

THEORETICAL RESOURCES 2

Ways of Presenting and Critiquing Action Research Reports^[1]

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Question: If action research reports are not to be judged by the criteria of conventional, natural-science-based 'academic' research, then what criteria *are* relevant?

Some Tentative Answers

- The report needs to define and to take into account its various audiences, unless there is no doubt that it is written exclusively for self-clarification.
- It should succeed in 'bringing the situation to life' but (at the same time) bring out its aims and emergent general themes (methodological, professional, personal, developmental). In other words it should make explicit the points of interest it potentially shares with the reader.

WAYS OF PRESENTING REPORTS

- Description should be presented so as to lead to 'appreciation', as a prelude to 'analysis'.
- Analysis should not be merely a matter of grouping data under headings, but should include: (a) a 'reflexive' account of how the writer decided upon the interpretation presented; and (b) an identification of points of tension, contrast, or contradiction between different elements in the data collected. This is the sense in which the report should demonstrate its rigour
- The report should demonstrate 'a sense of responsibility' towards its own intentions, its data, its various potential audiences, and the participants in the investigation.
- The report should make clear how data were selected, collected, and analysed.
- Rather than including a 'literature review', the report should show how the writer has drawn upon a range of resources, not just by citing people or books which the writer agrees with, but indicating how ideas, categories, interpretations, etc., have been explored and developed through entering into critical dialogue with the various resources cited. These resources can be: other people's comments (on the same data or on different data), other experiences generally, things one has read (*The Bible*, and even educational research!), films, TV, etc. In other words, the report must show that the writer has put her/his ideas 'under pressure' in order to explore various possible interpretations of the situation/events being reported, and these should be linked with the aims and with the themes identified.
- Criteria such as those indicated above will always need to be interpreted in various ways in the specific context of any given report, bearing in mind the particular aims of the individual project. This means: a) that aims will need to be made explicit, if only in retrospect; b) (most importantly) that the action researcher has an obligation to articulate the criteria upon which their own work is to be judged, i.e. to inform the reader about how to read (or view) it.
- In some cases a format for inquiry may have been chosen which is not compatible with some of the criteria listed above (e.g. through fictional writing) and in such cases the writer must inform the reader about how the work is to be read, how it relates to the practice from which it is derived, and how it might contribute to the knowledge of others. Action research is distinctive in that it produces 'personal' (rather than 'objective') knowledge, and thus needs to help the reader make their own appropriation of it.
- We must avoid making yet another set of 'technical' prescriptions as a means of controlling others' research, as opposed to addressing the questions of value and validity raised by our efforts at researching our own practice.

Note

[1] This paper grew out of a discussion at the CARN mini-conference in Chelmsford, UK, on 26 February, 1993

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