

USING ACTION RESEARCH IN THE CLASSROOM AND  
SCHOOL : A TEACHER'S VIEW\*

Susan Cosgrove  
Banksia Park High School  
South Australia

When I went to school I used to get into trouble for talking too much. When I went to university I used to get impatient during lectures because I couldn't wait until question time, and even then my questions were left unanswered. When I started teaching I got annoyed because I couldn't get through my lesson plans because the students talked too much or asked too many diverting questions. One day, with help from my learnings in language development and from discussions with other teachers at a language and learning conference, I realized what was wrong in my classroom and all the other classrooms that I had been in. I realized that the learners needed the power to direct their own learning.

So, I asked myself the question, "How do I share the power with the learners in my classroom?" Since then I have been trying to answer that question by inquiring into my own classroom and then sharing the findings with my students and other teachers.

What happened to me before, during and after the first action research project that I conducted is interesting because it pinpoints some of the conditions necessary for a teacher to begin and then sustain the energy that is needed to continue the examination of her practice.<sup>1</sup>

How did I become an action researcher?

Firstly, I knew that something was wrong in my classrooms. I noticed that the students weren't very interested, and that I was often preoccupied with organizational matters when I was supposed to be imparting knowledge. The students were not receiving the knowledge as they were supposed to. I had heard my teachers college lecturers talking about making the course relevant, getting the students to discover etc. etc. But, I had no idea how to do it! I know now that while I was being told those things, I was not learning how to do it. I was teaching the way I was taught, which was based on the theory of learning that says the learner receives the knowledge from the teacher.

Secondly, I was participating in learning about language development and how language affects learning. This learning was important for me in two ways:

1. I was observing a way of teaching that I could use in my classroom.
2. As part of my learning I was to investigate what was happening in my classroom.

Ask the students! What a revolutionary idea I thought it was! Why didn't I think of that when we were discussing how to make science or maths relevant and interesting when I was at college or in the science faculty? I had never heard of taping lessons, or asking another person to observe in my classroom.

1. I have now been involved in a number of action research projects at the classroom, faculty and school level.

\* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Australian Association for Research in Education, Adelaide, November 12-15, 1981.

Why hadn't I? I know it was because where I learned about educating people they didn't regard those activities as part of the role of the teacher.

Stenhouse (1975) wrote about 'the dual role' of teacher and researcher. In my view the role of 'researcher' is an integral part of a teacher's role. It is from a teacher's systematic investigation of her classroom practice that she learns to articulate the theory of her practice. I like the way Stenhouse describes each classroom as a laboratory and the teachers as part of the scientific community. He describes a critical, self-reflecting community where people support each other in their efforts to improve the understanding of their practice.

And this leads to my third point which is to describe how teachers become action researchers at the school level. I teach at Banksia Park High School which is an open plan high school. The principal, Les Kemp, is supportive of innovative ideas being explored in the school. He therefore encourages teachers to undertake inservice activities and to involve themselves in matters of education outside the school. Together with his staff, he has also established a participatory decision making system which enables all teachers to be involved in, and to influence the policy decisions made for the school. By doing this, he has established a structure wherein teachers can collaborate to improve education in the school. This decision making structure has created a context which facilitates the action research process. The decision making structure of the school makes it possible for teachers who realize that they own a problem to initiate a research project. This was how the evaluation of the unscheduled system began (Cosgrove et.al., 1980). As convener of the unscheduled evaluation committee which planned the research in collaboration with the rest of the staff, I had the opportunity to develop skills in conducting meetings and organizing the tasks we decided on. Prior to this the unscheduled evaluation committee members had developed the skills in collaborative decision making which are necessary in the planning of research at the school level.

In summary, the factors which contributed to my decision to become a teacher action-researcher were:

1. I 'owned' a problem and learned how to name the problem.
2. I was encouraged to regard researching as fundamental to the role of teacher.
3. I was working in a school where there was support for teachers who wanted to try out new ideas in their classrooms and where the administration recognized the importance of teacher collaboration for professional development and school improvement.

What has happened to me while I have been doing action research?

In 'Some thoughts on learning' (Cosgrove, 1977), I have described what happened to me and the students in my classroom during my first action research project. Organizing action research in the classroom requires that the teacher negotiate with the students about the purpose of the research. The students have to know that everything said, done, listened to, read and discussed can be used as evidence for the research. When I began in my classroom, we discussed the learning process. I asked the students how they wanted to learn in the science classroom and how I could best help them.

So, in essence, the students collaborated with me and helped to plan and undertake the research. They kept me informed of their decisions, they allowed me to tape their discussions, they co-operated with observers who visited the classroom and involved themselves willingly in the interviews which we conducted. They provided me with their writing in developmental and final stages, and communicated their conclusions about the experience.

It has been my experience since then when I have conducted further research<sup>1</sup> that this co-operation is a necessary condition in the process of action research in the classroom. I have also noticed that my research (and learning) acts as a model for their learning, and this is something I would like to pursue further. An important part of the process of collaboration with the students is their participation with me in reflecting on, and drawing conclusions from, the evidence we have gathered. I have always made the data and conclusions available to them. I have shared what I have learned. This, in turn, helps us to develop the necessary action and isolate new problems to investigate. Thus the students and the teacher are working together to improve the learning in the classroom.

Recently I have been participating with the teachers in my faculty, in a research project that was initiated by the Transition Education Unit. The research project is called "Improving Chances for Girls". As a group we were interested in exploring sexism in our school and society. We readily 'owned' a problem and decided to use the action research process to help us develop strategies for encouraging girls to think more carefully about their future choices. The students were fully informed of what we were doing and have co-operated well in reporting the changes in their awareness of the problem. As part of my research I found out that I spent over 80% of my time with boys.<sup>2</sup> I informed them about this and since then they have become interested in checking this, and helping me to spend more time with the girls. They are helping me to change the situation.

The teacher as researcher aims to improve the learning conditions in the classroom. The students are also involved in the research and the desire for change. The knowledge generated in this situation directly relates to the observations made and is thus owned by the teacher and the students. These conditions of collaboration, participation and ownership help me to generate knowledge which is 'empowering' (Kemmis, 1981). This is 'emancipatory action research' (Grundy and Kemmis, 1981).

I believe that one aspect of action research which became obvious to me during my first enquiry, is particularly important. This aspect concerns the kind of support I received from other teachers, the principal and members of the Language and Learning Unit. The support was partly moral and sympathetic but they also helped me to reflect on, and understand, what I was seeing and hearing. Their support finally encouraged me to document the experience (Cosgrove, 1977).

And while all this was going on something else was happening which I did not notice at the time. Other teachers had observed something different was happening in my classes. They were noisier than before,

---

1. This is, of course, an ongoing process. I always realize another problem I want to understand more about.

2. This is consistent with Spender's (1981) evidence.

the kids seemed a bit too excited and sometimes confused about what they were doing, and the teachers were being asked strange questions while they were in unscheduled lessons.<sup>1</sup> Some of my colleagues were suspicious. What was happening in my classroom? But, as I said, I was oblivious to all this at first. I continued to research after my first attempt, because I was so excited about what had happened. And soon I had to learn how to cope with the pressures of having to justify my actions to other teachers.<sup>2</sup>

Our experiences in the classroom based curriculum project exemplify the political problems that can be created by the action research process. At the time a group of us initiated this project, I was not so naive about the effect that this innovation might have on the rest of the staff. So, we publicized our intentions and kept people informed about what we were doing and what we were finding out in our classrooms. While we were exchanging our ideas between ourselves and generating a powerful support group, we were attracting interest and support from outside the group. A member of the Curriculum and Learning Unit was facilitating the initial research and helping us clarify our direction. The principal and a few other teachers kept in contact. Despite this, we had to face the criticisms of our colleagues, criticisms which questioned our professional integrity and efficiency but were largely based on hearsay.

While we were developing the classroom based curriculum we kept journals of our experience, and collected student writing, because we intended to evaluate our experience as part of our research. We elicited the help of a facilitator from Research and Planning. While she was helping us to clarify our intentions and what information we wanted to find out and who it was for, we realized the political nature of our action. While we were aware that this exercise would help us clarify our understanding, we also were aware that we were doing it because we felt we were under pressure to justify our actions.

Some members of the group were not prepared to face that pressure. In the end, we continued to develop the project but we did not complete the documenting of the research as a group in a formal or public way.

The politics of the context in which the action research takes place is important in influencing whether the teacher will continue to examine her practice, at least publicly. For instance, what happened to all the teachers who participated in language and learning, communication and teacher effectiveness conferences? Some documented one inquiry, others none. Why didn't they continue? What sort of schools did they go back to? What support was available to them? Even in the context of Banksia Park High School, which is generally supportive, the teachers described above were not prepared to continue in the face of such criticism. It's interesting to notice that virtually the same group of teachers is involved in the 'Improving Chances for Girls' Project. However, the audience for their findings is wider than the immediate school situation. They are not feeling threatened about documenting and justifying their findings. Is it because the research group has become more aware of the structures in the school and is more able to work out what to say to whom and how to say it?

---

1. My colleagues were timetabled to take my students in unscheduled lessons.

2. I have described the nature of these pressures and how I coped with them in "Methods for Slow Learners", (Cosgrove, 1981c).

It is my experience that the pressures of criticism from colleagues in the school of the group of innovating teachers (or teacher) are there partly because the role of researcher is not accepted as being part of the role of teacher. The teacher-researcher is judged as being odd and suspect. The teacher is changing her role in the classroom and her relationship with her students by negotiating and sharing the power with her students. This, in itself, is in contradiction to a school's traditional, hierarchical decision-making structures and can be seen as a threat to the status quo.

In summary, the conditions which helped sustain my effort and that of the groups of teachers I have worked with to examine our practices were:

1. the willingness of teachers to critically examine their practice.
2. the willingness to communicate their findings to other teachers to make public what happens in their classrooms and why it happens that way.
3. the willingness to involve the students in the action research process, by negotiating with them about the procedure, consulting them regularly and sharing the information collected with them. The students are therefore participants in the critical community.
4. the existence of people who can give moral support during the process. In our system, some of these people have to be in authority positions in the hierarchical structure.
5. the willingness of the teacher to articulate the theory which her practice describes, and
6. the development of an understanding of, and an ability to manage, the politics of action research, that is, the ability to cope with, and counter, the inevitable criticism that comes from colleagues, students and parents.

What have I got out of being an action researcher?

When I look back on my experiences I can see a pattern in the way I learned and then articulated the knowledge I discovered while doing action research.

I started researching in one classroom, with one group of students. The first thing I was able to articulate was what I called my theory of learning. Then, I extended what I had developed in that first classroom to other classrooms. I recorded what happened with each different set of students and finally was able to articulate some of the problems that a teacher faces when she tries to share the power with her learners (Cosgrove, 1978). During this time I had met other teachers who were doing similar things in their classrooms through the Language and Learning Unit network and so I was becoming part of a critical community. By this time I had extended my research to the Mathematics classroom where I was experimenting with different teaching strategies. Someone asked me to write about a strategy and so I articulated how I was using discussion in the classroom (Cosgrove, 1981a). Another person, after reading that paper, asked me to present my experience to the Maths Association Conference (Cosgrove 1981b). And the story goes on in a similar vein until now I am part of a critical community which involves teachers and advisers and now research specialists.

There are several points I will make in conclusion.

1. The type of knowledge which I accumulated as a result of my research was at first bound to the context of one classroom. However, from all those examples I was eventually able to find aspects that were transferable to my other classrooms. Other teachers have tried them too. What I have learned about negotiating with groups I can use to help other teachers who are reinventing that wheel in their classrooms. The answers I have formulated to the questions I am asked by students and other teachers I have used again and again and so have other teachers. The sum total at this ever-developing knowledge is the theories that I am generating from continual critical reflection of my practice.

The process of action research has, therefore, been a useful tool for me in increasing my understanding of classroom practices and improving those practices. We used action research usefully and successfully at the school level when we looked at the unscheduled system. The whole staff participated in the process of observing, reflecting and planning action to improve that system. This process is continuing into its second year. In my faculty at the present time teachers are using action research to help them develop, observe and reflect on strategies to help make girls aware of the effects of sexism on their futures.

2. My personal experience highlights the spiralling nature of the action research process. I can't stop it! Every time I question something in my classroom, or try out a new idea, the evidence that I collect in relation to that question or hypothesis always raises other questions or ideas which need to be investigated. When I share my experiences with other people and listen to theirs I have another source of ideas to investigate in the classroom.

For instance, it was because I, and the other teachers with whom I work, had used action research to improve our classrooms, that we decided to use it again in the "Improving Chances for Girls" project. And while we are using it to develop strategies, we are also noticing other problems that need to be investigated. Some teachers have been empowered to change their language, others their practices. I have been able to look more closely at the way I interact with girls and boys, and to analyse the language used between them. I've got a new action research project underway and I'm sure that you'll hear more about language and sex from me in future! There is so much to find out and understand in classrooms.

The way the unscheduled system evaluation has developed is interesting because it could be an example of how action research can be used to



improve schools. We described in our report (Cosgrove et.al., 1980) how we carried out the observation, reflection and action planning phases of the action research cycle. It took us a year to get that far. Since then changes have happened and been monitored and a new plan developed. Other changes regarding teacher and student attitudes and behaviour in unscheduled lessons are still being monitored. The phases of action research at the school level are long and complex because it involves so many people and factors. And the process is never 'complete'. Schools can use action research to continually examine, reflect upon and improve the education they offer to students. However, the context needs to be right for it to happen. Action research at the school level implies collaborative effort on the part of teachers and administrators and the hierarchical structures of decision making in schools act as a barrier to the process. The participatory decision making structure at Banksia Park High School (Quirk, 1979) has created a climate in which teachers know that they have the power to influence change. It provides teachers with the skills and experience necessary to make collaborative decisions and the structure to initiate, control and affect change.

3. The critical community in which I am involved consists mostly of teachers. We are connected because we share the view that part of the teacher's role is to be a researcher. Stenhouse said that teachers must join the Research Community. I would assert that the teachers in the school community are the researchers. Perhaps the Research Community needs to join us. This raises the interesting question of why there is tension between research communities of practising teachers and Research Communities of research specialists. In my experience, research specialists have a deficit view of teachers (and thus indulge in "teacher bashing") and teachers have a healthy disrespect for the evidence generated by the research specialists.

To illustrate the latter point, I will describe an experience I had this year. At Banksia Park High School we organize classes so that they are mixed ability groups. We don't stream. This year some teachers began discussing the need for streaming. I rushed off, got a whole lot of articles that pointed out the advantages of mixed ability grouping and said "Here you are. Here is research that supports the way we organize our classroom." "What's that got to do with our experience?" they replied.

If it is accepted that teachers can be researchers in their own right, then perhaps the tension and 'the gap' that is so often talked about would not be there. If the teachers I described above saw that their role included researching their classrooms, then perhaps these teachers would have been better able to develop the strategies necessary to cope with mixed ability classrooms.

And if teachers do become researchers and start contributing to research in education, how are they going to report their findings? The networks of teachers in South Australia<sup>1</sup> and in other states

---

1. For example the Curriculum and Learning Unit network, S.A.I.T. Contact Network, various subject orientated associations and the Open Education Teachers Association.

providing a forum for these findings. But how does the Research Community view the findings published by these networks? We need to open up communication between the two research communities.

Something has to be done about closing the gap between teaching and researching. We can't go on bemoaning the fact that teachers won't question, won't change. We have to examine the contexts and processes that are necessary to help teachers to begin and to sustain their efforts to critically examine their classrooms, and then try to reproduce those contexts in other places. We need to show teachers that it is o.k. to question and to want to change things.

I will end by recounting a conversation I have had many times. A person, usually someone out of the classroom, asks me when I am going to get out of the classroom, when I am going to do something more important, like advise, or research, or lecture to tertiary students. Forget it. I need a classroom. I need students in the classroom so that I can fulfil the role of teacher as researcher.

#### REFERENCES

- Cosgrove, S. Some thoughts on learning, in Language across the Curriculum Project, Vol.3, Education Department of South Australia, 1978.
- Cosgrove, S. A Shift in Focus. Paper presented at the Science and Talking conference, Wattle Park Teachers' Centre, Adelaide, 1978.
- Cosgrove, S. et.al., Evaluating the Unscheduled System, Banksia Park High School. Case history No.10. School Controlled Evaluation, Schools Commission, Adelaide, 1980.
- Cosgrove, S. Talking Mathematics, in Curriculum Research: Reader A, Deakin University, Open Campus Program, Waurm Ponds, Deakin University Press, 1981(a).
- Cosgrove, S. Methods for Slow Learners, in Boomer, G.(Ed.), Negotiating the Curriculum, Learning with Power, Ashton Scholastics, 1981 (in press).
- Cosgrove, S. Negotiating Mathematics, in Boomer, G.(Ed.), Negotiating the Curriculum, Learning with Power, Ashton Scholastics, 1981 (in press).
- Grundy, S. & Kemmis, S. Social Theory, Group Dynamics and Action Research. Paper presented at South Pacific Association for Teacher Education conference, Adelaide, July 1981.
- Kemmis, S. Empowering People: A Note on the politics of Action Research. Presented at the National Invitational Seminar on Action Research, Deakin University, Geelong, May 1981.
- Kemmis, S. et.al., The Action Research Planner, Geelong: Deakin University Press, 1981.
- Quirk, R. No Right of Veto: The Model of Representative Decision Making at Banksia Park High School. Unit for Industrial Democracy, Premiers Department, Adelaide, 1978.
- Spender, D. The Role of Teachers: What Choices do they have? Paper presented at the Council for Cultural Co-operation Educational Research Workshop for Sex Stereotyping in schools, Oslo, 1981.
- Stenhouse, L. An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development. Heinemann, London, 1975.