

Using Action Research Methodologies In Building a Frame for Practicing Research

Liz A. Langdon *University of North Texas*

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Using Action Research Methodologies In Building a Frame for Practicing Research

Liz A. Langdon

University of North Texas,
Denton, TX

Abstract

I discuss action research methodologies and nuances to recount how my research with art educators using critical encounters with visual culture and senior artists, facilitated gaining a broader view of place. During the study, I recognized my first-person voice operating critically and analyzing paradoxes found in the dialogue and data, which was in conflict with my second-person relationships with participants, insofar as we shared a way of knowing that values multiple forms of participant learning. I used these disjunctures to challenge my outdated notions of what it means to “do” research and learned that action research practice offers multiple insights into working in relation to participants and to myself. I describe the variations of action research employed to frame and to facilitate the study within the events of the workshop which suggested insights into what direction the analysis of the research should take. I conclude with describing participants’ learning through the action of the research. My objectives were refocused by the events of learning in and through the action of the research.

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This study focused on bringing K-12 art educators together with artists, who had a strong history with the community. In turn, the conversations impacted how individuals came to understand place and people. Our discussions led to criticality in how place is understood from multiple perspectives, the impact of visual culture, and a reflection on one's own biases and stereotypes. We used action research process to develop art curriculum related to living artists as an investigation into place. The need for a place-based art education which studies local culture, and the artists who are outside the elite mainstream are well documented in the literature (Congdon, 2005; Krug & Parker, 2009; Ulbricht, 2000). In place-based art education local artists and citizens contributions are valued.

I chose to use action research methodologies because of the challenges and openings inherent in bringing groups together. This required on-going reflection by participants and myself, which is a key part of the transformative nature of action research. I will discuss three aspects of action research in which my own and teacher participants' objectivity, subjectivity, and intersubjective relationships engendered an understanding of different perspectives.

The site of this research is a small North Texas city, which was deemed the most average city in the US based on the 2000 census, because it matched the national norm for ethnic balance (Fine, 2001). The majority of the residents are White, and the largest minority, Latinos, remained largely invisible from the city elite, whereas Blacks at almost 10% were represented on the city council, yet as Fine (2001) points out, "The East side — traditionally black — lies, literally, on the other side of the railroad tracks that run along the edge of downtown" one of the remnants from segregation that marks many small-town and cities around the country. My research offered opportunities to art educators to explore the impact of place on local artists and the legacy of unequal opportunities inherent in segregated places.

I developed a plan for action research to facilitate a group of art educators to work with local senior artists in curriculum development in order to answer my focusing research question. I wondered: How might art educators gain a broader view of place through identifying and working with local senior artists? I saw critical inquiry into local place as an important aspect of place-based art education and I felt senior artists could donate a greater sense of place through memories.

During the study, I recognized my first-person voice operating critically and analyzing the paradoxes found in the dialogue and data, which was in conflict with my second-person relationships with participants; insofar as we shared a way of knowing that valued multiple forms of participant learning. I used this disjuncture to challenge my outdated notions of what it means to “do” research and learned that cooperative action research practice offers multiple insights into working in relation to co-participants and to self. I planned and facilitated workshops, which were multifaceted with a goal of developing curriculum, but also to engage participants in discourse about views of place. I describe the variations of action research methodology employed to frame and to facilitate the events of the workshops. These events led to insights into what direction the analysis of the research would take. I conclude with describing participants’ learning through the action of the research and describing how it affords validity and reliability to the research.

Research Design

The four teacher participants were White, experienced K-12 educators with at least ten years’ experience teaching and ranged in age from approximately 35-50 years. They each identified a local artist or an artist who had lived in the locale, who was from an older generation. The seniors ranged in age from 59 to 90 years old. This opened up possibilities for intergenerational learning for teachers and their students. The working group’s goal was to collaboratively produce a unit of study about artists from the area, and introduce it to community educators through a summer workshop. My goal was for participants to connect with an artist and through the action research to connect to larger ideas about place and its history.

To explore my question, I set forth developing five day-long workshops, designed as monthly workshops, which initiate participants into a methodology of action research and create opportunities for participants to learn, share and work (Heron & Reason, 2007; Schoen, 2007). I used action research steps as pedagogical tools by identifying four consecutive monthly workshops by each of the action research steps: observing, reflecting, planning and acting. This provided a focus for each workshop’s activities and goals, although the cyclic nature of action research can take place over a few minutes or months. In practice the participants engaged in several cycles, throughout the six months of this research. The steps provide an ongoing and naturalistic learning process of awareness building throughout the research.

Schoen (2007) recommends key support for art educators' action research in developing an action research practice. I shared my understanding of action research with group members explaining this was on-going learning and that we are all researchers. I presented place-based art education as a viable theory that could become part of their action research practice (May, 1995) and emphasized that they were the researchers. To facilitate action research in their practice, I asked participants to observe local visual culture, create journals to document their observations, identify, interview and present an artist and reflect on the research during and after each monthly workshop, documenting with written reflections. I later recognized all this contributed to an extended epistemology which marks the multiple ways that participants demonstrate learning in cooperative action research.

Action Research

I chose action research because it is participatory, and a democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview (Heron & Reason, 2008 p. 1). The participatory world view refers to research “people do together to solve problems of concern to them” as opposed to the traditional scientific view of the world, where the creation of knowledge belongs to specialist researchers (Reason 1998, p. 6). Cooperative action research can “break this monopoly of knowledge” (Fals, Borda and Rahman in Heron & Reason, 2008). The practices of action research appeared ideal for participants to pursue research aims, because the practices are grounded in living issues and come out of a spirit of inquiry (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Action research is inherently relational, and it was appropriate to my postmodern and pragmatic research problem (Sumara & Carsons 1997). I embraced the possibility that through the research the participants would develop new perspectives through intersubjective relationships. Intersubjectivity is used in a social psychological sense, referring to a variety of possible relations of people's perspectives (Gillespie & Cornish 2010). The relationships with senior artist were significant in that it opened possibilities to learn about place through the perspective of lived history. Therefore, I used action research to guide how I conducted the research and returned to its tenets as I analyzed what had happened in the events.

Multiple Forms of Action Research

I had not conducted or participated in action research prior to this research. Guiding a critical investigation was a new challenge. I had read descriptions

of various action research methodologies and I considered several variations of what our action research could look like; practical, critical and cooperative. The three models of action research practice which I explored offered ways of doing research which supported different aspects of my goals. I planned workshops within the general framework of action research, and adapted the methodology as I grew to appreciate the value in each way of working. Yet, because action research is a living practice it does not lend itself to predictability, and conflicts and contradictions arose.

In writing about the complementarity between complexity and teacher action research, Phelps and Graham (2010) asserted that action research is a messy system in which teachers' work is complex and where factors cannot be controlled. They recommend that action researchers take a proactive stance in learning from this unpredictability and evoke, welcome and seek to understand the change processes. These ideas anchored my plunge into action research.

Practical action research is the most common form of action research that teachers do (Kemmis, 2007). Researchers remain open to the views of others and how others experience the results of the action research, which enables a reciprocal relationships between the practitioner and others involved, as in the case of a teacher and her classroom of students (Kemmis, 2007; Mills, 2011). It is often referred to as second-person action research, because the research is on or about other people (Torbert, 2006). I began our action research practice by asking participants to use the first step in the cycle to observe how their students describe local place in their artwork. At our next monthly workshop, I created a presentation to promote critical reflection but in discussing their student's neighborhoods, participants shared their own views which reflected a mix of fear and anger and a clear divide between us and them. The discussions were freewheeling and opinions outweighed reflection as participants expressed frustration over what they claimed were entitled groups of people.

I designed the research to empower and enlighten participants and to challenge the status quo, and I sought critical reflection to move toward changing participants' views of local and regional place. Critical action research is a direct way to facilitate the basic action research principle of beginning to look at things differently (Hobson, 2001; Kincheloe, 1991; Mills, 2011). It asks for critical reflection, based on observation, to effect planning for the next action. Critical action research has the goal of emancipation through awareness building, and, by enabling participants to see place from a different perspective, I anticipated they might be able to view it critically. Critical action research goals shares key purposes with critical social theory. It frees individuals from traditions, habits, and bureaucracy while enabling processes of enlightenment and democratic participation (Kincheloe, 1991). It was these socially responsive

aspects of critical action research that I anticipated might enable participants to examine issues in the community from a critical perspective (Mills, 2011). On the other hand, I had not even met most of my participants before the research began, so I could not count on their participation in a critique of the status quo. After the second meeting I recognized critical reflection would be on-going if I was to influence participants to move beyond practical improvement of practice, toward a sympathetic and reflective practice of critical action research.

Reflective practice was documented by participants as each became a co-researcher, learning through the artist they identified, which gave participants rich experiences to reflect upon. This extension of participation with artists looked like cooperative action research which extended the learning beyond our initial group of 4 participants. The artists contributed to our knowledge, and participants donated positive sense in the reciprocating intergenerational event. As I analyzed what participants did, I embraced their learning as evidence of the multiple modes of learning that evidence cooperative action research.

In the following sections, I describe critical and cooperative action research in greater detail and show aspects of both methods functioning within the research. I then differentiate myself in the roles of researcher and facilitator because I realized my first-person stance in the research supported a critical perspective, while it was through my second-person stance that I gained an appreciation of my participants as co-researchers. I learned about myself, both through the critical and cooperative aspect of the research and I believe that participants' learned through both, as well. I grew in understanding my role as researcher within cooperative action research, which enabled an openness to participants' learning.

Cooperative Action Research

Heron and Reason (2007) describe a cooperative action research group as research with, rather than on people, where "co-researchers also become the co-subject" (p. 145). In this research senior artists became a valued part of the group's work and a source of expanded learning about place. The relationships between artist and participant situated the teachers as co-researchers as the artists became the co-subjects. My participants' input regarding the artists and their relationship to communities consequently led the artist to reflect and see themselves differently, in relation to community and/or place.

Acknowledging multi-faceted learning is part of cooperative action research. Cooperative action research considers "extended epistemologies" as important forms of researcher learning (Heron & Reason, 2008 p. 366). Extended epistemologies recognize the validity of a variety of methods of gaining knowledge in co-operative action research including experiential, presentational,

propositional and practical ways of knowing. Participants' experiential learning was rooted in openness to encounters with the artists and their response was in presentational and propositional ways. I chose cooperative action research because it respects all participants as co-researchers and accepts an extended epistemology of participant knowing as data, which served as outcome of this research.

Critical Action Research

I had designed the second workshop based on the action research step of reflection, and added in a critical perspective, yet participants brought their emotional and affective states to their own critiques about people and situations. As my participants' unquestioned ideologies colored discussions, I felt the need to challenge them in an emailed and requested participant response. I presented their stereotyped characterizations in a gridded report which I had gleaned from transcriptions of the previous meeting discussion. The report challenged participants' stereotyping language, and then asked for critical reflections from participants. Online I posed critical questions to slow participants' navigation of what seemed like the familiar territory of local place. This online dialogue generated in-depth discussion with some participants, through which I learned more about what participants knew and felt about place related issues, and where there were possibilities for growth.

Through these written dialogues, we exchanged views and participants demonstrated propositional ways of learning in written responses. I asked participants to think differently and answer challenges to their traditional ways of thinking. The one-on-one dialogue that took place in email exchanges provided a forum for honest and sometimes contentious exchanges. My attempt to build critical dialogue through programmed facilitations met with little success and I found I needed to adjust strategies.

My dual role of facilitator and co-participant caused an inner conflict between being critical of participants' ideologies and embracing the cooperative spirit of the research. A key part of critical research is reflective inquiry, where participants must first research themselves, question what shapes their thinking, and then be open to the same with others (May, 1993). The success of developing a framework that encouraged growth and change through a critique of the status quo depended on what investments participants and myself were willing to make in terms of emotions and affective states (Kemmis, 2007). Although I brought participants into critical discussions by challenging statements they made, I had not critically investigated my own perspectives. It was only much later as I reviewed the data and accepted my conflicted views as a first-person researcher, that I found how disjuncture opened the research and myself to cri-

tique. I was challenged to look at my own biases regarding my misunderstanding of an artist's Native American heritage and her artwork's authenticity, which ran parallel to my participants' conflicted views regarding race and ethnicity. When I tried to make sense of my conflicted feelings and challenged ideas, I engaged in self-critique, I revisited my participant data and found a rich store of knowledge.

First and second person research

My change of strategy also marked my realization of the necessity of using both the first-person and second-person stance, in analyzing the data, because of my dual role of facilitator and co-participant (Torbert, 2006). In first-person inquiry, research is conducted on oneself simultaneously with those who one engages with as facilitator, in a second-person relationship (Torbert & Taylor, 2008). During our workshops I was challenged to both listen to what participants were saying, and take in the big picture. As a facilitator I needed to respond to the emerging direction of the research, and plan timely action both in my responses and that of my participants, all the while trying to improve my practice of facilitator and deal with dissonance (Torbert, 2006). I had novice skills in balancing and integrating the actions of questioning, advocating, illustrating and framing discussions, and I did not always assess or creatively speak to the flow of ideas in our work sessions (Torbert & Taylor, 2008). In the workshops when participants' shared stories and perspectives that were alienating to me, I found myself in a double inquiry, which fluctuated between second-person inquiry with participants and first-person inquiry within myself (Torbert, 2006).

As the action research facilitator and investigator of my research question I often failed to engineer the flow of discussions in meetings. In the workshop discussion, when a participant stereotyped Black people, a younger participant, who earlier had stereotyped local Native Americans, shared her more nuanced views about meeting cordially with a longtime friend who is Black. She noted the generational difference between how their parents' had viewed the friendship, and how segregated neighborhoods worked to keep them apart. I missed this opening to discuss criticality of place and generational difference, because I was flummoxed by previous racially insensitive statements. I saw contradictions between the planned future of the research and how it was unfolding. Conflicts between my ongoing relationship with co-participants and my critique of their views, added to the double-sided dimension of my role. My awareness of incongruities between my intentional collaboration, my strategy of using critical reflection, and our performance as a cohesive group in this second-person in-

quiry, created the basis for my first-person inquiry (Torbert, 2006). The paradox between first person and second person grounded my approach to analysis of the data in the narrative.

By the end of the second workshop I found myself in the precarious position of the initiator of second-person action research, who was walking a fine line between what McArdle (2008) describes as “getting in” and “getting on” addressed below:

Making ‘getting in’ more possible . . . requires some matching of the language or behavior of the stakeholders you endeavour to ‘get in’ with. It is both about ‘sameness’ — making the intervention less visible, less different, from ‘what normally goes on around here’- and about ‘difference’ — making the intervention more visible, different, in ways that you feel will engage people’s interest in the potential inquiry. If the visibility of either is extreme, getting in can be less possible (p. 605).

I use the term facilitator to denote my role as an ‘initiating’ or ‘methodology expert’ (McArdle, 2008). I was a fledgling facilitator, initiating research, and beginning to understand how methodology might work. For instance, my prepared presentations and questions held a critical perspective, yet I had not prepared participants to think differently. I fell short of providing substantial entry into experiences that connected participants with critical thinking in my fledgling facilitation. I was reminded the dynamics of action research groups are complex situations. I was a novice action research facilitator, and had a lot to learn about the nuanced approaches to facilitate action research (Heron & Reason, 2007; Sumara, & Carsons, 1997). McArdle (2008) explains that there is “some working of energy to be done at this early stage — reading how individuals respond to your ideas and using this as ‘data’ to inform what needs to be done next” (p. 605). I vacillated between pushing boundaries and emphasizing the familiar (McArdle, 2008). The disorienting dilemma of cooperative and critical research would affect not only my participants, but it also affected me.

My objective goals were buffeted about by ethical concerns of honestly upholding my views among participants’ differently constructed social values. I was learning that dissonance is an important part of critical reflective research, yet I wanted to be comfortable “in a productive and mutually emancipatory dialogue with difference, diversity, and incongruity in each event” (Torbert & Taylor, 2008, p. 240). I developed a dialogue with dissonance and incongruity as part of my first-person research stance within the events of the research, which ultimately guided my theoretical approach to data analysis, which acknowledges the sense produced in paradox and contradiction.

I altered my pedagogical based strategy of presentations in the following months' workshops. I facilitated a Socratic Seminar discussion, led by a colleague trained in the method (Read Write Think, 2013). The Socratic Seminar follows strict rules of engagement for discussion of texts and images, allowing comments and questions related to text interpretation, that move the discussion forward. Due to the nature of the images, discussions again turned to cultural differences, in ways I perceived as both positive and negative, but the controlled forum kept the discussion even. Torbert and Taylor (2008) identify this as a double-loop feedback, where the action in the research leads to a transformation of strategy, which influences ongoing interactions within the research group. A more formal approach in the following months led to more thoughtful group reflections, an important component of action research.

Extended epistemologies of cooperative learning

I came to an appreciation of participants' contributions within the extended epistemology of cooperative action research. I designed opportunities within the research that enabled the participants' creative, visual responses to the research. At the end of the first cycle of action research, I discussed participants' learning in individual interviews that confirmed the visual messages of their presentational learning, and invited propositional thinking, highlighting the participants' evolving work. Most importantly, in the previous month, participants had demonstrated propositional thinking in group reflections, which casts them as co-researchers (Heron & Reason, 2008). Through reflecting on participant contributions, I realized the value in their unique connections to local place. When listening to and writing the artists' stories, participants reflected qualities unique to knowing and appreciating the local. The participants' connection to place was shared in and through memories with the community artists.

Members worked collaboratively on the place-based curriculum and on programming for a summer seminar by sharing ideas and resources, and by making group decisions regarding the title, overall theme, and enduring understanding of the curriculum unit (Heron & Reason, 2007; Pardhan, 2002). To do this we reflected together on place's contributions as context, inspiration and opportunity, for the artists. Based on what participants proposed, presented, and learned, the unit of study's title demonstrates a shift from participants thinking about the local as narrowly defined by geo-political borders, to a more inclusive understanding of cross border regional influences. I shared in multiple roles of participant, observer, and researcher as we collected and analyzed data about place and people (Gamwell, 2005; Heron & Reason, 2007).

The cyclical nature of the action research encouraged growth both for participants and me. I found that cooperative action research is reflected in multiple forms of learning that take place in the action of the research, which reminds the facilitator to listen to participant voices. I learned that each person takes away different lessons, or events of learning, and that sometimes learning takes place in retrospect. I found using the principles of cooperative action research challenged me and kept me returning to the principles of constructed and extended learning, to listen, to challenge and to recognize learning in myself and participants even after the end of the event, which for me is where the enduring learning takes place. This meant allowing for failure in some aspects of the research. I did not imbue participants' practice with critical theory, nor do I claim to have freed participants from tradition, habits, or bureaucracy, a goal of critical action research (Mills, 2011). Yet, I empowered participants to think differently about the community and to acknowledge unique perspectives about culture, place and art gained from relationships with senior artists. As participants compiled their lessons and selected a unifying theme for the curriculum, the participants chose to highlight the diverse artists' personal challenges, and the artists' unique transformations of these challenges into opportunities to serve as inspiration for their students. This represented an uncritical view, because it did not interrogate how place, or a hegemonic culture can be the source of the challenges, however, together we had created a curriculum that credited place for supporting diversity. During the re-cycling of the project the following year, when participants worked in their classrooms with the curriculum, and presented the work at conferences, I was encouraged by participants' presentations, propositional thoughts and extended practices, all indicators of an extended epistemology, which demonstrated response to critical questions I raised in the first cycle of research (Heron & Reason, 2008).

My own understanding of the facilitation of critical action research as a methodology has become more complex, as I learn the importance of compassionate intersubjectivity in creating space for critical discussions with participants (Torbert, 2006). I witnessed participants' receptiveness to difference in the intersubjective relationships they established with senior artists and realize in future research I need to be upfront in explaining my stand point and goals with my participants, and defining our relationship as cooperative, yet necessarily critical of hurtful speech.

The workshops challenged habits, asked participants to seek new encounters and did not reproduce typical social encounters but looked for deeper contact through intergenerational experiences (Heron & Reason, 2008). The participants' interest in the events of the research sustained an on-going sense among participants that their work was important. I learned that action research

is emergent, and that knowledge is developed in both the facilitator and the participants, in response to what we all bring to the inquiry.

Validity and reliability

The validity of action research can be assessed for promoting growth in terms of human development (Torbert & Taylor, 2008). I planned this action research with goals to integrate aspects of practical, cooperative and critical action research. Torbert (2006) suggests analyzing the action of the research for “constructive objectivity, compassionate intersubjectivity, and critical subjectivity” (p. 1). The nature of this action research lent itself to the development of personal relationships between me and the co-participants, between the co-participants and the senior artists, and the participants and the wider community. Participants constructed a unit of study based on their objectivity as teacher researchers, yet, demonstrated compassionate intersubjectivity in relaying the experience with artists who shared their stories. Participants demonstrated critical subjectivity in reflections in which they reassessed views I had challenged.

Action research also offers the opportunity for triangulation, just as in other forms of qualitative research, through the transformative personal and social experiences of action research in “three domains: the domain of the instrumental results; the domain of the intersubjective, ethical and political interactions; and the domain of subjective aesthetic and spiritual disciplines” (Wilber, in Torbert & Taylor, 2008, p. 240). The participant data demonstrates that there was development in all three domains. The objective results of the research are shown in the curriculum document produced by participants. Within the unit of study the participants’ artist’s narratives hint at political and ethical interactions, which participants analyzed in group discussions about the artists in relation to the local. Some participants shared commonalities beyond place with their researched artist and all valorized the artist for their life accomplishments in relation to what time and place had offered. The transformative personal effect of the research is a subjective aesthetic experience and each participant recounted different experiences. Participants found their relationships with artists inspirational and empowering. I use the positive social and developmental outcomes of intergenerational learning to identify what participants shared as empowering for personal growth. One shared an enabling mentoring experience. Another participant, who was a fledgling art teacher, extended her and her students social networks to include a well-recognized community artist. A third made connections with the social identity of a life-long student of art, who challenged the grandmother myth. The fourth participant, who earlier had spoken insensitively about people, acknowledged great satisfaction in recognizing an accomplished

international artist, who is Black, who was not known locally after leaving her hometown 50 years earlier. She helped reconnect the artist to the community through a major event the following year.

Conclusion

Action research served the practical purpose of developing relevant curriculum related to place, supporting cooperative learning through multiple means and challenging participant's perspectives. The experience of identifying an artist and creating a life story narrative with the artist, inspired thought and prompted teacher action, creating curriculum from their stories. Action research was the best methodology to inquire about place-based art education and intergenerational learning because it placed the study of these entwined topics in a genuine context. The goals and benefits of action research varied for the participants, yet the cooperative aspect of action research within the place-based art curriculum writing team functioned as support, which empowered art teacher participants to monitor and analyze their practice, and to expand their knowledge of art and art education (Schoen, 2007).

It extended the research through collaborative exploration of wider social and cultural implications of place by building relationships with senior artist. My challenges to participants to think and act differently produced critical reflection and added to participants' changing perspectives. In the future I will initiate opportunities of research cooperatively, and listen to each voice to learn, because I experienced the *practice* that Reason and Bradbury (2008) refer to *is* action research, and it is an evolving form that takes place in the "the doing of it rather than the abstract describing of it" (p. 234).

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