

Teacher Action Research as a Worldwide Movement

By Nancy Grudens-Schuck

Action Research has deep roots. Agriculture teachers who use action research to improve instruction are part of a larger tradition. The tradition spans 75 years and several continents (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). Moreover, action research is resolutely democratic. It mirrors other traditions where agriculture teachers are warmly welcomed, such as the populist land-grant tradition and experiential learning traditions.

Strong roots also means that we aren't alone. Teachers in other places are solving important problems in their classrooms using action research (Noffke & Stevenson, 1995). They are making it happen despite crushing workloads and disinterested colleagues. In fact, they are using action research in order to *solve the problems* caused by unfair workloads and the stresses of relationships with colleagues, as well as other challenges. It is work, but it can also be interesting, fun, and professionally rewarding. Some history might help put teacher action research in context.

Action Research Across Continents

Arguably, Australia is in the lead in terms of numbers of teachers using action research (McTaggart, 1997). Action research is increasingly common in the US and the United Kingdom, but most of us consider ourselves beginners (I do). That said, action research is very much "at home" in the United States (Noffke & Stevenson, 1995). In fact, action research was invented here. Here's how it happened.

Early History

When talking about action research, most people give credit to Kurt Lewin, a psychologist active in the 1930s and 40s (Adelman, 1993). Lewin fled Europe as a Jewish refugee during World War II. Finding academic work was difficult for social researchers during this time, even more so for refugees. His reputation as an intellectual of high regard had already been established in Europe, leading to a position at the University of Chicago.

Focus on Everyday Problems: Lewin's pioneering work took shape while working with factories that were experiencing labor problems. His idea was to use psychological research methods to solve everyday problems on the shop floor, especially those occurring between managers and factory workers (Lewin, 1948).

Through Lewin, the era of applied

research had come to psychology, what most of us today would term "organizational research" (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). The purpose was to conduct practical research for ordinary people. This was the beginning of worldwide movement to democratize social research.

Lewin's ideas sputtered in the US after he died, but individuals in Europe and Scandinavia applied his ideas to solve problems in the coal mining and fishing industries (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). It was here that action research became even more democratic. Laborers' ideas and knowledge were taken into account as part of the problem solving process. Lewin's ideas were used to reorganize dangerous, backbreaking work in coalmines through procedures that were safer, more humane, and more productive. It was the beginning of the "ergonomic" trend whereby equipment (such as computers) was designed with workers' habits and phy-

September - October 2004 Issue

Theme: Program Standards

With the ever changing face of Agricultural Education, how or what standards am I applying to my program? What are program standards, and how do they affect me as a teacher? What kind of standards are there for me to respond to? What is the connection between learner achievement and program standards?

Theme Editor: Carol A. Conroy
SRI International
1100 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 2800
Arlington, VA 22209
Email: Carol.Conroy@sri.com
Phone: (703) 247-8622

Articles Due to Theme Editor: July 15, 2004

Due to Editor: August 1, 2004



Students being guided through the seeking data and data recording phase of action research.

siques in mind.

Where did action research go next? Of course, this is difficult to answer, because the label "action research" changed everywhere it went. But there is evidence that Deming, the great American organizational consultant, and the improvements in quality in Japanese industries in the past 30 years, are due to the social research revolution that Lewin started (Greenwood & Levin, 1998).

In your hands. Where is action research going now? The focus is on people doing research themselves to solve their own problems. The participatory thread in action research has become stronger in the past 20 years, and is the heart of the teacher action

research movement (Noffke & Stevenson, 1995). However, it is not just teachers! In Iowa, I work with a farmer association that conducts its own on-farm research, explains the results of farmer-centered research during field days, and publishes the results in newsletters (Exner, 1995). That is action research, too, although it is more likely to be called "farmer centered research" or "farmer-to-farmer." Other programs are termed "citizen science" such as the water monitoring projects in which my students participate as part of service learning projects. The 'researchers' in these cases are not necessarily professional research scientists, yet they are conducting bona fide inquiries using techniques for gathering meaningful data systematically. To me, this speaks vol-

umes about the power of the ideas of Kurt Lewin, who began a movement whether he expected to or not.

Example from Teaching

I have used action research in different types of research projects since 1996. Each project has a different feel, from practical to participatory, as explained in the article by Kathleen Kelsey.

Course design. Several years ago, I used action research to design a new course in agricultural education with colleague Cary Trexler (then at Iowa State). We used an action research approach with graduate students to figure out which type of qualitative (i.e., interview-based) re-

search methods course to offer, and what to include in the course. Students conducted interviews of each other about the potential course using both qualitative (interview) methods and quantitative (survey) methods. Then they compared the results. By using the methods that we hoped to teach in the course, we all learned "where we were at" with respect to gaining the skills. In this way, action research is "researching by doing." As a result of this process, I designed a successful course that combined qualitative inquiry with two other content areas (evaluation and participation theory) to fit our needs.

Other benefits. I was really pleased with the students' enthusiasm for the action research phase. For example, when we had difficulty scheduling a time to analyze the data, graduate students proposed a 7 am breakfast meeting. They brought fresh eggs, pancake batter, orange juice, and a skillet to cook breakfast for the 25

people who attended. It was great fun.

An added benefit to doing the action research was the protective benefit of many people knowing about the issue ahead of time. When the time came to vote on the new course, everyone understood the need for the course. I did not experience any difficulties getting approvals for the new course.

Conclusion

Action research upholds a commitment to solving the everyday problems of ordinary people in a democratic society through the application of scientific principles. Action research fits agricultural education because it has walked some of the same historical paths.

References Cited

Adelman, C. (1993). Kurt Lewin and the origins of action research. *Edu-*

cational Action Research, 1 (1), 5-24.

Exner, C. (1993). Complementary abilities and objectives in on-farm research. In C. Francis, R. Janke, V. Mundy, & J. King (eds.) *Extension education materials for sustainable agriculture: Alternative approaches to on-farm research and technology exchange*, Series Volume 3 (pp. 33-335). Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

Greenwood, D. J., & Levin, M. (1998). *An introduction to action research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Lewin, K. (1948). *Resolving social conflicts: Selected papers on group dynamics*. New York, NY: Harper Brothers.

Noffke, S. E., & Stevenson, R. B. (1995). (Eds.). *Educational action research: Becoming practically critical*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.



Student work, upon completion of the action research project, can be displayed and shared with all.



Dr. Nancy Grudens-Schuck is an Assistant Professor at Iowa State University.