

International Education for Action Research in Health, Ageing and Development

Discussion paper regarding cooperation between The University of Sydney and Sichuan University

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This is an informal discussion paper only and not a formal proposal.

Background

What is action research?

Action research combines action to improve a situation with research to increase knowledge. The internationally recognised *Handbook of Action Research* defines action research as a participatory process that brings together “action and reflection, theory and practice in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities” (Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

Systems thinking enables action researchers to build whole descriptions of social and organisational systems with their emergent properties. This enables us to engage with issues including change processes, social action, reflective practice, tacit knowledge, change and development in communities and organisations, and with complex and intractable problems.

Action research is not like traditional research. Traditional research is reductionist, breaking things into parts to analyse them, while action research studies whole systems. Traditional research reports events after they have happened, while action researchers learn from change as it happens. In traditional kinds of research, we study things as an outside observer. In action research we are participants in the action. We are both observer and observed, both object and subject of the research, in the living-theory approach (Laidlaw, 2004).

Preliminary work

Ian Hughes (The University of Sydney) and Lin Yuan (Sichuan University) conducted online collaborative inquiry into international education for action research. Participation by about 200 action researchers from all parts of the world resulted in recommendations for curriculum, learning approaches, resources and organisation, as well as offers of support and participation in an international action research community.

Action research in Asia

Starting from different beginnings in U.S.A., South America, North America, Europe and Australia various approaches to action research are converging. Professional development programs, Internet resources, University coursework, PhD and postgraduate research and peer-reviewed international journals have developed since the 1940s. While action research has been received well in various projects, it is underrepresented in Chinese and Asian institutions. Asia has the largest population and fastest rate of development of any World region. We need something new to guide us through the complexities of our rapid development, with the unpredictability and unexpected consequences this brings.

There have been a range of action research projects in PR China, including classroom action research (Laidlaw, 2002), experimental action research (Laidlaw, 2004), participatory action research (Li, 1997; Wang, Yi, Tao, & Carovano, 1998), participatory rapid assessment (H. J. Yuan, 2001), contract learning (Chien, Chan, & Morrissey, 2002), group learning (Davison, 2001) and developmental action inquiry (Pang, 2002). Action Research has been used in language education, primary education, nursing education, rural health promotion, and other fields. Various international organizations have assisted these projects including HelpAged International, Action Learning and IFAL, Action Learning Associates, The Centre for Socio-Economic Development, and the Sino-Swiss Programme. However, action research is practiced in at least to universities in Hong Kong, and at Guyuan Teachers College in mainland China A more detailed review of action research in China is in preparation (Hughes & Yuan, forthcoming) and a course reader has been assembled (L. Yuan, 2004).

In Thailand a participatory action research improved health care delivery and empowerment of mothers with HIV infection (Jirapaet, 2000). Action research and soft systems methodology identified improvements in water catchment management between villagers, government and commercial stakeholders. In Thailand and Vietman participatory rural assessment programs with older people have been supported by HelpAged International.

In Philippines, action research has been used in public health HIV/AIDS projects and in agricultural extension.

In South Asia, India has a strong tradition of non-violent action and participatory community development, however this is often not recognised as a form of research by universities and peer-reviewed journals. In Bangladesh, there is a strong developmental action research program at Jahangimagar University. In Nepal, participative action research redefined electricity supply in terms of energy provision. Participation and generative understanding uses the creative energy of human beings in a different way, and provides a different kind of energy. HelpAged International has supported participatory rural assessment in Nepal and Bangladesh.

This list of projects is not complete, but it shows that action research has been used for a wide of purposes used many Asian countries. From publication dates we can infer that the use of action research is increasing. This brief survey also indicates that

development of action research is imbalanced. We have identified only two universities offering systematic teaching of action research. Classroom action research is taught at Guyuan Teachers College in China, and developmental action research at Jahangirnagar University in Bangladesh. It is clear that there is a large unmet need for formal action research degree studies, for professional development and for centres that over time will develop Asian approaches in action research.

How Action Research can help Chinese people

The highest value in action research is not knowledge for its own sake, but knowledge for humanitarian purposes.

Participative action research can facilitate people who are affected by problems, including poor, illiterate or disadvantaged people, to participate in research, contributing their expert knowledge about their own life experiences. Participative research enables disadvantaged community members, local officials and other stakeholders to speak about their difficulties, analyse their problems, and implement solutions in cycles of planning, action, observation and reflection.

Action research combines action, learning and research. Action researchers regard their work as not only work, but also research. By researching our own practice, our teaching is also research. When we facilitate other to learn from their action, their work for self-improvement becomes research that others can learn from. Action research has many advantages when there are scarce resources and rapid change.

China is a heavily populated country, undergoing rapid change, with large majority living rural lifestyle, and many cultural minorities. There are no models from other parts of the world for Chinese development to follow. Chinese leaders have a strong ideology of listening to the masses, and strategies are needed to turn this listening into learning and action for change. It is impossible to understand the difficulties one by one, solve problems one by one, and hand down policies from the centre. Systemic approaches are needed. This proposal offers an opportunity for Sichuan University to collaborate in International Education for Action Research. Sichuan University is well positioned in Western China to develop new approaches to help poor people improve their quality of life, improve health, education and development, and build systems to enhance the lives of individuals and communities.

As expertise develops, Sichuan University is well positioned to complement teaching in English with Chinese language courses, to develop a truly Chinese approach in action research in health, development and public administration; and to collaborate with The University of Sydney in International Education for Action Research in the South East Asian region.

Action research is very humane research and it can empower people, improve self-esteem, quality of life and citizen participation.

Action research in health, ageing and development

Action research is used in varied ways by health professionals and health researchers. At one end of a continuum, action research techniques can be employed for quasi

experimental research in real life settings such as hospital wards and clinics. Organisational action research can assist in continuous improvement, planing and managing organisational change, and worker participation. Action research, reflective practice and living theory can engage health professionals in practitioner focussed action, learning and research to improve the ir own practice. Participative action research can empower client groups, disadvantaged communities, consumers and others in action and knowledge to improve their own life situations (Hart & Bond, 1994).

Participatory action research (PAR) combines well with participatory rural assessment (PRA) in community health, development and related activities. PRA is a cost effective way to establish local needs and priorities. Long term PAR projects can follow PAR in planning, implementing, evaluating, reviewing and re-planning development projects.

Collaborating Organisations

- Action & Research Open Web (AROW), School of Behavioural & Community Health, The University of Sydney, Australia
- Health Promotion and Training Center on Ageing of the West China Medical Center (HPTCOA) Sichuan University, PR China
- Help Aged International Asia-Pacific Development Centre (APRDC)

Career development in

- Health, development & social administration
- Health promotion
- Community development and community organisation
- Social action
- Organisational, community and social change
- Service development & quality improvement
- Education, research & consulting

Open WWW access to

- Courseware
- Readings & other resources
- Curricula & course guides
- On-line forums, e-mail discussion lists, e-mail announcements

AROW at <http://www.fhs.usyd.edu.au/arrow/>

AREOL at <http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arhome.html>

ActionResearch.net at <http://www.actionresearch.net>

Courses

- PhD in action research through University of Sydney, or Sichuan University or (by Cotutelle agreement) jointly through both Universities.
- Coursework Master of Health Science degrees on-line through University of Sydney
- Professional development certificate course
- Non certificate professional development

Preliminary work

- International Education in Action Research course curriculum revised and updated in collaboration with CIFRA Burkina Faso and GTZ Germany, 2001.
- Learning Sets conducted in Singapore in collaboration with Management learning and Action Research, Singapore, 2000-2001.
- Research learning circles conducted in Sydney 2003-2004.
- International research learning circle conducted on-line, 2004.
- International Education for Action Research: collaborative on-line inquiry involving leading academics in action research from all continents. Data collection and preliminary analysis completed, 2003-2004. Final report to be written and submitted for publication.
- Action Research in China: Literature review completed 2004. Report in preparation.
- Action Research in Health Reader compiled 2001
- Action Research in Africa Reader compiled 2001
- Action Research in China Reader compiled 2004

International Action Research Course Outline

This course outline presents one

PART 1: PREPARATION COURSE

About 100 hours of workshops taught face-to-face in Sichuan or other locations in China. We can produce a teacher's manual and a student workbook in English. Ian Hughes has conducted workshops of this type in Africa, Australia and Singapore but the content should be updated and made appropriate for Chinese cultures and conditions. Topics covered could include

- Participatory Rapid Appraisal
- Participatory Action Research
- Chinese and international traditions in participation, action and research.
- Methods for data collection and analysis
- Project planning

A brief introduction to systems thinking could be included in the preparation course. It may be useful to offer an additional Unit on systems complexity for postgraduate research students, those with more interest in theory, those taking advanced study or with projects involving systems complexity.

This preparation course could be offered in a residential block, or over weekends, or over several weeks.

An equivalent preparation course in English is available over the Internet from The University of Sydney.

PART 2: FIELDWORK PROJECT

A fieldwork project in Participatory Rapid Assessment (PRA) or Participatory Action Research (PAR) over maybe 15 weeks, with e-mail support and access to on-line resources. Students would work on a project sponsored by their employer or some other organisation. These may be in various places, so students would be asked to give regular reports on progress, difficulties and problems by e-mail. Students can also ask for and receive support by e-mail from staff and fellow-students. If logistics and funds allow, there could be a one day meeting part way through the project period.

PART 3: WORKSHOP AND SEMINAR

Conduct residential or weekend workshops to analyse data, write up findings and prepare a presentation. A one-day seminar to present project reports and discuss implications for learning, research and action for health.

PART 4: FINAL REPORTS

Final reports of PRA or PAR may be written up after the seminar, with an opportunity to publish final reports that are of appropriate standard and in English, in Action Research e-Reports. www.fhs.usyd.edu.au/arow/arer

Certification

A professional development course equivalent to maybe 3 months full time education, but spread over a longer period of part-time study. This is not a formal degree course. We could offer a certificate of participation to those who complete all activities including project work and reporting, and a certificate of attainment to those who choose to complete assignments. Students who complete assessment tasks at appropriate standard, and who satisfy all requirements for enrolment, may be able to apply for credit transfer into postgraduate study at Sichuan or Sydney.

The course could be designed at postgraduate level for people who already have a professional qualification and who are working in the field, with qualifications at least equivalent to a Bachelor degree.

Funding

- Funding for short courses may be raised through NGO in China administered through Sichuan University

- Sponsorship by employers or other agencies, especially where projects will benefit employing organisations.
- PhD Scholarships

Funding items

- Develop curriculum for presentation in China
- Conduct courses in Sichuan with guidance and consultation from University of Sydney. Establishment and extraordinary costs.
- Sponsorship of Certificate students
- Sponsorship of travel, accommodation and medical insurance for visiting experts (lectures, workshops or seminars)
- Sponsorship for seminars and workshops
- Repeat courses in Sichuan
- PhD scholarships
- Build on-line knowledge/ learning modules
- Build resources for on-line learning circles, (Email, Share Point, Net Meeting)

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