

**Address to the guests of the North-West University on the occasion of the 9<sup>th</sup> Action Research Action Learning Association and 13<sup>th</sup> Participatory Action Research World Congress**  
(St George Hotel, Pretoria, 05 November 2015)

**Action research and the transformation of higher education research**

Prof RJ Balfour, 2015

**Preliminary Remarks**

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I am Professor Robert Balfour, Dean of the Faculty of Education Sciences and on behalf of the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Dan Kgwadi, and leadership of the North-West University I am delighted to welcome you as guests of North-West University to Pretoria.

I would also like to acknowledge special guests and benefactors who have helped make this occasion of the 9<sup>th</sup> Action Research Action Learning Association and 13<sup>th</sup> Participatory Action Research World Congress possible:

- The President of Alara, Mr Colin Bradley, and the Vice President Professor Emmanuel Tetteh, whom we thank in the name of ALARA and PAR for choosing to host the Congress with NWU;
- Professors Lesley Wood, in the Faculty of Education Sciences who has led the organising committee in terms of the arrangements of which are all the very pleased beneficiaries today. And also special thanks to Saartjie Venter, Merna Meyer, Andri Schuurman, Jandre van der Walt, and Danika Alberts who were part of the organising committee.
- Our sponsors who both through their support and presence, have enabled the conference to take place and I wish to mention by name:
  - o Bright Media
  - o The Global Centre for Work Applied Learning
  - o Juta and Company Publishers
  - o The National Research Foundation
  - o North-West University
  - o Van Schaik Book Store.
- The keynote speakers Professors Danny Burns, Richard Teare, Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt together with; Dr Pip Bruce Fergusson, Dr Gina Blackberry, Prof Eileen Piggot-Irvine, Dr Ina Louw, Prof Pieter Du Toit, Prof Shankar Sankaran, and Dr Margaret Fletcher.
- And, finally, to the approximately two hundred delegates and attendees from across our complex and diverse world, who over the next few days will converse, deliberate and reflect on the role and potential action research holds in transforming notions of participation in research and research as action contributing directly to the common good.

**Address to Meeting**

South Africa has been wracked by mass student protests over what seems to be an unending cycle of university fee increases over the last six years: occurring as these do because state subsidy to universities has in real terms declined over the period, and the national student loan scheme has not kept abreast with increases either in fees or cost of living. I admit to being surprised this has not come sooner to us, but the students, to their credit, have been successful in exacting a commitment from the Ministry, a 0% increase for 2016, though that does not ease the burden of the many thousands who could evidently not afford the fees to begin with (and who have dropped out into unemployment). How the higher education sector will cope with absorbing these costs has yet to be made clear but the Ministry and Vice Chancellors have been meeting on the issue in recent days. What becomes clear is that transformation is an issue in which inclusion, and a more equitable distribution of resources in relation to university funding, are being contested.

Today I want to talk about the relationship between action research and the transformation of higher education. In 1989 Christine Davis published a little book entitled *Action Research: an investigative*

*approach* in which, drawing from her experience of working with the South Australian Education Department, she showed how teachers could use action research not only to become researchers, but indeed co-developers of research about learning with children, and about their own professional practices as teachers in relation to children. Davis's work spoke directly to the relationship between action research action learning. From even earlier than this the links between action research and critical theory were articulated by the likes of Peter McLaren who also in 1989 claimed that it enabled "researchers to see the classroom not only as an arena of indoctrination or the site of instruction, but also as a cultural terrain that promotes student empowerment and self-transformation" (McLaren, 1989, 167).

In these and the plethora of writings by scholars, there comes together, through action research scholarship, other relationships: for example, that between justice and equality (now normative within the area called social justice education), subject positioning and power (also a normative area of focus in feminist and post-colonial scholarship), and class and culture (part now of the sociology of education). With its modest beginnings in the aspirations of teachers and social workers to research real-world experience and practice in ways that included and enabled participation, action research and action learning has become the single most transformative movement in higher education research within the last three decades. And, precisely because reflection is an integral part of the action research process, the impact on learning through reflection, and learning to reflect has changed our very notions of thinking.

Thinking, as no longer the reflection on knowledge provided, but rather on knowledge construction and arising from an awareness of constructivist insights also, knowledge discovery. If we were to describe action research and action learning in the language of transformation, then surely we could agree that the attention paid through this methodology and learning approach, serves to raise consciousness and awareness of the self and other in the teaching learning space, as co-constructors of identity, role, and process.

Because knowledge creation changes how we understand the world, and change is based on our advances with knowledge, transformation is about valuing people equally in the processes of change. Transformation is not only about how we change, but how we strive to value difference as part of that change process: and action research emancipates the primary activity of a university from the hands only of those among us who are professed, to share with the many outside these walls who crave, yearn indeed demand insight arising from their own understanding of power and action, reflection and learning whether in schools, universities or communities.

I began by describing student protests at South African higher education campuses. These protests have only been about fees. Earlier in the year there were protests about gender oppression, success in studies, language and belonging(see Bernado, 2015 and Petersen, 2015). The range and frequency in 2015 of protest action suggest a lively degree of responsiveness by students and academics to issues affecting the transformation of higher education as a whole: that responsiveness occurs as a result of consciousness of the deepening inequality (Soudien, 2008) in a world where the discourse of participation, access and transformation sit in uneasy tension with socio-economic and political processes devoted not to equality or the common good, but to realising neo imperial and neo-liberal agendas, in which exclusion rather than inclusion, marginalisation rather than participation, and silencing rather than listening are the order the day. To be sure, students do not demonstrate only about student issues, but rather in relation to a range of issues in communities which have community relevance and affect the relative stability and seclusion of the university setting. Thus what action research has further enabled researchers to do is to move beyond the epistemological confines of their disciplines and institutional hierarchies to the world to which they have a responsibility as people galvanised by a need for emancipation arising from insight and action. This somewhat revolutionary language is encapsulated by Prawatt (1991, 739) who defines two types of empowerment or emancipation: that which is epistemological in which thinking processes or skills are the focus, and then to political empowerment in which alternative discourse creation (for example, feminism) serves to disrupt the very language of power and coercion (744).

How has action research changed disciplines? Sometime ago (1990s) when I was still a student training in applied linguistics, research conducted within its applied branches such as acquisition studies and sociolinguistics took still the product of language as the focus of analysis. Action research changed my perspective as a young student in the 1990s because it addressed the necessary balance between identity, culture, place and space and the researcher and researched. One can see how the discipline itself has changed under the influence of research approaches, such as action research, which aim to achieve participation rather than products; consider for example, the excellent book by O'Halloran et al. (2004) in which the shift from language to a more inclusive view of meaning creation processes (the visual, the auditory, the spatial, and human action) is described. In short, as approach to the discovery of knowledge or as research method, action research and action learning enable practitioners to transform a curriculum (as argued by Ndebele et al, 2013 and others) very much more attuned to the student or learner, and much more carefully aligned with the context and situation in which power and knowledge interact. There are many other examples as testified to, in the programme for the ALARA conference.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Ladies and gentlemen, it has been a single honour for me to welcome you to this great event occurring fittingly at the end of a year in South Africa higher education, characterised by action. This conference concerns the learning derived from action, and judging from the array of presentations from a diversity of contexts and disciplines, we see scholarship devoted precisely to those challenges arising from the continued presence of deep inequality, dehumanisation and oppression in our societies. To the actions of our research we bring reflection concerning the dignity of people in and through learning, our aspirations for a changed world. As Zuber-Skerrit et al. (2015) note "Action research provides us with a culturally and socially Responsible way....to generate knowledge that will help us to negotiate ...these pathways" (39). From action we derive reflection which in turn informs research that leads to successful innovation.

I wish you well in the coming hours and days in which a world of experience comes to gathered into this one venue. I trust that you will be mindful of the opportunity indeed privilege that this gathering represents for everyone here this morning. And, finally, I declare this congress open!

**END**

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