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Researching teaching, learning and assessment practices

How action research can help educators understand their work better by focusing on day-to-day tasks – from the classroom to administration – and learning lessons from it

By David Powell

Action research is a practitioner-oriented form of research that can be applied in a range of educational settings. There are different forms, though normally action researchers examine their own practice or collaborate with colleagues and students to study an aspect of practice that is of mutual interest and benefit.

Stephen Kemmis, professor of education at Charles Sturt University, Australia, advocates a particular form: critical participatory action research. It is concerned with "changing three things: practitioners' practices, their understandings of their practices, and the conditions in which they practise" (Kemmis, 2009, p.463).

Having these three goals makes this form of action research socially just, as it promotes equality, and is personally and institutionally transformative.

The term ecologies of practices describes the possible relationships between the five practices found where we work: students and their learning; teachers and their teaching; leadership and administration; professional learning, which includes continuous professional development and initial teacher education; research and evaluation (Kemmis, Wilkinson and Edwards-Groves, 2017).

Each of these practices consists of their own "sayings, doings and relatings", also known as their practice architectures, which "hang together" and are shaped by "the arrangements" of the site (Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon, 2014, p.31).

For instance, what a practitioner says in a class, the activities they have designed and use, and the relationship they have with their students, are determined by, for example, the room set-up and the availability of technology (Mahon, Kemmis, Francisco and Lloyd, 2017).

SOCIALLY JUST

Kemmis and his team invite us to study the ecologies of practices and practice architectures where we work to better understand our own practices, their relationship with other practices where we work and use what we learn to make socially just changes to our practices.

Currently 19 providers in the North East of England and Cumbria are applying these theories within an Outstanding Teaching and Learning Assessment (OTLA) project funded by the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) and managed by a consortium led by Success North, a Centre for Excellence in Teacher Training based at Newcastle College.

These providers include further education colleges, private training organisations, an offender learning service, and adult and community learning. Each provider has been asked to set up a project team that represents the practices of their site so that they can begin "a conversation" (Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon, 2014, p149) about changing an aspect of teaching, learning and assessment.

The teams are likely to use questionnaires, interviews and focus groups to collect their data as they are commonly used methods in action research. It will be interesting to see if any team chooses to "make video recordings" to capture "better records" of their practices and the arrangements that shape them (Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon, 2014, p.224).

It is hoped each of these projects will provide participants with a deeper understanding of their practices and what shapes and influences them, as well as contributing "another brick in the wall" (Wellington, 2000, p.137) in terms of what we know about practices in the FE and skills sector.

In the words of Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon (2014, p.27) we hope the outcomes of the projects will make the world a "better" place to "live and practise in".

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