ACTION RESEARCH

in Teaching and Learning

A Practical Guide to Conducting Pedagogical Research in Universities
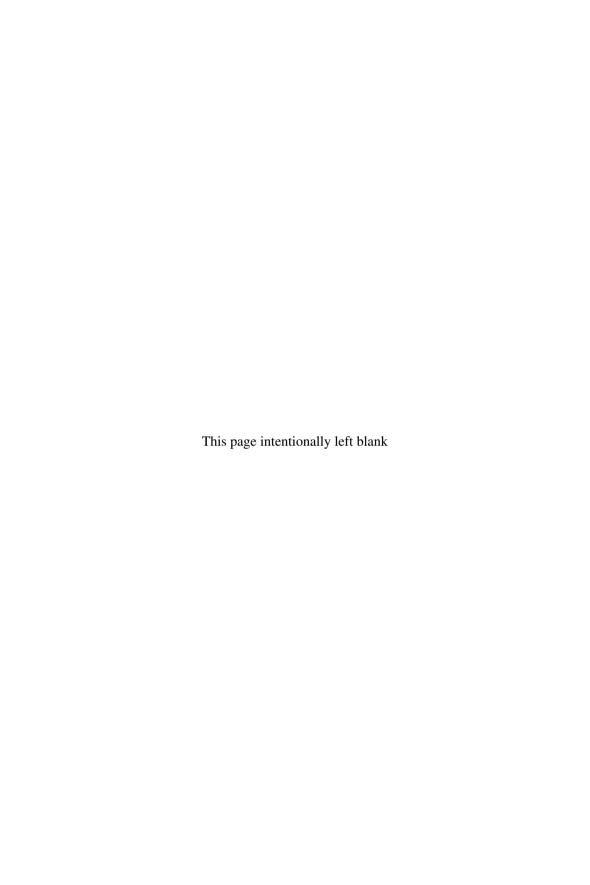
SECOND EDITION

Lin Norton

Action Research in Teaching and Learning

Practical and down-to-earth, the second edition of *Action Research in Teaching and Learning* is an ideal introduction to the subject, offering a distinctive blend of the theoretical and the practical, grounded firmly in the global higher education landscape. Written in an accessible style to build confidence, it provides easily adaptable, practical frameworks, guidelines and advice on research practice within a higher education context.

The reader is guided through each stage of the action research process, from engaging with the critical theory, to the practical applications with the ultimate goal of providing a research study which is publishable. Supplemented by useful pedagogical research tools and exemplars of both qualitative and quantitative action research studies, this new edition features chapters engaging with teaching excellence and analysing qualitative and quantitative research, additions to the resources section and a new preface focusing more explicitly on the ever-growing number of part-time academics.

Action Research in Teaching and Learning combines a theoretical under-standing of the scholarly literature with practical applications and is an essential, critical read for any individual teaching or undertaking action research.

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A Practical Guide to Conducting Pedagogical Research in Universities

Second Edition

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I dedicate this book in loving memory of my cousins:

Graham Charles Smith 6.12.1949 – 23.2.2017

and

David Keith Smith 13.1.1954 – 19.11.2017.

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Foreword

I am delighted to welcome this new edition of Lin Norton's book on action research in higher education. Readers of the first edition will recognize Lin's engaging style which is grounded in her own experience, her questions and reflections.

The hallmarks of Lin's approach lie in her enthusiasm for inquiry and her focus on experiential learning. These two impulses are the basis for a text anchored in concrete examples drawn from her own personal experience of doing research and reflecting on it, and her wide experience in higher education as psychologist, educator, researcher and career developer.

The inclusiveness of this book makes it accessible to anyone working in higher education, not just lecturers. It draws on Lin's experience of supporting pedagogical action research across the range of work in higher education, from full-time educators to support staff, management, and associate staff too. By creating a text that provides such a diversity of practical examples, she also succeeds in demonstrating how action research, in exploring contextual details, invites the reader into other life-worlds and in so doing to discover more about their own. This embrace of diversity also leads Lin into territory not generally associated with action research, but familiar within the science-based traditions, and she successfully demonstrates how tools, designs and approaches from such disciplines may be deployed in pedagogical action research.

The extensive use of vignettes, both real and fictional, the 'points to ponder' throughout the text, and the final summary of each chapter's aims all illuminate for the reader what pedagogical action research looks like. Inquiry is framed as opening up discussion rather than offering conclusions, with conventional ways of viewing a research question often challenged. This new text effectively demonstrates the feasibility of small-scale action research projects for personal, collegial and institutional benefit, and provides valuable support for anyone undertaking action research not only in the university sector, but beyond it as well.

Dr. Ruth Balogh
Associate Senior Research Fellow, Glasgow University
and Lead Co-ordinator of CARN, the international
Collaborative Action Research Network

Preface to the second edition

The principle of pedagogical action research is very clear; it is to improve some aspect of the student learning experience. As in all forms of research, both pure and applied, the ultimate aim is to contribute to new knowledge, but of equal importance is the imperative to change one's practice.

Since I wrote the first edition of this book ten years ago, the pace of change has accelerated in the global higher education sector, posing new demands and sometimes heavier workloads for those of us who work there. Universities face challenges such as financial uncertainty about long-term funding, competing in a global market, meeting students' expectations, satisfying the need for new technologies and taking account of student diversity. At the same time, the importance of the student experience has been foregrounded in many countries across the world. Consequently, there have been quite significant cultural shifts in teaching and learning. The discourse of pedagogy is now more familiar than it was in 2008 to faculty in the disciplines and to other professional staff. Similarly, there is a greater recognition of the need for professionalization as well as continuing professional development in university teaching and learning. This is encouraging for colleagues who are new to university roles and want to learn more about pedagogy as well as for those who are experienced and want to build their career profiles in this field.

My intention in writing this book is to offer a practical, down-to-earth guide for anyone who has a teaching and/or learning support role in universities and who would like to carry out action research in their own practice. Throughout the book, I have adopted an informal personal style, drawing directly on my own experience in carrying out and promoting this type of action research. My purpose has been to illustrate the feasibility of pedagogical action research even when other academic demands are pressing.

In personal terms, my ongoing exploration of action research in the intervening years and indeed the very act of rewriting and updating this book has led me to re-examine my own approach. I began with the notion of doing action research focused on teaching and learning at university level, because as a psychology lecturer I was strongly motivated to do all I could to help students

be successful in their studies. Since that early start, my career developed from a university teacher to an academic staff developer and I moved out of psychology into education. Because of my early psychology training, I sometimes use methods in my action research studies that draw on positivist principles that do not feature frequently in the action research literature. I also find myself balancing the role of the academic with that of the practitioner, and the teacher with that of the academic staff developer. The combination of these different roles inevitably exerts tensions that are not always easy to resolve. I deal with it by endeavouring to hold steadfastly to the aim of enhancing students' learning experience. Everyone's experience is different but I hope that this book will illustrate that we all are likely to face similar dilemmas. In a way, this is one of the reasons why doing pedagogical action research is so engaging and deeply fascinating.

The book is organized into two sections: the theoretical and the practical, either of which can be read independently. If, however, you would prefer to get on with the practical aspects of doing an action research study, a good starting point is Chapter 5. In a practical book you may wonder why I have chosen to begin with a more theoretical focus, especially when action research itself tends to start with the practical. The theoretical chapters are about the context of learning and teaching in higher education, rather than theorizing action research itself, which has already been written about extensively. In a sense, my theoretical chapters are essentially concerned with the practical, as I want to explicate some of the complexities and challenges involved in doing this kind of research. The context in which I write is the UK university setting, so where relevant I have explained and defined UK practices and drawn as widely as possible on international literature.

In this first section, which comprises Chapters 1 to 4, my intention is to make a convincing case for carrying out pedagogical action research in the context of changes in the Higher Education sector. I have spent some time on this as I have found that there is still an uncomfortable divide between research and teaching, in which the former is more highly rewarded. Not only this, but some types of research are privileged over others. This means that you need to be able to justify and defend any research and/or pedagogical activity, which might not be recognized as mainstream. In-keeping with my overall aim of writing a practical book, I have incorporated some 'points to ponder' in each of these chapters. In the second section, I have written essentially a 'hands-on' practical guide to enable you to carry out your own pedagogical action research study. In each chapter, I suggest some activities and recommend further resources, if you want to explore further.

Throughout the book, I have used the device of fictionalized case studies or vignettes, constructed and embellished from real issues, to bring to life some of the difficulties we face and decisions we have to make in carrying out our action research projects. I have also included actual case studies and reflections that some of my colleagues have generously contributed (see Acknowledgments).

I am deeply grateful to them as they provide illustrations other than those from my own experience as an academic psychologist.

I hope in reading this book, you will have caught some of my enthusiasm and commitment to this type of research. I wish you the very best of luck in your own pedagogical action research journeys.

Lin Norton
2018

What does doing pedagogical action research mean in the current higher education context?

Introduction

In this chapter I begin with a brief consideration of what pedagogical action research entails. I follow this by exploring the context that we work in and how this might affect our decision to carry out some form of pedagogical action research study. I use a personal example of my early research that will show how we can make significant pedagogical changes even if we start from fairly humble beginnings.

What is pedagogical action research (PedAR)?

Pedagogical action research involves using a reflective lens through which to look at some pedagogical issue or problem and methodically working out a series of steps to take action to deal with that issue. The fundamental purpose of pedagogical action research is to systematically investigate our own teaching/learning facilitation practice with the dual aim of modifying practice and contributing to theoretical knowledge.

A personal anecdote

Many years ago when I was a new psychology lecturer, initially appointed on a one-year contract, I was full of enthusiasm and love for the discipline. At the same time, having struggled myself as a mature student, I was keen to help the students I taught to avoid some of the pitfalls that I had encountered; the main one being that simply working hard is not enough to guarantee academic success. You need to also work in the 'right way'. My own lightbulb moment about the 'right way' came when I realized that an academic degree requires independent thinking rather than faithfully reproducing others' views. Although I did not know it at the time, I had stumbled on the difference between a surface and a deep approach to learning (Marton and Säljö, 1976).

   This personal learning experience fuelled a lifetime commitment to helping students to learn. Although I cannot remember the exact chronology, it was

fairly early on in my academic career as a lecturer that with the help of an enthusiastic colleague I ran an 'Approaches to Learning' programme for first-year psychology students. We developed this initiative from an earlier workshop programme designed to help students understand what was required of them in studying psychology at degree level. Its aim was to raise students' metacognitive awareness of their own learning processes and actively encourage them to take a deep approach to their psychology studies. The effectiveness of the programme was reported in a journal paper and a book of conference proceedings (Norton and Crowley, 1995; Norton and Dickins, 1995).

As well as the formal dissemination, we also presented our project in seminars to colleagues within our institution. This led to my collaborating with a colleague from theology, who ran a similar programme and together we produced a tutor pack to help colleagues in other disciplines teach in a way that encouraged students to take a deep approach to their learning (Norton and Scantlebury, 1995). Reflecting on this undertaking, I can see how one small step motivated by my own student experience led to many more steps and how the whole process became widespread across the institution.

Because of this experience, I am a great believer in taking small steps and seeing where they lead us. This can be really effective for all of us who are new to pedagogical action research, no matter what stage of our academic career we are at. All we require to begin is an interest in how students learn and a readiness to explore and reflect on the effects of our teaching and assessment practices. How students learn is not, however, straightforward. It needs to be seen in terms of our students' characteristics and the higher education context in which we operate.

Student profiles

The profile and number of university students has dramatically changed over recent years across the globe. The British Council's analysis (2012) of higher education global trends indicates the fast-paced growth in international enrolments in the UK. There is also an increasing number of mobile students who choose to study at higher education institutions in countries other than their own. This has significant implications for how we teach our students, as a significant and increasing percentage will come from different countries. We need to think beyond the language challenges they may face. Providing courses in English for academic purposes is one response but it does little to help those from an educational background where the learning environment is quite different. International students may have experienced very different teaching approaches and be unfamiliar with their chosen university's assessment requirements (Cook and Norton, forthcoming).

There is also the issue of diversity. This comes in many forms and would include characteristics such as age at entry, gender, sexual orientation, culture, ethnicity, religious beliefs, disability, work commitments and family responsibilities. Each of

these categories implies further variability rather than any homogeneity. This growing awareness of the changing make-up of the student body suggests that more needs to be done in terms of the inclusivity of our teaching (see for example Gibson, 2015; Hockings, 2010; Mountford-Zimdars, 2015). I found these three references on a useful site provided by Plymouth University (n.d.) on inclusive teaching and learning research that suggests resources, research and reports for several specific groups of students.

Students as adult learners

More generally, when thinking about our students it might be helpful to consider the characteristics of adult learners. Malcolm Knowles was an American educator who was credited in the early 1970s with arguing that adults and children learn differently. In his theory of adult learning that he called andragogy, he made five assumptions about the characteristics of adult learners in terms of their:

1. self-concept which moves more towards being self-directed;
2. experience, which is described as a 'growing reservoir' that becomes their resource for learning;
3. readiness to learn that becomes orientated to the developmental tasks of their social roles;
4. orientation to learning that shifts from subject-centeredness to problem-centeredness;
5. motivation to learn that becomes internal.

Knowles has written extensively on the adult learner and principles for effective teaching (see for example Knowles, 1970, 1973, 1980, 1984). His work, although critiqued, has been widely used in various educational settings as well as in business and training areas. From our perspective his work is useful as it encourages us to think about teaching that is more active and experiential to align with the learning needs of our students.

All university students are adult learners, but those who are defined as mature (being 21 or over with a gap between school and university) face additional hurdles in being successful at their studies. A South African study by Abrahams (2014) illuminates some of the challenges they may face. He was interested in the trajectories and transitions in higher education of what he called working students. As part of a larger action research study, he interviewed a sample of part-time students in political studies. One of his main findings suggested that universities' support for these students might be limited by a failure to understand their complex trajectories in higher education. Instead of a traditional linear transition into higher education usually demonstrated by traditional students, these mature students are more likely to have paths that are less linear and more complex, and may well stop and start. This study is just one example but it serves to highlight the need for more

research to begin to understand mature students' actual experiences. Knowing more about how our students approach their studies and what is important to them (not to us as teachers) could be the basis of such a pedagogical action research study, as illustrated in the following vignette:

Janet: assumptions about students

Janet was a high-flying Cambridge graduate, who found no difficulty in studying and who obtained a first-class degree in theology. Janet came from a public school background and although acutely aware of her own privileged circumstances, she was relatively unaware that students might struggle with learning. In her commitment to serve God, Janet decided to teach in a small theological college which offered degrees to mainly mature students from a wide variety of theological backgrounds and countries. Janet loved working with such a wide mix and felt genuinely inspired by their dedication to their calling but she was rather disappointed by the standard of work in their written assignments. Deciding that the problem was lack of practice in academic writing, she decided to incorporate writing sessions into the curriculum designed to help her students and was excited about her initiative. Discussing it with a colleague, she was surprised when he suggested that before embarking on a remedial course of action, it might be a better starting point to actually find out what her students thought their difficulties might be. She thought about his suggestion and decided to carry out an action research study, the first step of which was to hold focus groups and interviews with volunteer students. One of her initial findings from this cycle revealed that the students' biggest challenge was taking the required academic critical approach to texts that they found sacred. Taking this as her starting point, Janet decided to read the literature about pedagogy in theology and thus informed, she intends to carry out a second cycle, in which she will hold seminars on the tensions between faith and an academic approach to study.

In this vignette, we can see how an action research approach helped Janet to see the difference between her own assumptions about her students' difficulties and their actual experiences. While she thought the problem was a study skills issue, her students were experiencing the more fundamental stumbling block of critiquing sacred texts. This type of enquiry might well help Janet to reassess her own approach to enabling students to learn. Although this is a hypothetical example, it is founded in work I have done with theological academics who have raised similar issues. A more general observation of not taking account of the student perspective comes from my experiences of having sat in countless

departmental meetings as well as many detailed curriculum planning meetings. A common thread in these events is that teams of staff are constantly theorizing about why and how students are performing or not performing to the level expected. It is very rare that even one student is present at such meetings, so we continue to make assumptions about them. An action research approach would ground such theorizing with some evidence. Recently, for example, there has been an encouraging move to involve students more as partners in all aspects of curriculum planning (Bovill, et al., 2016) and assessment (Deeley and Bovill, 2017). If we were also to involve the same students as collaborative action researchers we would have a sound basis for a pedagogical action research study.

Janet's vignette is also an example of pedagogical action research which encourages us as academics to be reflective practitioners. This involves us engaging critically with the pedagogical literature. Action research contributes to reflective practice as we begin to conceptualize pedagogical issues as 'wicked problems'. Ramaley (2014) coined this term to signify issues for which there are no simple, easy answers but many, each of which have value. In Janet's case she realized that what she had thought was the problem was actually something else. By reading the literature and reflecting on the implications of the findings from her interviews, she may come up with not one potential solution but several. Testing solutions could form part of an ongoing action research cycle.

Points to ponder

1. Without thinking about it too much, write down five words or phrases that you would use to describe your students.
2. Looking at your list, what might this tell you about some of the assumptions you might make about students?

The higher education context

Universities are currently being forced to compete for students in a climate where the student is customer and the measures of quality are performance-based (Burke, Stevenson and Whelan, 2015). In this section, I will be looking at the issues around defining teaching excellence and how it can be demonstrated. I will also question whether or not there is a demonstrable link between excellent teaching and improved student learning. The introduction in the UK of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), in which the Government will be monitoring and assessing the quality of teaching in English universities, is the context in which I write. My argument is that while action research has an important role to play, we have to use it in a way that looks beyond the forces of techno-rationalism and metrics. Like McNiff (2016), I believe that those of us who work in higher education can use action research as a way to listen to other

views as well as to critique our own approach. Biesta (2007) argues for research approaches that are thoughtful in engendering practices and beliefs that are 'educationally desirable' and driven by moral values. Fitzmaurice (2010) contends that the growing attention and focus on learning and teaching in higher education may push us to a concept of teaching that has been reduced to a set of competencies. Thinking of teaching as a professional practice enables us to move beyond a mechanistic view of teaching to a broader conception that 'takes into account the complexity and contextuality of the work, and the importance of virtuous dispositions and caring endeavour in teaching.' (p.54).

It is easy to feel somewhat disillusioned by the way that higher education appears to be going in the 21st century. The prevalence of market forces, accountability, metrics and increasing student consumerism are described by Brown with Carrasso (2013). Despite these drivers, we still retain a certain amount of relative autonomy (Darabi, Macaskill and Reidy, 2016). As this book is about pedagogical action research, I suggest that this is one approach we can use to exercise some autonomy in our own practice. To illustrate how this might work, I will use the 'micro-meso-macro' frame of reference, frequently used by researchers. Fanghanel (2007) described these levels in terms of filters in a higher education environment:

1. The micro level, meaning internal factors affecting the individual lecturer
2. The meso level, incorporating the department (or equivalent) and the subject discipline
3. The macro level, which includes the institution and external factors.

More recently Simmons (2016) has suggested there should also be a fourth level when looking at the impact of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) in improving learning in Canada:

4. The mega level, meaning the provincial and national context.

When our students are not learning or performing as well as we would hope, it can be tempting to blame the rapidly-changing higher education context, or indeed students themselves. But this stance will not help to move us on in improving our practice so that our students have a better and more satisfying learning experience. Whether we are relatively new to university teaching, or have had many years of experience, the chances are that each of us will have identified some aspect of our students' learning that we would like to change.

Consider, for a moment, the following three fictional examples:

1. Andreas is concerned about improving work placements for his engineering students (micro level).
2. Brendan and Barbara are working across departments to help students make links between the careers service and their degree programme (meso level).

3. Caroline is increasingly concerned about the real learning benefits of digital technologies in spite of being an active digital learning champion (macro/mega level).

These different examples all start with academics examining the current state of affairs in their professional practice. They want to bring about some form of change but they are operating in different levels. Each of these examples will be explored in more detail to illustrate how some of the challenges play out. I shall begin with the micro level: concerned with factors that affect us as individual academics.

The micro level: why carve out a career in learning and teaching?

Case study 1. Andreas: looking for a pedagogical niche

Andreas has been appointed as a postdoctoral teaching fellow in civil engineering. After much thought, he has made the move from Spain, where he successfully obtained his PhD, to an English university which is research intensive. Although this is a risky move as it is only a two-year contract, career openings are limited in his own country so Andreas feels he is getting 'a foot in the door'. After a year, he is beginning to worry. He feels he is less valued than others in the department and that his subject specialism of soil mechanics is not mainstream enough to help him establish a strong enough research career. A turning point came when he attended a learning and teaching conference organized by a neighbouring university with a strong reputation in employability and met some fellow engineers who had made quite a name for themselves in engineering education.

Inspired by this encounter, Andreas begins to think about his third-year students and why they seem to struggle applying what they have learned from their site visits to his course. Andreas is ambitious and wants to write a book on the subject, but his PhD mentor advises him to start off with a small action research study to find out where it takes him.

Andreas is an example of an increasingly common type of academic throughout the world. As a casual lecturer, he is on a short-term fixed contract, with no guarantee that it will be extended. For anyone who is in this situation, it is important to think of building up a career plan and an emerging career identity. Building an expertise in the pedagogy of the subject through pedagogical action research might be one element in such a plan. This is what Andreas has decided to do and it gives him a second string to his bow. It may ultimately lead him to

a career in higher education learning and teaching (for example in academic or educational development or in management). The situation of casual or sessional lecturers is discussed further in Chapter 4.

The meso level: what influences do our academic departments/schools and disciplines have on our teaching practice?

It is some years since Becher (1989) coined the term 'academic tribes (academic cultures) and territories (disciplinary knowledge)'. In the second edition of *Academic tribes and territories: Intellectual enquiry and the culture of disciplines*, more emphasis was put on learning and teaching practices (Becher and Trowler, 2001). Today, the influence of these disciplinary groupings is still extant although they are more nuanced than the simplistic homogeneous categories they were. The implication is that university departments tend to guard their territories quite fiercely, so it would be uncomfortable if, for instance, I was to find myself in a psychology department where they only do large-scale statistical research and the teaching is exam based. While this was not actually the case in my own career, what I did find was some considerable tension between my academic role as a psychology lecturer and my research interests in learning and teaching. I have documented these in an account for the Collaborative Action Research Network Bulletin where I was writing about the challenges of aligning the personal, the professional and the political when doing action research (Norton, 2018). One of my main reflections in this piece was about how hard it was when I was trying to establish myself as a credible psychology lecturer in an institution where research was one of the strategic priorities. At that time, pedagogical research was not seen positively and pedagogical action research even less so.

Over the years, the situation has not changed very much. Kneale, Cotton and Miller (2016) carried out a desk-based analysis of the Education Unit in the earliest iteration of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) (2014) which showed that higher education research and impact studies formed a low proportion of the research studies and the impact case studies. In the UK, the REF is vitally important as the results determine how much research funding institutions will receive. The indications are that pedagogical research is not viewed as prestigious. If we do decide that this is a path we want to go down, then we have to be clear-eyed about the consequences and our overall career ambitions. Action research might not be seen as the best way to build a research profile but there are very many outstanding exceptions such as Jack Whitehead, Jean McNiff, Bridget Somekh, John Eliott, David Coghlan, Susan Noffke and Peter Reason, to name but a few. Regardless of our potential track record, we may decide to do it anyway for the many other advantages it offers us. Working across the boundaries of our departments might be one such benefit:

Case study 2. Barbara and Brendan: working across departments

Barbara is an experienced lecturer in English literature, her speciality being women Victorian poets. For several years, Barbara has worried that her graduates tend to be blinkered in their choice of career, thinking that their only options are becoming teachers themselves. Since this was her own professional career route, Barbara feels that she can offer little advice until by chance at a coffee break she finds herself sitting next to Brendan who works in the Careers service. When she tells him about this difficulty she is quite surprised and excited to hear that there are many careers that English literature graduates take up, including public relations, journalism, marketing, advertising, curator, archivist and many other roles in the media industry. She invites Brendan to talk to her final-year students and the event is a success, according to the student evaluations. Reflecting on these, Barbara and Brendan see some scope in developing this one-off event into something that will have a sustained effect on their students. Together they begin to think of extending the initiative into a programme that embeds employability opportunities into the Literature curriculum. Convincing their relative heads of department takes some time, but the deciding factor appears to be their commitment to evaluating the effectiveness of the programme in a combined research study that will be presented at the university learning and teaching day. The presentation is a success and Brendan and Barbara are able to carry out further cycles of action research involving colleagues from different departments who can see value in their model.

Barbara and Brendan's case study is an example of the rich cross-fertilization of ideas that can happen when colleagues from different subjects work together to cross disciplinary and departmental boundaries (Kreber, 2009). It is also an illustration of how a small idea, if backed up by research evidence, can rapidly spread into a much bigger network, but it can take persistence and faith. This is one of the reasons why action research with colleagues can be more successful than trying to work alone. Barbara and Brendan not only share their professional knowledge but motivate and support each other to carry out research.

Another opportunity that action research offers is that of questioning the mores of departments, for example, 'that's the way we have always done things around here'. In some cases action research goes straight to the heart of how our disciplines are taught and assessed. Why, for example, are essays and exams still such a staple diet of assessment in so many subjects (Norton, Norton and Sadler, 2012)? In making these comments about the effects of the discipline, I am aware that in countries such as the USA and Canada, for example, the curriculum is much more broadly based than focusing on a single discipline. However, the hold that a disciplinary approach

and our educational background exert on us can be considerable. I agree with Poole (2010) when he says, 'I see the world through the eyes of a psychologist' (p. 56). As a psychologist myself, this is manifest in the way that whenever I write or talk about pedagogical action research I am always looking for a demonstration of evidence before making any claims. This inevitably affects how I have carried out my action research studies. We cannot rid ourselves of these ways of thinking as they have become ingrained, but we can be open to learning from other disciplines, which is one of the advantages I have seen when teaching on PgCert programmes or facilitating workshops. Regardless of what I was presenting, the most productive times were when colleagues from different subjects had the opportunity to talk through learning and teaching issues and share their own practices.

Questioning the conventions and traditions of our disciplines and/or our departments is not always an easy thing to do, but engaging in action research may lead us to think about ways in which matters might be changed. Adcroft and Lockwood (2010) suggest that attempting to establish a culture of teaching and learning can work better if it is bottom-up and emergent than managerially driven. They say that three principles are involved: i) there is more to the scholarship of teaching and learning than what happens inside a classroom setting or a purely technocratic understanding of pedagogy; ii) it is more of a behavioural and cultural movement than a departmental one, and iii) it involves facilitating and encouraging communities of practice.

Points to ponder

1. What issue might you think of that others in your department, or beyond, might be interested in researching with you?
2. What are some of the practices in your discipline that you feel uncomfortable about?

The macro/mega level: how do the institution and the university sector affect us?

When considering this level, we cannot escape the most recent changes that are affecting the higher education sector. These include global competition and league tables, quality assurance and accountability, the consumerist student and controversies around the demonstration of teaching quality. Related to these changes is the concept of teaching excellence.

Teaching excellence

The university context is a fast-changing environment, which puts competing pressures on us including the need to be excellent at teaching, research and

administration. More recently, we have been urged to prepare students for employment and to be entrepreneurial in a global market. Universities are currently being forced to compete for students in a climate where the student is customer and the measures of quality are performance-based (Burke, Stevenson and Whelan, 2015). Inevitably, attention has been centred on teaching quality with the concomitant requirement of metrics and league tables. In England, the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) was in part intended to redress the balance between teaching and research with greater rewards for teaching (McNay, 2017). The UK Government has opted for a metrics approach that incorporates teaching quality, learning environment, student outcomes and learning gains (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015). There has been much debate in the literature about teaching excellence as a concept and how we should demonstrate it. In an interview study with senior academics from 11 universities in England, Burke, Stevenson and Whelan (2015) found that the discourses of teaching excellence identified in their participants' interviews were concerned with neoliberalist market-oriented objectives and increasingly the adoption of rigid assessment frameworks. A disturbing implication of their research is that such discourses may have unintended consequences of affecting widening participation and equity goals. Frankham (2017) suggests that the effects of the TEF on performativity have the obverse effect of not preparing graduates for the workplace. Not all authors are negative. Hayes (2017), for example, suggests that the TEF being a major educational policy could lead to a change in attitude to international students and contribute to their more equal status. Wood and Su (2017) carried out a small study with 15 academics from five post-1992 universities. They concluded that the concept of teaching excellence needs to be more nuanced. The interrelated nature of teaching and research needs to be recognized and the focus on outcome-related measures needs to be rebalanced by considering the purposes and development of learning.

Points to ponder

1. How would you define teaching excellence?
2. How do you think it should be demonstrated?

Regardless of the pros and cons of this specific governmental driver in the UK, we have to accept that across the globe we are working in a higher education context where the profile of how we teach has been raised. While this in itself must be a good thing, we also have to guard against teaching excellence being reduced to a standard list of competencies. The next case study illustrates this dilemma.

Case study 3. Caroline: concerned with teaching excellence

Caroline is an associate professor of geography as well as being the director of her university's academic practice centre (APC). In this role she has responsibility for a small team of educational developers, as well as several digital learning experts. This reflects the sizeable financial commitment the university has put into digitally enhanced learning, which her vice-chancellor is particularly keen on. Consequently, the university's PGCert programme is built around teaching and learning with technology. There is also a route into a masters and a professional doctorate for those who want to proceed further. In addition the APC runs continuing professional development programmes which all academic staff are expected to undertake.

In spite of such a powerful institutional drive and a ready take-up by many (although not all) of the teaching staff, the academic performance of the students appears to be declining and colleagues are complaining that students do not seem to bother any more with what they call vaguely 'real learning'. Student satisfaction scores are very high so senior management is pleased but Caroline is worried at the undercurrent that is rumbling among the academics. Taking her team and some trusted colleagues into her confidence, Caroline suggests a series of interlinked action research projects to try and get to the underlying problem. An early finding from a Geography colleague found that the enthusiasm students had for digital technologies was more to do with practicalities of time and convenience rather than any indication that they used them to deepen their learning. Armed with this knowledge, Caroline suggested an institutional drive where interested colleagues could become involved in their own pedagogical studies, helped by APC's experts. The aim was to explore ways to encourage deeper engagement with learning. After two years, and several presentations and reports to senior management, the university devises a new learning, teaching and assessment strategy to take forward the understandings and lessons learned from the action research initiative.

In this case study, Caroline had the courage to face some uncomfortable truths and by taking action in a collaborative and participatory way was able to bring about institutional change. In enabling staff to carry out research in their own subject contexts, she was able to gain a broader sense of why students were not engaging with the curriculum despite all the affordances that modern technology had brought them. This example is an illustration of what might be achieved at institutional – and even beyond to national – level when we can establish working partnerships.

Working partnerships can be more formally constituted. Roxå and Mårtennson (2011), for example, take a sociocultural perspective and introduce the concept of academic micro-cultures in their work on academic development at Lund University. They define these micro-cultures as a department, a workgroup, or a disciplinary community but what characterizes them is high internal trust and intense communication. Similar to Wenger's (1998) communities of practice they are an example of how bottom-up approaches can influence institutional strategy. Communities of practice have had a powerful effect on learning and teaching in universities as well as in many other organizations. The history and development of the concept is presented on the Wenger-Traynors' website. Here we can find the following definition:

> Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.
>
> (Wenger-Traynor and Wenger-Traynor, 2015)

What Caroline has done through action research has joined up these micro-cultures to the macro level of her university. Of course she is in an advantageous position of being in middle management but nevertheless, joining up communities of practice or micro-cultures has been shown to be influential at an institutional level and beyond.

Implications

Having now explored all three/four levels and shown how action research might operate in each, I want to return to my main argument, which is that in a context of accountability in teaching and learning we need a 'bottom up' approach. By this I mean that as academics (established or aspiring) we feel enabled to take ownership of our own professional development in pedagogy. One way to do this is by pedagogical action research which encourages us to become reflective practitioners and to engage critically with the scholarship and literature of teaching and learning. It is through doing research that we begin to understand more about our own teaching and assessment practice. Action research also gives us the opportunity of working collaboratively to grow initiatives and begin to challenge and perhaps change established practices. All this must seem like a long way off if we are thinking of taking that first step. A good starting point is to consider our own educational beliefs and values. I have been influenced and motivated by the work of Gert Biesta who is a professor in education in the UK. One of his publications that has influenced my thinking about action research is an essay in which he critically analyses the concept of evidence-based practice in the field of education. Biesta argues that professional action as implied in evidence-based practice requires professionals to ask questions...

not about the effectiveness of their actions but about the potential educational value of what they do, that is, about the educational desirability of the opportunities for learning that follow from their actions (and what should be prevented at all costs is the situation in which there is a performative contradiction between what they preach and what they practice).

(Biesta, 2007, p.10)

Points to ponder

1. Why did you come into higher education?
2. What do you think is educationally desirable and how does this align with your own moral values?

If we are to take the step of researching our own teaching practice, then we must reflect on our beliefs and values about higher education in general. Our position may well put us in the uncomfortable zone of being outside the current educational zeitgeist, but one of the avowed intentions of action research is to challenge the status quo of the particular educational system that we work in. Kemmis (2006) has argued that some educational action research lacks edge and that it should be capable of 'telling unwelcome truths'. While he was referring here to the school system, he has also talked about the higher education context elsewhere (Kemmis, 2001) so it is not surprising that this maxim applies equally well to higher education.

Pause for a moment and consider an occasion when you have had to abide by a practice that just does not chime with your pedagogical beliefs or values. This can happen at the institutional or the departmental level or it may come from the discipline itself. Often it pertains to curriculum design and/or assessment practices. It is unlikely that on your own, particularly if you are new to the department or are part-time, that you would feel that your voice might be heard. Having mentored early career lecturers, I have empathized with their frustrations and while there is no easy or straightforward solution, exploring alternative ways of teaching and assessing through action research might enable you to have a credible mechanism for telling unwelcome truths. This is part of what being a reflective practitioner entails, which will be the focus of my next chapter.

Synopsis

*   In this first chapter I have taken as my starting point the various influences, demands and expectations that face those of us who work with university students. Until we reflect on the effects of these influences,

we will not be able to make our pedagogical action research as robust or as influential as we would wish it to be.

- In discussing the micro-meso-macro/mega framework, I have used the device of case studies to describe some of the more common contexts that readers will be familiar with and to explain how this may sometimes pose challenges and frustrations that cannot always be resolved.

- Throughout the chapter, I have posed some points to ponder, to help you to think about your own values, experiences and ambitions. Even if you do not wish to engage with these natural pauses for thought, my intention has been to portray an honest account of what undertaking pedagogical action research can and cannot do.

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Comment: It is clear from this abstract that we had not yet collected the data, indeed we said this quite plainly in the extended summary, which was required in addition to the abstract. Another point that went against us was that we referred to the Ideal***Inventory but we did not make clear that this had a record of publications to give it respectability. In the event, the reviewing committees decision was a wise one because this proposal was premature and as it happened, we did not get a large number of students completing both stages.

Compare this abstract with the next one in Appendix L on a similar research topic: student meta-learning. This was submitted to the same conference, two years later and was successful.

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