people who are under study is the common thread.

While qualitative and quantitative research paradigms might not share ontological and epistemological assumptions they, as Patton (1990, p.15) emphasises, need not be considered mutually exclusive in practice:

Because qualitative and quantitative methods involve differing strengths and weaknesses, they constitute alternative, but not mutually exclusive, strategies for research. Both qualitative and quantitative data can be collected in the same study.

It was within this context of a recognised mutuality of approaches that qualitative techniques were explored in the conference. However, with the emphasis of Action Research being on deep understanding, critical reflection, and the improvement of concrete practice, qualitative methods are vital tools. Typically, qualitative evaluation, like qualitative research, draws on methods of interviewing, observation, and document analysis (Coghlan and Brannick, 2001; Greenwood and Levin, 1998; Patton, 1990; Reason and Bradbury, 2000; Shaw, 1999). The conference process provided participants with structured activities directed to the development of generic qualitative, or 'humanist', research skills such as: active listening and questioning, participant observation, and reflective journal writing.

CONCLUSION

The conference-workshop had three broad aims. Firstly, it intended to raise participant awareness of the power and value of qualitative approaches to educational evaluation. Secondly, it aimed to provide conference participants with the opportunity to develop skills of programme planning and qualitative data gathering so they could design and implement their own evaluations with confidence. Thirdly, the conference was seen as an opportunity: a conduit for the establishment of collaborative qualitative research networks. The purpose in planning an interactive and participatory conference was more than just to model Action Research – it hoped to bring together people with common educational and research interests. Prior to the conference there was no idea of what sort of networks (if any) would be established. They could have been formal or informal, large or small, local or international.

While it has been planned to contact all participants as part of a post-conference evaluation one formal network is currently being planned. As a direct result of the conference, consideration is being given to the establishment of an international qualitative research network.

REFERENCES

- Bogdan, R.C. and Biklen, S.K. (1982) *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Coghlan, D. and Brannick, T. (2001) *Doing Action Research in Your Own Organisation*. London: Sage.
- Freire, P. (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Greenwood, D. and Levin, M. (1998) *Introduction to Action Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Kemmis, S. and McTaggart, R. (2000) Participatory Action Research. In N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research 2nd edn.* (pp. 567-605) Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Kemmis, S. and McTaggart, R. (eds.) (1988) *The Action Research Planner*, 3rd Edition. Waurin Ponds: Deakin University.
- Lewin, K. (1946) Action Research and Minority Problems. *Journal of Social Issues*, 2, 34-46.
- Lewin, K. (1948) *Resolving Social Conflicts*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Lincoln, Y.S. and Guba, E.G. (2000) Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Influences. In N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research 2nd edn.* (pp. 163-88) Thousand Oaks: Sage
- Patton, M.Q. (1990) *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, 2nd Edition. Newbury Park: Sage.
- Reason, p.and Bradbury, H. (2000) *Handbook of Action Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Sarvella, P. and Mc Dermott, R. (1993) *Health Education Evaluation and Measurement*. Madison: Brown and Benchmark.
- Shaw. I. (1999) *Qualitative Evaluation*. London: Sage.