

Action Research Principles in Seminars on Qualitative Research

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The academic reality in Israel teaches that despite the legitimacy that exists to carry out research according to the qualitative-constructivist-interpretative paradigm, it is still necessary to establish its place alongside the positivist-quantitative paradigm. This need led to the establishment of a special interest group that has been engaged since 2001 in the study of various issues in qualitative research and in the implications of its application in different academic frameworks in Israel.¹ One of this group's unique activities is biannual seminars, each dedicated to a different genre of qualitative research². The seminar preparation process and the conducting thereof are based on a constructivist approach that enables a gradual build-up of knowledge grounded in the experience of the participating researchers³. In many respects, this process resembles action research setups characterized by iterative steps of identifying problems, studying their characteristics, acting, evaluation and renewed action (Kemmis & McTaggart 2000). The different stages of action research are described as answers to a series of questions that evolve from one another during the research (McNiff & Whitehead 2002). The seminar preparation process, and the conducting thereof, especially resembles participatory action research, which is based on dialectic deliberation, reflective discourse, bearing responsibility and reciprocity between all participants. Retrospectively, five stages can be discerned that characterize action research, and that were experienced while preparing, conducting and summarizing the seminars:

¹ The establishment of the interest group was the initiative of Prof. Naama Sabar Ben-Yehoshua, one of the leaders in qualitative research in Israel. Group activities are held at the MOFET Institute, Israel's training center for training teachers for teachers colleges.

² The first seminar was held in February 2003 and was dedicated to the genre of action research. The second seminar was held in January-February 2005 and was dedicated to the narrative research genre. The seminars lasted two and a half days and are held in dormitory conditions in the Kinneret area (Sea of Galilee).

³ The seminars are open to researchers from all disciplines. To date, seminar participants included researchers from the disciplines of education, science education, psychology, sociology, anthropology, social work, literature and architecture.

1. Identification, description and definition of the problem (What do we know about the studied phenomenon? How do we know it?)
2. Planning action for dealing with the problem (What is the action plan?)
3. Execution of action, reports and feedback, and ongoing documentation of the steps (How to test and validate new knowledge?)
4. Processing and dissemination of new knowledge (How to formulate and disseminate the knowledge created?)
5. Future implications (How to use new knowledge and what are the implications of the action?).

The purpose of this presentation is to describe the various aforementioned stages.

Identification of the problem, its description and definition

The decision to dedicate the first seminar to the genre of action research, and particularly to the relationship action research and the qualitative paradigm, stemmed from recognition of the situation at teaching colleges in which the name *action research* was in fact given to an assortment of sub-genres and strategies in qualitative and quantitative research. In light of this state of affairs, it seemed important to establish the knowledge of the leading researchers in this genre, to explore its boundaries, and the difficulties and advantages of integrating the various research setups in the training process and professional development of teachers - researchers. The second seminar was dedicated to narrative research, since this is a prevalent genre in recent years in education studies as well as in other disciplines of the behavioral sciences and social sciences, and at the same time, the use of narrative approaches has expanded into the therapeutic, critical, aesthetic and literary disciplines to the extent that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the concept of *narrative research* and other uses of the term *narrative*.

After defining the need to hold the seminar and having determined its subject, the steering committee prepared for the formulation of a manifesto, which was to present the objectives of the seminar and invite an appropriate target audience to attend. The decision to hold a study seminar (rather than a conference) entailed limiting the number of participants (not to exceed 35). The participants were selected based on a position paper written by the various candidates, in which they were requested to specify their experience in the field that is the subject of the seminar (action research or narrative research), and describe a critical position toward the current activity in this area.

To our delight, we received in response to our call for papers an abundance of viewpoints, questions and relevant issues that arose from the fieldwork of those involved in the subject at various academic institutions in Israel. The steering committee then evaluated the position papers and selected those that most suited the objectives of each of the two seminars. In addition, the committee invited guest researchers considered to be international experts in their fields; Prof. Jean McNiff from England participated in the first seminar and Prof. Amia Liblich from Jerusalem in the second. The subjects are engaged with, and served as the basis for the seminar topics. For instance, topics covered by the first seminar were a comparison between action research and qualitative research; the role of the researcher in ethnographic research and in action research; the reciprocal relations between researchers and their subjects and between researchers and the studied world; the contribution of qualitative research and action research in the training of teachers and in the professional and personal development of teachers; the contribution of action research in the school setting; critical action research as an instrument of social change; ethics and politics in qualitative research in general, and in action research in particular; what is considered to be a success in action research; and "quality control" issues. Topics of the second seminar covered six main issues, as follows: The essence of truth and knowledge in narrative research; the researcher, the narrator and all that is between them; the dynamics between the personal and the public; issues in analysis and interpretation; representation forms of the narrative and of its processing; and ethics in narrative research.

As mentioned, the subjects extracted from the position papers constituted the source for determining the seminar contents, defined the main problems with which the researcher and teachers in this field are grappling, and raised a broad and rich variety of epistemological, methodological and practical topics. Writers of position papers who were accepted to the seminar received detailed instructions on how to rewrite, focus and turn their position papers into working papers. The working papers were put on the seminar's website and essentially constituted the end of the "problem definition" and its description stage. An edited and printed booklet containing the working papers was distributed among the participants at the seminar itself and served as a basis for the learning that took place during the seminar.

Planning the Action and its Execution - Seminar Learning Frameworks and Activities

The seminar was planned by a cooperative steering committee composed of eight researchers-experts and the seminar itself was conducted in way similar to a Learning Community or a Self-Organizing System, characteristic of participatory action research. This system gives a place of honor to the personal knowledge of each and every one of the participants, and from the assortment of viewpoints, the new knowledge is together gradually created. It is a gradual process of development from personal knowledge, to group knowledge. This kind of structure requires the continuous participation of the participants during the course of the entire seminar and the development of knowledge takes place through various discussion frameworks that build on each other and support each other:

- a. Primary discussion groups - Seminar contents and questions discussed in such groups were not predetermined by the steering committee but rather formed by the participants themselves in the course of the ongoing processing from position papers to working papers. Therefore, we decided that each of the working papers would be presented and an initial discussion held in the framework of several rounds of parallel discussion groups (3 papers in each). Group mediators were requested to document the gist of the discussions and report on such during the plenary sessions held later on.
- b. Secondary discussion groups - Further discussion of the ideas and topics raised in the primary groups was held in three discussion groups: epistemology, methodology and practice (in the first seminar), or in groups whose participants selected a discussion topic from among a list of suggested topics (in the second seminar). The group mediators were responsible for leading and documenting the discussion.
- c. Plenary sessions - Plenary sessions included general lectures, reports from the primary and secondary discussion groups, feedback periods and the final summary of the seminar. The limited number of participants enabled patient listening to all speakers and effective discussions, even in the plenary sessions.
- d. Learning workshops - An addition to the second seminar was a framework of study workshops in which participants could learn a new tool or approach proposed by fellow participants (for instance, a tool for the analysis of narratives).
- e. Free discussion - In addition to the aforementioned frameworks, several informal social-cultural activities took place (sightseeing in the area, artistic performance) during which the exchange of opinions continued, as well as during meal times and breaks.

Throughout the seminars, and particularly during the summing-up period, participants described a unique experience and expressed a high level of satisfaction. For example:

- *"We underwent here a very intensive and enriching social intellectual experience..."*
- *"I felt that I was very much enlightened by different points of view, particularly those of people who do not come from my context".*
- *"I came with a lot of questions and I'm leaving with even more questions..."*
- *"The thing that was great was the relinquishing of positions of strength and there was a completely free dialog here..."*
- *"All of the conditions here and the entire atmosphere was such that enables learning. It was possible to share, to ask questions and to build additional layers with respect to the concept of qualitative research and action research."*
- *"The opportunity given to us all to be active, enabled participatory learning... from the wondering grew a statement that was meaningful to all participants. The clarification of something obscure led to learning."*
- *"I left the action research seminar with a lot of questions and here (in narrative seminar) there were answers too and not only questions."*
- *"I feel that I have "a community and a family" and my outlook connects to others. At the university, I find that is very much missing."*

Processing of the new information and its dissemination

After the seminar ended, all participants were invited to write an article for a book that was to deal with subjects raised during the seminar. Those participants who responded to the call sent abstracts, which enabled the steering committee to evaluate the book's potential, and received guideline for writing the final articles. All members of the steering committee participated in the evaluation of the articles and thus continued to be full partners, even at the book production stage. The articles in the first seminar's book were arranged in chapters representing different types of knowledge discussed at the seminar. This book is scheduled for publication within the next several months. The book opens with a Prologue describing the planning of the seminar and its implementation, and concludes with an Epilogue that connects the chapters and discusses the place of action research in the academic world.

The first chapter, Action Research in Theory, presents four articles that treat the philosophical and epistemological aspects of action research. The second chapter, Action Research in Practice, describes five action researches in the field of education, each one of which acts in a different context and raises different insights about the potential of action researches. The third chapter, Between Ethnography and Action Research, includes three articles that compare ethnographic research and action research as sub-genres of qualitative research. In the fourth chapter, Action Research in a Multi-Disciplinary View, the boundaries of classic action research in the field of education are broken and action research spills into additional fields such as design and social work.

Production of the second seminar's book began immediately following the end of the seminar in February 2005, and we are now in the midst of evaluating abstracts sent by participants who expressed their desire to contribute to the book. Like in the first book, here too the material will be arranged in meaningful chapters related to the main topics raised and discussed in the seminar.

Future Implications

This is the final stage in any action research setup, and in the case of the seminars, is manifested by a decision to continue to hold seminars in a similar format, which will be dedicated to addition genres of qualitative research. In light of this decision, we held the second seminar in 2005, exactly in parallel to the process of producing the first seminar's book.

The third seminar will be held in January-February 2007, and probably will be dedicated to the genre of ethnographic research. The success of the first two seminars and the satisfaction of their participants, as well as the high quality of the first seminar's book, indicate that such seminars constitute a successful way to create and consolidate theoretical and methodological knowledge, and to form a community of experts on the paradigm of qualitative research, a body that is so lacking in the academic landscape in Israel.

Conclusion

The need to deepen the knowledge on the various genres of qualitative research led to the suggestion to hold a series of biannual seminars on qualitative research. We did not decide in advance on the seminars' methodology nor did we formulate topics beforehand. Rather, we asked the candidates to speak out and formulate *their* understanding and autonomous positions on the general subject of the seminar.

Our intention was to create conditions for open thought and to transmit willingness to examine issues from different points of view and through various lenses. The variety of issues raised served as a starting point for the seminar discussions and, following the seminar, the knowledge was consolidated into a "grounded theory", which is related to the practical aspect and which stems and grows from the pondering the experience in various genres of qualitative research. While preparing the first seminar, and especially when drawing the conclusions at its end, an awareness and a desire were born to continue with a series of seminars each one of which would be dedicated to a different sub-genre of qualitative research. Conscience reflection during and after the first seminar enabled operationalization of the preparation of the second seminar, and convinced us that the principles of action research constitute a suitable and efficient strategy for future planning and conducting of such academic seminars.

Kemmis, S. & McTaggart, R. (2000). Participatory action research. In M.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), **Handbook of qualitative research** (2nd ed., pp. 567-606). Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publication.

McNiff, J. & Whitehead, J. (2002). **Action Research: Principles and Practice**. Routledge Falmer, London and New York.