PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH
AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Stephen Kemmis

ABSTRACT: It is argued that the central issue for the Conference theme of 'Quality in practitioner research is whether a piece of action research or practitioner research is significant in terms of contemporary themes and issues, and the felt needs of particular communities or societies. What may count as significant in these terms is, of course, controversial. The focus in this address is on the educational significance of action research projects in education. The issue of truth-telling through educational research is discussed, especially the telling of the kinds of unwelcome truths that arise from a practice of education and educational science that is emancipatory or critical. Peters (2004) doubts whether the 'truth games' of qualitative research can be sustained in the light of arguments about the role of the subjectivity of the researcher in creating understandings of situations studied. It is argued that practitioner research and action research might escape this criticism because the researchers are the participants (and vice versa), and their understandings are intersubjectively constructed. On the question of educational significance, it is argued that much of the action research practised today is uncritical and unlikely to lead to significant change in education. It may even be directed at the improvement of schooling rather than the development of education. On the view that emancipation is an especially important contemporary task as societies in the west confront new challenges of irrationality, injustice, alienation, suffering and cynicism, it is argued that an emancipatory view of education is needed, as is a critical science of education – a science of education capable of informing education for transformation. Not all action research in education is based on this emancipatory view, however. Motivated by a technical view of the improvement of practices, it is argued that much action research in education has been 'captured' by the school improvement movement, focusing on the performance of teachers rather than on the performance of the schools and school systems they work in. By contrast, practitioner research and action research should be collectivist and focused on key contemporary problems for societies and for education, and should work with and for communities beyond schools. Critical participatory action research initiatives open communicative spaces within and beyond schools by creating opportunities for public discourse in public spheres (features of which are briefly outlined). It is suggested that significant action research and practitioner research projects connect with wider social problems and social movements. The address concludes with a discussion of conditions under which action researchers can tell unwelcome truths as co-participants in projects, in communities and in relation to governments – discursive conditions that need to be secured in each of these kinds of sites, partly by being enacted and deliberately modelled in the action research process.

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INTRODUCTION: TRUTH-TELLING

After this address, some of you may want to offer me hemlock, as the Athenianians did to Socrates, or exile from the communities of action research and practitioner research. A conference is a little like a trial – a trial of ideas, we hope, rather than of people. But there is an age-old problem for the speaker, the messenger, the truth-teller. It is the problem of bringing bad news or truths the audience does not want to hear. (One of the Microsoft Office templates for PowerPoint presentations is for bringing bad news. I will not use it today.)

Socrates was condemned to death by an Athenian tribunal on these grounds put by the poet Meletus (Church, p. lix): “Socrates commits a crime by not believing in the gods of the city, and by introducing other new divinities. He also commits a crime by corrupting the youth. Penalty, Death”. After long debate, which concluded with the sentence of death, Socrates accepted the sentence because he regarded himself as a good citizen. He had been free to leave Athens if he disagreed with its laws, but he had not; he was an Athenian; Athens had educated him; he had thought it so good that he had children there; he had participated in the civic life of the city; he had done military service for Athens when it was required. He had agreed to be part of the life and laws of the city, and if the city now repudiated him – even for bad reasons – he concluded that it was his duty to accept the legal judgement of his peers, and thus accept the hemlock – death by poison. Despite the dangers, he had spoken the truth as he saw it, and it cost him his life.

In six lectures at Berkeley in October-November 1983, Foucault addressed the problem of *parrhesia* – truth-telling, sometimes rendered in English as “free speech” though it means something more than this (Foucault, 1985a; 2001). In his Berkeley lectures *Discourse and Truth: The problematisation of parrhesia* (1985a), Foucault explores the social conditions and the conditions of subjectivity that make *parrhesia* possible – the kind of activity in which people risk danger to “speak truth to power” (in the Quaker phrase³ which may also be attributable to Foucault). Defining *parrhesia*, he writes:

> [P]arrhesia is a certain kind of verbal activity where the speaker has a specific relation to truth through frankness, a certain relationship to his own life through danger, a certain type of relationship to himself or other people through criticism (self-criticism or criticism of other people), and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty. More precisely *parrhesia* is a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognises truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself).
> In *parrhesia*, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and insecurity, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy (p.5).

The person who uses *parrhesia* despite the danger of doing so is the *parrhesiastes* – the adviser who speaks the truth frankly to the king, the citizen who speaks the truth frankly and fearlessly despite the contrary opinion of the majority, or the philosopher who speaks the truth to the tyrant. At a certain period in ancient Greece, these were qualities that were supported by political understanding of the ‘game’ of *parrhesia* by both the *parrhesiastes* and the person they riskily addressed. It is an open question whether our times offer such support for the *parrhesiastes*, whether a university professor, a whistle-blower or a good citizen who speaks out against the tragedies and tyrannies that have begun to flower in the west in the light of September 11, 2001.

³ “The phrase ‘speaking truth to power’ goes back to 1955, when the American Friends Service Committee published *Speak Truth to Power*, a pamphlet that proposed a new approach to the Cold War. Its title, which came to Friend Milton Mayer toward the end of the week in summer 1954 when the composing committee finished work on the document, has become almost a cliché; it has become common far beyond Quaker circles, often used by people who have no idea of its origins” (Ingle, 2005).
PROBLEMATISATION: WHAT DO WE MAKE PROBLEMATIC IN OUR INVESTIGATIONS?

In concluding his 1983 lectures, Foucault outlined his reason for exploring _parrhesia_ – to explore the process of problematisation – what counts as a problem – as an expression of a particular relationship between thought and reality in a particular situation. He writes:

…with regard to the way that _parrhesia_ was problematised at a given moment, we can see that there are specific Socratic-Platonic answers to the questions: How can we recognise someone as a _parrhesiastes_? What is the training of a good _parrhesiastes_? – answers which were given by Socrates or Plato. These answers are not collective ones from any sort of collective unconscious. And the fact that an answer is neither a representation nor an effect of a situation does not mean that it answers to nothing, that it is a pure dream, or an “anti-creation”. A problematisation is always a kind of creation; but a creation in the sense that, given a certain situation you cannot infer that this kind of problematisation will follow. Given a certain problematisation, you can only understand why this kind of answer appears as a reply to some concrete and specific aspect of the world. There is the relation of thought and reality in the process of problematisation. And that is the reason why I think that it is possible to give an answer – the original, specific and singular answer of thought – to a certain situation. And it is this kind of specific relation between truth and reality which I tried to analyse in the various problematisations of _parrhesia_ (1985a, p.66).

As Michael Peters (2004) indicates, it was around the time of the Berkeley lectures that Foucault shifted from speaking of ‘regimes of truth’ – as in his former writings – to ‘games of truth’, perhaps borrowing from Wittgenstein’s (1958) notion of ‘language-games’. Foucault began to see the social and discursive construction of truth less as a ‘regime’ and more as a ‘game’ – suggesting a revision of his ideas about science and disciplines. Perhaps they were less like ‘iron cages of reason’ to use Max Weber’s (1947) phrase, and more like games played between groups of players. And he wanted to show how both truth-telling and the things it is important to tell truths about are historically-specific, arising for particular groups of people at particular times. What counts as a problem, how it should be investigated, and its significance are socially- and discursively-constructed by particular ‘players’ in particular ‘games’ at particular historical moments.

We could see the construction of truths about ‘quality in practitioner research’ – the central theme of this conference – as occurring within a ‘regime of truth’ or as a ‘truth game’. Is this conference about the extension and elaboration of one or more ‘regimes of truth’ about practitioner research and action research, or is it one site for ‘games of truth’? If we are exploring truths about practitioner research and action research within a ‘regime of truth’ then, perhaps, beneath the surface, the problem for the conference may be to find and root out heretical ideas, wrong understandings. Of course, our conference community may embrace several different or competing ‘regimes of truth’ about action research and practitioner research, and the problem for participants may be to find their own group within the conference, using the conference as an opportunity merely to distinguish other views from their own, and to generally confirm their views and membership within one sub-stream of the conference.

If, on the other hand, we see the conference as being about ‘games of truth’ played in each session, in each group around the bar, in the many side-meetings and discussions that give the conference its vibrancy and life, then the problem for the conference is for each of, and all of us, to be in – and to play in – particular kinds of relations to truth, to the consequences for our own lives (like danger), and to each other. And the game is already underway. Each of us, already and for some time, has been relating to particular discursive formations about practitioner research and action research which, from the viewpoint of our subjectivity, yield our particular understandings of what we regard as relevant truths. Each of us has been in specific relations to these truths in terms of their consequences for our own lives – for example, in terms of reputations, opportunities, risks and achievements for others and ourselves, and our self-understandings and subjectivities as exponents and practitioners of action research and practitioner research. And each of us already has some relations with others here, if only as
readers of others’ texts, in a web of relationships that already constitutes a social field in which we are already players and to which we already ‘belong’ to a greater or lesser extent – a field which will probably be re-shaped by the way we ‘play’ the game of this conference.

I hope to provoke you, and thus to test whether we are co-participants in the same ‘game of truth’, or whether we are allies and enemies aligned with and by different ‘regimes of truth’.

And other questions arise about the ‘truths’ that emerge from the practitioner research and action research reported at this conference – within what games of truth-telling did they come to be? Did the problem of telling unwelcome truths arise in these studies? Did telling these truths require of us the courage and conviction of the parrhesiastes? How were the truths we told expressed and accommodated by our readers and listeners? And what were the effects not only on the individual understandings of each, but on the discursive field of which our utterances were part? What were the effects on the social field in which we related to others in that and other networks of relationships? What were the effects on the material-economic field in which, from an economic perspective, the exchanges and transactions served involved the interests of some, perhaps at the expense of others, and in which, from the perspective of the environment, we used or transformed some of the earth’s resources in ways that were more or less sustainable?

In a conference addressing the theme of quality in practitioner research, I want to make a few remarks problematising ‘practitioner research’ and/or ‘action research’ – though time will not permit the depth the topic deserves, nor can I do justice to answering the kinds of questions about the effects of our investigations on individual understandings and subjectivities nor on the discursive, social and material-economic fields in which our work is done. I think we need to think about how we problematise – what we think might be problematic about – both our methods of truth-telling in practitioner research and the truths we want to tell through it. In the time I have today, will say only a little about methods, but I do want to say more about the truths we want to tell through our investigations.

CAN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH BE SUSTAINED IN TERMS OF METHOD? CAN PRACTITIONER RESEARCH?

Writing about Foucault and educational research in the light of this understanding of the relationship between games of truth and the subjectivity of the researcher in educational research, Michael Peters (2004) presents a stark challenge to educational research, particularly qualitative research in education. If practitioner research and action research are species of qualitative research (which they may or may not be), then we would do well to respond to his challenge. He writes:

In his later work, Foucault shifts from ‘regimes of truth’ to ‘games of truth’. Accordingly, the emphasis falls on how the human subject constitutes itself by strategically entering into such games and playing them to best advantage. Forms of educational research historically embedded within its various institutional contexts (research associations, conferences, journals, training regimes) thus constitute ‘games of truth’, where researchers constitute themselves and constitute the researched. The genealogical model [of Foucault’s approach] makes room for human agency in the processes marginalised by positivistic sciences and Marxism. In this context, genealogies are ‘anti-sciences’ because they contest ‘the [coercive] effects of the centralising powers which are linked to the institution and functioning of an organised scientific discourse (Foucault, 1980, p.84).

… In terms of the subjectivity of the educational researcher, we can perhaps best highlight the Foucaultian notion of ‘practices of the self’ by briefly examining qualitative research and the way in which the now traditional concept of ‘participant observer’ already tacitly begins the process of ‘unbracketing’ the subjectivity of the researcher – that is, challenging the objectivist ideology associated with bracketing one’s own beliefs, assumptions, tastes and preferences – in order to acknowledge how deeply they enter into knowledge constructions and power relations.
Foucault also provides us with the means to begin to question the relationship between researcher as author and text: between doing research and reporting on it [Peters’s emphases]. Of the diverse modes of reporting, none has sole purchase on the truth. Qualitative educational research, which is based on the researcher’s ‘understanding’ rather than on the constructed dialogue that takes place among participants – albeit with different roles and responsibilities – can no longer be sustained [my emphasis – SK].

In Foucault’s late work, we find a greater emphasis on the self-awareness of the researcher, on the identity of the researcher and on the ethics of self-constitution, which challenges and brings a new focus to the researcher/subject relation in its discursive and methodological representations (pp.57-8).

The key points in this passage are that qualitative researchers must understand themselves as playing a certain kind of game of truth-telling in their research and that the game does not and cannot exclude the subjectivity of the researcher – neither the researcher as a certain kind of person doing the research, nor as a certain kind of author reporting on it. Peters’s provocation that “qualitative research … can no longer be sustained” is based on the argument that the researcher’s ‘understanding’ can never be a substitute for the understandings of participants themselves – it is the product of a game of truth-telling sanctioned only by the tradition of participant observation, as if the tradition justified the substitution. Participant observer qualitative researchers have been playing this game for too long, Peters might argue, and they should consider instead the kind of genealogical research done by Foucault, conducted with intense self-awareness about his relationship to the texts and discourses and institutions and practices he studied – perhaps nowhere more evident, I think, than in Foucault’s (1985b) The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality, Volume 2.

I believe participatory research and much action research can answer Peters’s objection in terms I have argued for twenty years or so. The charge that researchers substitute their understandings for those of participants is answered if the researchers are the participants themselves – if the participants, in and as a consequence of their research, tell their own stories, in the light of their own self-understandings and their understandings of their practices and the situations they find themselves in. And that is the kind of action research I have argued for in many places, including with Wilfred Carr in our (1986) book Becoming Critical, published about twenty years ago.

We have no grounds for complacency, however. Peters’s objection may still stand whenever, in our roles as university researchers and the authors of reports on projects (for example), we give accounts of action research projects on the basis of our own particular perspective or understanding of what the project was and did. Nor does it help if other participants in an action research project – a teacher in a school, for example – writes their own accounts of their understandings of the work of the project. Each one who writes an account bases it on their own understandings, which may not adequately capture the understandings of others.

One safeguard against this difficulty may be the practice of inviting participant confirmation (or ‘member checks’) of accounts authored by one on behalf of a group. This is a powerful and useful safeguard. If participants say and explicitly agree that an account written by one on behalf of others – or by a university person participating in the study as a co-researcher – is fair, reasonable and accurate, then there are good grounds for believing that the account gives what might be called a collective understanding of the project. On the other hand, and especially given the solidarity participants may feel for one another and the goodwill they may have towards one of their number who has taken the trouble to prepare the account, other participants may be involved in a self-deception: “yes, that is a reasonable way of seeing the project, even though I would not have put it quite that way myself”. The question is: does the report fairly, reasonably and accurately portray or represent the subjectivities of the different participants involved? For the answer must be given sincerely and in good faith if it is to escape Peters’s charge that the participant observer’s or the author’s account of their own understanding of the project is deeply suffused by their own
subjectivity to the exclusion of others – their own “beliefs, assumptions, tastes and preferences” as Peters (p.57) put it – or their own prejudices, as others might put it.

For twenty years or more, I have argued that action research is a superior form of critical educational research, and can make a contribution to a critical educational science, when the participants are the researchers and when the researchers are the participants. Under these conditions, each participant can and should be conscious of the diverse and sometimes conflicting views and subjectivities of their co-participants so their work together can, in a deliberate and self-conscious way, be a model of open and democratic dialogue. That is, not only is the subjectivity of each participant a matter of methodological self-awareness, but when the conversation between them is conducted in such a way as to allow different voices to be heard, to take different perspectives into account, to reach agreements with one another without coercion, and to agree on what should be done in the light of collectively-reached understandings. That is, I have argued that the kind of guarantee that Peters seeks in subjective self-understanding can only lead to a kind of solipsism – understanding myself in relation to others and the world, not in a form of understanding that can reach beyond individual subjectivity.

As you probably know, I have relied on Jürgen Habermas’s (1984, 1987b, 1992) theory of communicative action to argue for a form of understanding beyond individual subjectivity – in an intersubjective space. In Becoming Critical, Wilf Carr and I (1986) relied especially on Habermas’s (1970) use of the ‘ideal speech situation’. We understood that the ideal speech situation was not something that could be attained in the practice of action research, but that the importance of the concept was in its negative and critical challenge. It challenged participants to test their emerging self-understandings and collective understandings against the four validity claims: ‘Is it comprehensible?’, ‘Is it true in the sense of accurate?’ ‘Is it sincerely meant and stated?’ and ‘Is it morally right and appropriate in this situation?’. In later writings (for example, Kemmis, 2001; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2001), I relied on Habermas’s elaborated theory of communicative action: the kind of communication that occurs when we interrupt what we are doing to ask whether our self-understandings and collective understandings meet the four validity claims, and conduct our discussion aiming at (1) intersubjective agreement about the terms we use in understanding situations, (2) mutual understanding, and (3) unforced consensus about what to do.

Everyone who has been involved in an action research project or in practitioner research knows that it is far from easy to establish the social and discursive conditions in a project where people can equally, openly and fearlessly ask and answer such questions, and conduct themselves civilly towards reaching intersubjective agreement, mutual understanding and consensus about what to do. In practice, the process is always subject to distortion, discussion is frequently brought to a premature end by the pressure to act or to move on, and the long process of reaching deep intersubjective understanding frequently – perhaps usually – runs up against practical constraints on ‘really’ understanding one another’s points of view. But in my view, these limits and interruptions are not fatal, they are just aporias or gaps to be explored in other discussions – the openings for new conversations. The thing that holds a group together is the tacit or explicit agreement to continue the conversation towards these aims, despite the limits and interruptions – because there is no definite destination at which to arrive. We must accept that intersubjective agreement is always situated and provisional; mutual understanding is always situated and provisional; mutual consensus is always situated and provisional. In communicative action, we are held together not by the prospect of an unconditional ‘truth’ that will stand above us (as in objectivism) or the prospect of reaching individual understandings (as in subjectivism), but by the debate, the conversation. A practitioner research or action research project can thus be understood as opening a communicative space (Habermas, 1987a, 1996; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005) in which emerging agreements and disagreements, understandings and decisions can be problematised and explored openly. In Chapter 8 of Facts and Norms, Habermas (1996) explores this kind of communication in terms of public discourse in public spheres. The kind of public discourse he has in mind is communicative action – communication aimed at
intersubjective agreement, mutual understanding and consensus about what to do. The kind of public spheres he has in mind are communicative spaces constituted by participants themselves in order to make space for dialogue; in which there is voluntary participation; in which speakers have or take communicative freedom in the sense that each can freely adopt yes/no positions, and freely adopt any of the communicative roles of speaker, listener or observer (or simply leave the conversation); in which participants aim to be inclusive (both socially and in terms of the language they use in addressing each other) (see Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, for a listing of ten features of these spheres). Such communicative spaces may be created within an organisation or institution, but only by suspending, ‘for argument’s sake’, the hierarchical roles and rules and the functional imperatives of the institution as a system directed towards the attainment of particular objectives. More generally, however, these communicative spaces are to be found at the margins of institutions, blurring boundaries and connecting with other public spheres. The conversations within these communicative spaces presuppose communicative freedom, despite its everyday limits, and make communicative freedom a guiding aim. The conversations and the communicative spaces frequently arise together in response to legitimation-deficits – that is, in response to circumstances, policies or decisions which lack legitimacy in the eyes of those involved. Such legitimation-deficits are frequently the central themes or concerns which give rise to social movements – like green issues, or equity issues – and become the foci for sustained practical and critical discussions about the nature and consequences of possible courses of action by those involved. And the kind of action that might be considered is to influence formal organisations indirectly by “laying siege to the formally-organised political system by encircling it with reasons without, however, attempting to overthrow or replace it”, as Kenneth Baynes put it in his (1995) essay on Habermas, democracy and the state. As Habermas observes in Between Facts and Norms, the communicative action of these groups builds solidarity among participants which in turn gives them a sense of communicative power and lends legitimacy to their emerging agreements, understandings and decisions – as a response and counter to the perceived lack of legitimacy of the pre-existing views and decisions which provoked the formation of a particular public sphere.

In response to Peters’s criticism of qualitative research in which the researcher’s understanding stands as a kind of counterfeit (my word, not Peters’s) of participants’ self-understandings, then, I have evoked an alternative image of ‘understanding’ in which truth is not something to be found in the mind of any particular researcher or any particular participant, but something to be found – or at least approached – in the communicative space between them. This is the space of intersubjectivity. In a recent (2003) book on the ethical questions that arise as a consequence of the possibility of manipulation of the human genome, The Future of Human Nature, Habermas describes the linguistic grounding of intersubjectivity:

As historical and social beings we find ourselves always already in a linguistically structured lifeworld. In the forms of communication through which we reach an understanding with one another about something in the world and about ourselves, we encounter a transcending power. Language is not a kind of private property. No one possesses exclusive rights over the common medium of the communicative practices we must intersubjectively share. No single participant can control the structure, or even the course, of processes of reaching understanding and self-understanding. How speakers and hearers make use of their communicative freedom to take yes-or no-positions is not a matter of their subjective discretion. For they are free only in virtue of the binding force of the justifiable claims they raise towards one another. The logos of language embodies the power of the intersubjective, which precedes and grounds the subjectivity of speakers.

…. The logos of language escapes our control, and yet we are the ones, the subjects capable of speech and action, who reach an understanding with one another in this medium. It remains “our” language. The unconditionedness of truth and freedom is a necessary presupposition of our practices, but beyond the constituents of “our” form of life they lack any ontological guarantee. Similarly, the “right” ethical self-understanding is neither revealed nor “given” in some other way. It can only be won in common endeavour. From this perspective, what makes our
being-ourselves possible appears more as a transsubjective power than an absolute one (pp.10-11).

This does not mean that the intersubjective is somehow ‘above’ individual understandings or self-understandings. Speakers and hearers encounter one another in communicative spaces – in speech and writing, for example – in which communication occurs. Agreements jointly reached do not somehow transcend, obliterate or negate individual subjectivity. Richard J Bernstein quotes Habermas (1972, p.334) on the “paradoxical achievement of intersubjectivity”:

Subjects who reciprocally recognise each other as such, must consider each other as identical, insofar as they both take up the position of subject; they must at all times subsume themselves and the other under the same category. At the same time, the relation of reciprocity of recognition demands the non-identity of one and the other, both must also maintain their absolute difference, for to be a subject implies the claim of individuation (Bernstein, 1992, p.305).

In short, such ‘truth’ as we can ever find will be in communication, and we will find it only through communicative action – by being locked or engaged together in the search for intersubjective agreement, mutual understanding and consensus about what to do. And the topics and themes and circumstances of our communicative action will forever be changing, leaving all our conversations incomplete and partial – only halting steps on a path and limited achievements towards an unattainable complete agreement, complete understanding, and perfect consensus about what to do. All we have is the conversation.

To say “all we have is the conversation” is not to say something like “these are the limited achievements of the chattering classes”. As Foucault’s examination of parrhesia and problematisation showed, they are conversations among particular people, at particular times, about particular things in the world. They are about real relationships between particular speakers and listeners, about particular things, using particular ideas, at particular times. They are, in Foucault’s word, “creations” which express particular relations between subjects, ideas (discourses) and things in the world. Treating things as problematic – problematising particular topics or themes – establishes particular, concrete relations between people, between people and things, and between people and discourses or ideas. Foucault’s genealogical approach aims to make this set of dependencies more explicit, particularly through the analysis of texts.

Habermas, by contrast, suggests that the communicative action between people undertaken in the work of problematisation should be our focus – how people can conduct themselves to reach more secure intersubjective agreement, more secure mutual understanding, and more secure consensus about what to do, even though these ‘securities’ are securities without guarantees4. We should understand them as the limited and fragile achievements they are. We should think of them negatively, critically, as intersubjective agreements over a limited range which will be tested when a new question arises; as mutual understandings over a limited range that will demand further work when mutual understandings must withstand the claims of a new and different perspective; as consensus about what to do over a limited range, in a particular situation and under particular circumstances, that will require re-thinking when new consequences are foreseen or when they emerge in practice. In short, Habermas’s (1987a) view of communicative action as a postmetaphysical answer to the question ‘what is truth?’ reflects a profound fallibilism that equally rejects philosophical essentialism or foundationalism on the one side, and the emptiness of endless skepticism, on the other. It asserts: “our communicative achievements are limited, but they are achievements none the less”. And, as Habermas pointed out long ago in distinguishing the search for truth from the organisation of enlightenment and from arriving at risky decisions about what to do, decision making always requires the exercise of

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4 That is, guarantees about the nature, effects or implications of seeing a particular problem or agreement or understanding or decision in this way, or as that kind of a problem, to which then or those kinds of methods or responses are conventionally applied.
wisdom and prudence — practical judgement, without guarantees from science alone, understanding alone, or conviction alone. Against what Habermas (1987a, 1987b, 1992) criticises as ‘the philosophy of the subject’, it asserts that such truth as is to be found may be found only in communication, particularly in communicative action, in the intersubjective communicative space that lies between interlocutors.

This, then, is an answer to Peters’s charge against qualitative research, at least for action research conducted as a practice of communicative action. It does not answer for other forms of qualitative research, or perhaps for action research conducted in other ways. It is an answer for participant observation when the participants are the observers/researchers, when they are collectively participants and observers/researchers, and when they conduct their participant-observation research as a collective task of understanding along the lines of communicative action. And it is an answer for those who report on practitioner research or action research conducted along the lines of communicative action – the report does not offer a fixed or final truth arising from the subjectivity of any individual participant, or from the collectively-agreed words of co-participants as if it could be redeemed in the coin of their intersubjectivity. The report is no more than a new intervention in a new communicative space, one that aims to be a fair, relevant and accurate account of the views of participants, but now travelling into other kinds of communicative spaces in which communicative action may not be usual or likely, and in which it cannot be guaranteed unless in the commitment of readers to join and extend the conversation.

From what I have said so far, perhaps you see no reason for me to be offered the hemlock or exile the Athenians offered Socrates. I may be in trouble, but maybe I am not yet in serious trouble. Now I will turn to the provocation that might decide you that it is indeed time for me to go one way or the other – to stop speaking for critical participatory action research, or to be exiled from the communities of practice that constitute our field or fields.

Now, I take on the task of the parrhesiastes. I intend to bring bad news. Foucault says that one way for the messenger bringing bad news to the king – or worse, the senate – to survive giving the message is to create a game that allows the news to be heard in a particular kind of way. I have explored the process of truth-telling hoping to soften you up in this way. Another way is to make a contract – to ask you to agree in advance that you won’t demand my death or exile as a punishment for my view. But the strongest way to permit parrhesia is to have a society in which disputes are settled by argument and the right application of just laws, and to act as a courageous citizen in the way demanded by Joseph Pearson’s title for the (2001) book from Foucault’s 1983 lectures – “fearless speech”. Is this conference such a society? Am I such a man?

**ACTION RESEARCH TWENTY YEARS AFTER ‘BECOMING CRITICAL’**

In our (2005) article ‘Staying Critical’ in the issue of the Educational Action Research Journal commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the publication of Becoming Critical, Wilfred Carr and I argued that we had been surprised by the extent to which action research became widespread to the point of faddishness in the years that followed – not due to our advocacies alone, of course. We were also surprised by the extent to which other more technical approaches to action research had been adopted by many educational action researchers rather than the critical form of action research we had described. Although Wilf and I did not make the point in quite this way, it seems to me that much action research has lost this critical edge, especially in the bigger sense of social or educational critique aimed at transformation of the way things are. Much of the action research that has proliferated in many parts of the world over the last two decades has not been the vehicle for educational critique we had hoped for. Some of it may instead have been a vehicle for domesticating students and teachers to conventional forms of schooling.

What are some of the kinds of action research that I am complaining of?
### Examples of inadequate action research

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<td>Action research that aims only at improving techniques of teaching – classroom questioning or assessment, for example – without seeing these as connected to broader questions about the education of students for a better society.</td>
<td>By not addressing these broader questions or presuppositions about them, this action research takes them for granted, works within them, and at best improves the efficiency of the schools and school systems in which it is conducted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action research aimed at improving the efficiency of practices rather than their efficacy and effectiveness evaluated in terms of the social, cultural, discursive and material-economic historical consequences of practices.</td>
<td>By not taking a critical view of the social, cultural, discursive and material-economic consequences of schooling, this action research is more likely to reproduce than transform irrational, unjust and alienating consequences of many existing forms of schooling in many school systems – consequences which include the suffering of many past and present – and perhaps future – participants in these forms of schooling.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action research conducted solely to implement government policies or programs, in order to achieve conformity with what the policies or programs intend, without subjecting those intentions, their presuppositions, and their frameworks of justification to critical examination.</td>
<td>By uncritically accepting the intentions, presuppositions and frameworks of justification of government policies and programs, this action research in the end produces findings that can be justified only by appeal to authority. It is unlikely to create bodies of evidence capable of challenging existing modes of schooling. It is likely to be and to produce conformity and compliance to authority rather than a critical evaluation, asking uncomfortable questions about the quality of education offered in a school or school system.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Action research that understands the improvement of practice only from the perspectives of professional practitioners (like teachers, nurses or managers), without genuinely engaging the voices and perspectives of others involved in the practice (like students or families or community members, in the case of action research in schools, or patients and their families, in the case of health, or, in general, the perspectives of clients and communities).</td>
<td>By excluding the voices and active participation (in the conduct of the research), this action research privileges the voices, and frequently the norms and the institutions, of professionals over the voices and views of the others involved in and affected by professional practices. It thus deprives the professions of greater understanding of the consequences of their practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action research conducted by people acting alone rather than in open communication with other participants (like students or their families, or other people in the wider community) whose lives and work are involved in or affected by the practices being investigated.</td>
<td>Since practices are constructed in interaction between people of different kinds and roles, in extra-individual social, cultural, discursive and material-economic fields that extend beyond the knowledge or control of particular individuals acting alone, action research that ignores, or does not openly and genuinely enter a critical conversation with, the perspectives of other participants deprives the researcher of relevant knowledge about the nature and consequences of their actions – knowledge that can only become accessible to them intersubjectively – through the knowledge and understandings of those with whom they interact.</td>
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5 I argue that practice cannot be adequately understood only from the perspective of ‘professional practitioner knowledge’ but only by also considering the extra-individual features of practice in two recent papers (Kemmis, 2005a, 2005b).
Much action research in education at least is or has been of one or more of these kinds. If so, it is unlikely to bring much unwelcome or uncomfortable news about schooling. If so, it is unlikely to require that we action researchers display the courage and conviction of the parrhesiastes – the obligation or duty to speak with the greatest courage and conviction we can muster when the time comes to speak honestly to the tyrant, the assembly, the head of the department, or our friend.

Perhaps more importantly, action research that brings no unwelcome or uncomfortable news does not require us, as part of our being and work as action researchers, to build and secure the kinds of social and political conditions in our institutions that make parrhesia possible. And I believe that building and securing such conditions is an integral part of the obligation and the duty of the critical action researcher – it is our own small investment in making a worthwhile polis, a community that can conduct itself civilly through reason and care for the good of others.

In the light of my implied charge that action researchers have not brought enough unwelcome or at least uncomfortable news, I now invite you to ask:

- What sorts of problems have the investigations reported at this conference addressed?
- What aspects or dimensions of practices, understandings and situations did they problematise?
- In what way did they make these things problematic?
- Did they problematise things subjectively, from the perspective of particular practitioners or professions, or did they problematise them intersubjectively, opening a communicative space for conversation between co-participants in practices and settings?
- Did they address technical problems about improving schooling or critical questions about education? Or were they about both?

THE TENSION BETWEEN EDUCATION AND SCHOOLING

Not having read reports of all the action research and practitioner research conducted around the world, I must make a best guess from what I have seen and read. My estimate is that action research as it is most widely practised has not fulfilled the aspirations Wilfred Carr and I had for a form of critical educational science that would challenge and change schooling to make it more profoundly educational. In my view, this contradiction – the contradiction between education and schooling – is at the heart of an educational science. I take ‘education’ to be the double process of developing the knowledge, values and capacities of individuals, on the one hand, and, through the preparation of rising generations, of developing the discourses and culture, social relations, institutions and practices, and the material-economic and environmental conditions of a society, on the other. I take ‘schooling’ to refer to the institutionalised processes and practices established in a society (not only by the state) to prepare individuals to participate in the cultural, social and economic life of the society, especially but not only in schools (and other education and training institutions) established for the purpose.

On the one hand, the contradiction between education and schooling provokes the permanent challenge to change schooling to make it more fully educational. On the other, it challenges our notions of what counts as ‘educational’ in the light of the practice, the experience and the consequences of schooling. In particular, Wilfred and I had hoped for forms of action research that might help to limit the power of schooling as a tool of domestication of students and teachers to existing social orders (and their unfolding iterations through time) that are – like the social orders in many of our countries today – unjust, unsatisfying, unproductive or irrational. We had hoped for schooling that was more educational – and for new ideas about education that might emerge from the practice and experience and consequences of schooling.
The challenge to make schooling more educational necessarily provokes controversy. It threatens to unsettle what is settled, and to test the limits of what we are willing to take for granted as good in schooling. And, in much of the western world, what has been settled has also become more bureaucratically ossified. Increasingly, states regulate the conduct of schooling through regimes of curriculum, assessment and pedagogical prescription that limit the reach and the grasp of the educational practice of educational professionals, making them the instruments of legislators and administrators. An example is the perennial call for increased state-wide testing to monitor schools and teachers against standardised expectations of what all schooling should achieve for everyone by certain ages. Such is the presumed legitimacy of these states and their machinery of government that many educational professionals now feel it is their duty to implement whatever the state instructs in curriculum, in assessment and in pedagogy. Some are disheartened, and simply lower their targets in the face of state prescription. A few resist, doing what educational work they can in the ‘privacy’ of their own classrooms. Many become cynical, increasingly regarding themselves as servants of the state to a hitherto-unprecedented degree – and decreasingly regarding themselves autonomous professionals whose task it is to serve the public good, the good for humankind and the good of the students they teach.

In short, I believe there has been a struggle between schooling and education in the last two decades, and that schooling has been gaining the upper hand. Teachers and the education profession have been casualties in this struggle, but they are not the only or the principal casualties. Teachers are in the front line; they see wounds inflicted on their students; despite this knowledge, they feel powerless to stop the governmental erosion of the good for their students and the good for humankind. The greatest casualties, however, are the students. We risk giving them schooling at the cost of their education. They are increasingly trained to succeed at tasks set for them by others rather than to pursue their own reasonable aspirations through learning and through becoming educated about the world they live in.

EDUCATION AND EMANCIPATION

Some believe that the notion of education for emancipation is utopian. I believe emphatically that it is not utopian to hope for education that emancipates students, teachers and societies from irrational forms of thinking, unproductive ways of working, unsatisfying forms of life for teachers or students or their families, or from unjust forms of social relations in schools or societies. Notice that I do not say “emancipation from the established order” or “hierarchy” or “bureaucracy” or from some specific institution. I am speaking about emancipation from irrationality, injustice, alienation and suffering, and these are to be found in every social and educational setting, not just in the schools and school systems established by tyrants or tyrannical governments.

I believe that the view that education for emancipation is utopian is a counsel of despair, though often rationalised as ‘realism’. This sort of ‘realism’ breeds acceptance of social evils. It offers docility and compliance with the-powers-that-be in exchange for an education that is what it should be – a double task of developing the knowledge, values and capacities of each individual, on the one hand, and, on the other, developing the structures and practices of the communities and societies they live in. Describing an emancipatory aspiration for education as utopian threatens education itself. It threatens to make education a matter of convention, procedure or social routine – that is, to replace education with schooling, with domestication. And this is to lose sight of the critical question of how, if is to become more educational, schooling must be continually and critically probed and transformed in the light of changing issues and circumstances and in the light of its historical consequences for people, groups and societies.

Some of the consequences of schooling are unforeseen and unpleasant. While of course schooling has many positive and educational consequences, we must not shrink from its negative consequences. For a tiny minority of students, the consequences include the deaths by suicide of
those who feel unable to meet the seemingly impossible demands of university entrance examinations. For a larger minority of students, the consequences include the disappointment they experience when poorer-than-expected school performance lowers the trajectory of their reasonable hopes and ambitions. For an even larger minority of young people, the consequences include a disenchanted learning itself – when they come to believe that learning is no longer an integral process in their own authentic life projects but that it is instead a preparation for compliance to the will and purposes of irresistible others and invincible institutions.

Perhaps you feel that I have painted the picture too starkly, and named things that should not be named in a speech about action research. I concede that there is much grey between the black of schooling for domestication and the white of education for emancipation of individuals and societies. But there are few questions more important than ‘Is schooling educational?’ for educators and for education today, under changed conditions humankind has produced for itself. These are just a few of the challenges confronting us:

- We need new forms of education that might help emancipate students and societies from irrational forms of thinking and give us hope for more rational thought in the political realm. For example, because of the way we construe problems of international differences and conflict, western powers are sliding towards tyranny along with their enemies, as evidenced in national security laws proposed in some countries in response to the terrorist outrages of September 11, 2001.

- We need new forms of education that might help emancipate students and societies from unjust forms of social relations, and give us hope for greater justice for all. For example, because of cynicism about whether or how governments can change lived social relationships between people, the gap between the rich and the poor between and within nations continues to widen, despite proposals to forgive the debts of the world’s poorest debtor nations. The poverty trap for nations continues to amplify threats to national and international stability as many of the world’s richest nations fail to meet their own progressive foreign aid targets aimed at reaching the UN Millennium Goals target of 0.7% of Gross National Product by 2015 (Sachs et al., 2005).

- We need new forms of education that might help emancipate students and societies from unsatisfying forms of life and give us hope for more satisfying forms of life for all. For example, because of our continued reliance on industrial-age modes of energy production and use, greenhouse gas emissions are gently heating and choking the planet, and, as we see from the devastation of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina on August 29, 2005, making weather conditions more unpredictable.

- We need new forms of education that might help emancipate students and societies from unproductive ways of working and give us hope for better use of the world’s social and material resources. For example, agricultural production in the industrialised west wastes vast resources of energy and potable water in modes of production that, in terms of the ‘triple bottom line’ (of economic, social and environmental outcomes), offer limited and short-term economic gain while contributing to worsening environmental and outcomes.

Beyond these challenges, a new challenge of postmodernity has arisen: the challenge to the very possibility of public discourse about these questions. It has become decreasingly possible to “speak truth to power” when those who would speak truth to power believe themselves to be deprived by some postmodernist philosophers of an understanding of truth capable of confronting power. And if those advocacies infest only philosophical circles, it is nevertheless

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6 Checking this date on Google, on October 27, 2005, produced 211,000,000 ‘hits’ in 0.11 seconds. This says something about world media. The death toll from Katrina was over 1,300 persons. Although only three weeks have passed since the Pakistan earthquake at the time of writing, googling ‘Earthquake + Pakistan + October’ produced, by contrast, about 6,800,000 hits in 0.26 seconds. Currently the death toll in Pakistan, India and Afghanistan stands at over 80,000 with a similar number of casualties.
the case that the kaleidoscope of representations of reality and unreality in a world where relationships with images seem as important as relationships with other human beings, all of us suffer the erosion of ancient moral resources, solidarity and collective agency when we no longer offer care to ‘the stranger at the gate’ that we would offer to our own.

It is of little help to say ‘there is no such thing as truth’ if we are to be able to explore a proposition like the assertion that there are “80% of the 80 million refugees in the world are women” (Hemmati and Gardiner, 2001). If true, this proposition suggests powerful lines of enquiry into the nature of refugees and the causes of their displacement. But if we can no longer decide whether such a proposition is true, let alone about the truth of the suffering of these human beings, then refugees must have even less hope than they do today.

Issues like those I have mentioned – about ways of understanding international conflict, poverty, environmental problems, sustainable development, the plight of refugees – are crucial issues for education. As the workers’ movement, the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, the green movement, and various peace movements have shown (to name just a few examples), there is a dialectical relationship between social movements and educational movements – each is necessary to the other. It is a perennial part of the role of education and educational science to make the world-as-it-has-come-to-be interpretable, understandable, and thus prepare rising generations to address their inheritance of challenges to our present and their future. And education cannot achieve this if it is understood solely in terms of developmental tasks for individuals; it must also help whole generations to name, understand and participate in the crucial developmental tasks confronted by societies.

This is to argue for a form of education that does not domesticate students to existing social, economic and discursive orders, but a form of education that will allow them to be free and equal citizens with others, including the generation that has schooled or educated them. And this is a crucial task of intersubjectivity, too – of the kind I referred to when speaking of intersubjectivity in the context of Habermas’s theory of communicative action. Writing (in the context of new ethical questions that have arisen with the possibility of genetic manipulation of human embryos) about the “fundamental symmetry of responsibility that exists among free and equal persons”, Habermas says:

The developing adolescent will one day be able to take responsibility for her own life history; she will be able to take possession of what she is. That is, she can relate to her process of development reflectively, work out a revisionary self-understanding, and in a probing manner retrospectively restore the balance to the asymmetrical responsibility that parents have for their children’s upbringing. This possibility of a self-critical appropriation of one’s own developmental history [is needed] to establish the symmetrical responsibility required if one is to enter into a retroactive self-reflection as a process among peers (2003, p.14).

I hope, then, for a form of education that will allow – indeed, encourage – a “revisionary self-understanding” by those we educate, so they can take responsibility for themselves, not just as the recipients of the education or schooling we gave them, but as free and equal subjects capable of speech and action. And this can only be achieved if it is an equal part of the role of education to demonstrate how they can be good citizens – citizens who will both participate in and exercise the citizen’s duty to sustain the political life of just and good societies, in which freedoms of thought, speech and association are guaranteed, and in which there is a genuine, enacted, shared commitment to the good for humankind.

AN EMANCIPATORY – OR CRITICAL – EDUCATIONAL SCIENCE

If we are to have an emancipatory form of education capable of giving those we educate these freedoms of thought and action, then we also need a critical kind of educational science – a distinctive and critical science of education that will necessarily explore its relationships of
similarity and difference with other natural, physical, social and human sciences, but that will use all of its resources to explore the tensions and contradictions between education and schooling as they emerge at particular times and in particular places, in order to contribute new, evolving and historically-appropriate answers to the question “education for what?”.

Before moving on, I should make one further remark – a hopeful one – about the contradiction between schooling and education. It is this: although my earlier remarks may have led you to think of education and schooling as dichotomised, in either/or terms, they should be thought of as dialectically-related (in both/and, or as I prefer to put it ‘never either, always both’ terms). That is, if teachers in schools (all forms of schooling throughout the lifespan) believe that their task is education rather than domestication then we can search for the education inside schooling and the schooling inside education – something that perhaps Foucault (1979) was pointing to in his discussion of the double meaning of ‘discipline’ (as in ‘the disciplines’ like science, and disciplining the mind and body to certain tasks and rules). I concede the power of his point. But, against Foucault, I also want to defend a particular view that education that you may find hopelessly old-fashioned or anti-postmodern – the view that education is a task of emancipation from irrationality, injustice and unproductive and unsatisfying forms of life. It is a task of learning not just how to think but also how not to think; not just what appears to be true or right but also what it is false or wrong to believe; not just what appears to be conducive to the smooth running of government or industry but also what is counter-productive, what leads to suffering, what is alienating or exploitative or oppressive, and what places unjustifiable limits on individual and collective capacities for self-development, self-determination.

So: there is hope that, as critical educational scientists, we can explore the permanent contradiction between education and schooling as a dialectic in which each may help constitute the other. If we place education above schooling, we risk making it a useless ideal; if we place schooling above education, we make it no more than it is, and we have no grounds other than technical or prudential ones for doing schooling differently. If we have a view that the tension between them might be productive, then, it seems to me, we have grounds for continuing to make, not just better schooling but schooling that is more educational. Thus, also, we set the task for practitioner research worthy of the name, and for action research in education: to make education better than it now is by making it more educational.

Before moving on, may I remind you that in this section I have laid the charge that action research as it is most widely practised has been inadequate because it has not been driven by an informed concern to improve education as a double task of the development of individual persons and the development of good societies and the good for human kind. Instead, I have suggested, action research and practitioner research have too often been driven by the desire to improve schooling in terms of government policies and programs likely to lead to untoward consequences educationally, socially and historically. Surely an education profession cannot accept that ‘improvement’ in these terms is sufficient – that would be to abandon hope for a profession that can act wisely in the light of its knowledge, including acting, when necessary, as parrhesiastes, speaking truth to power. Practitioner research and action research of that kind must demean both education and research. To have reached such a conclusion about the value of much action research and practitioner research musts surely have caused offence to some people here. It is the reason I fear your verdict.

**HOW DID WE GET HERE? THE ROLE OF EDUCATION AND THE ROLE OF ACTION RESEARCH**

The societies we have today are not entirely the product of the education or schooling offered twenty or forty years ago, but the education or schooling of those times was among the conditions of causality that created the societies we live in today, including the problems and challenges we confront today. Was Wilfred Carr’s and my advocacy of action research in *Becoming
Critical part of a trend against this outcome, as we thought, an advocacy aimed at averting some of the problems and challenges we face today, or was our advocacy part of the cause of those problems and challenges? Was our advocacy of critical action research among the contemporary irritations that provoked a conservative counter-movement evidenced in the proliferation of more docile forms of action research that sit more easily with the desires and conventions of the administrators and state officials who have sponsored so many action research initiatives in the United Kingdom, Europe, the United States and Australia? Was our advocacy of critical educational science one of the irritations that provoked the development of more domesticated forms of schooling that have forgotten even the desire for emancipation through education?7

I do not mean to suggest that Wilfred and I are or were revolutionary heroes. There were far better heroes long before us, from the mild-mannered, progressive and liberal John Dewey to the stirring, inspiring and radical Paulo Freire, along with many other radical schoolers like Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner and radical de-schoolers like Paul Goodman, Ivan Illich and Everett Reimer. And we had many contemporaries in 1980s education whose voices carried far further than ours – people like Brian Simon, Lawrence Stenhouse, Michael Apple, Henry Giroux and Bob Connell, to name just a few.

We intended our advocacy of critical action research and critical social and educational science in Becoming Critical to provoke change from within in schools and education. We hoped for an education profession that would continuously develop its capacity to seize the possibilities for education in the communicative spaces that open each day in the interstices of schooling. We hoped that teachers would find local and more general ways to extend and explore this communicative space, and find ways to secure these gains in new kinds of curricula, new forms of pedagogy and new approaches to assessment that might make schools places in which students and teachers could learn and model democratic citizenship and civic engagement in their communities and societies. At the time, it seemed that many teachers, professional associations and educational administrators in schools and education systems shared our interest in these ideas. Yet no sooner had the book appeared in its 1986 revised edition that the door to those possibilities seemed to close tight shut – in the UK and in Australia, at least. The elaboration of state curricula, state testing and state advocacy for more routinised pedagogies had begun, and along with it the denigration and deprofessionalisation of teachers and teaching.

In many parts of the western world, these kinds of trends tend to accompany economic slumps and rises in unemployment – these are good times, it seems, to blame schools and teachers for the consequences of economic decisions in which teachers and schools have played little part. In some parts of the world, it also appeared that there was also an oversupply of teachers in the 1980s and ’90s, and little interest in investing further in the continuing education and development of the profession.

What did go on apace was re-structuring of schools and the administration of schooling in pursuit of ‘improvement’ and ‘best practice’. Despite our emancipatory aspirations for it, action research was harnessed in the service of school improvement of a technical kind – improving the smooth operation of schooling rather than improving the kind of education schools offer. A variety of advocates of action research hoped that by harnessing action research to school improvement it could be spread more effectively though education systems. Perhaps they were right. But they also narrowed the purview of action research to make it a tool for reflection by teachers on their own performance, rather than to explore, in a more open-eyed way, the work of teachers and students as part of the work and workings of schools and school systems in their societies and

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7 I use this form of words to take issue with Jean-François Lyotard’s (1984) sentence in the postscript ‘What is Postmodernism?’ to his book The Postmodern Condition where he refers to the increasing credulity of people to the “grand narratives” of progress and emancipation: “Most people have lost even the nostalgia for [this] lost narrative” (p.41).
communities. My bleak reading of this appropriation of action research is that some action research has become a means for problematising the work of teachers, not the schools and systems they work in, and not the curricula, pedagogies and modes of assessment that operate across whole school systems to constrain teaching and learning within state-approved boundaries. Maybe action research has come to make a difference in how teachers teach, but less difference in what for. Perhaps it has even deflected attention from the question of ‘what for?’ in favour of the easier technical question of ‘how’. In Becoming Critical, we were less interested in how, and much more interested in what for.

Despite this gloomy assessment, there are many examples of action research initiatives that have worked at the margins of schooling to create richer and more emancipatory forms of education. Many of these have been associated with wider social movements – for example, against the background of the women’s movement, projects exploring the education of girls and more recently of boys; against the background of the environmental movement, projects exploring education and action for environmental (and social and cultural) sustainability; against the background of the movement for Indigenous rights, projects exploring the development of forms of education that could sustain and develop Indigenous people, communities and cultures rather than further erode them. Similarly, in some places, there have been integrative projects across the school-community boundary, fostering social action by students in the interests of community development, improved water quality, and the abatement of greenhouse gas emissions by reducing energy waste in schools and in students’ homes and communities. Within classrooms, there have also been action research projects aiming to increase students’ engagement in schooling by making curricula and pedagogical practices more responsive to students’ interests – following the century-old advocacies of the progressive movement in education.

I have some anxieties about how far these initiatives can go if they remain limited to projects done in or by schools. Given the environmental, economic, social and cultural problems of the region in which I now work – the Murray-Darling Basin in Western New South Wales in Australia – I am currently very interested in supporting action research initiatives exploring education for sustainability. The region in which I live faces massive environmental, economic, demographic, social and cultural problems over the next twenty years – among them, increased salinity leading to poorer land and water quality, loss of biodiversity, loss of agricultural land, reduced agricultural production with its attendant ills of economic and social hardship, a drift of population to larger provincial cities and to capital cities, a declining and ageing population with stretched services and professionals, and school closures and amalgamations in rural and remote areas as the population of school-aged children and young people declines. In our region, action by schools will not be enough, will not produce results fast enough, and will not spread the effort widely enough to address these problems or explore alternative solutions. We need widespread social action to work on these problems, and we need it quickly – in far shorter timescales than the long cycles of school generations. Schools can be crucial partners in these efforts, but they can’t do all the work that needs to be done. Community education, community action and community participation is needed – perhaps through critical action research projects that can bring people together around major issues and themes requiring shared deliberation about our shared fate and future.

THREE MESSAGES

Excellent action research and practitioner research will be critical and transformative – it will, to adapt Orlando Fals Borda’s (1979) phrase, “investigate reality in order to transform it” and transform reality in order to investigate it. To reiterate the point made a moment ago: significant practitioner research and action research requires and encourages shared deliberation about important issues for our shared fate and future. I hope the messages you will take from my critique of educational action research will include at least the following three points.
1. This is the first and foremost message I want to offer in relation to the conference theme of ‘Quality in practitioner research’: the quality of practitioner research is not just a matter of the technical excellence of practitioner research as ‘research’. It is a matter of addressing important problems in thought and action, in theory and practice – problems worth addressing in and for our times, in and for our communities, in and for our shared world. It is a matter of addressing important problems for education, for the good of each person, and for the good of our societies. This is what it means to be ‘critical’.

2. A second key message is that educational action research will frequently be undertaken in but not necessarily for schools, and it will be undertaken with and for the communities in which they are located – that is, that the projects will cross the boundaries between the school and the world beyond it to explore themes and issues of interest both inside and outside the school.

3. A third key message is that critical participatory action research will explore the constitution of practice in a deep, rich way, and bring to light and encourage communication about the variety of ways practices are understood, from a variety of standpoints and perspectives. It will explore themes of pressing contemporary interest, frequently in relation to contemporary social movements – themes that arise from shared perplexities, uncertainties, contradictions, conflicts and problems and issues about contemporary educational practice, learning from and changing the (sometimes untoward) consequences of practice. And the changes brought about by this participant research will not just be changes in the individual practice of professional practitioners – it will inform wise and prudent collective action by a range of those involved in and affected by the practice, in the interests of transforming the collectively-constructed social, cultural-discursive and material-economic fields that shape, structure and support existing practice.

Action research and practitioner research that meet these quality criteria will be constructed as networks of communication – constituted for public discourse in public spheres (in the way I described earlier). It will encourage practical reasoning and exploratory action in communities of practice. It will involve critical theorising and research, and collective action aimed at changing practices, understandings of practices, and the settings and situations in which practice occurs. Constructed as public spheres for public discourse, action research and practitioner research initiatives will involve loose affiliations of people who gather to address common themes related to on contemporary problems or issues. They will engage themselves in communicative action to inform themselves about the perennial practical question “what is to be done?” And their answers will be in the form of transformed practice, transformed practitioners, and transformed settings in which their practice occurs, at particular times and in particular places.

This approach to the transformation of practice understands that changing practices is not just a matter of changing the ideas of individual practitioners alone, but also discovering, analysing and transforming the social, cultural, discursive and material conditions under which their practice occurs. And this requires, in addition, changing the ideas and actions of the others who share in the constitution of social and educational practices by their thought and action – including the clients of professional practices, and the wider communities involved in and affected by the practice. And this, I am sure, will involve discovering and telling some unwelcome truths about how things are here and now, and how they have come to be.

CONCLUSION

In my presentation today, I have dwelt on the problem of truth-telling in action research and practitioner research, and especially the problem of telling unwelcome truths. I believe that action
research and practitioner research work that discovers no unwelcome truths, that avoids or
shrinks from them, or avoids telling these truths is not the kind of research needed to transform
practices, our understandings of our practices, or the institutional and historical circumstances in
which we practice. If it tells no unwelcome truths, it is unlikely to be critical research. In
education, caution about encountering uncomfortable truths may lead us – has led us – away
from investigating some of the most substantial themes and issues confronting education and our
societies today – especially if, as I have hoped to persuade you, schooling is gaining the upper
hand in the endless struggle between schooling and education.

I have tried to paint a picture of action research as I would prefer it to be: engaged with the
substantial problems of societies and thus the substantial problems of education for changing
times, exploring themes of contemporary significance openly and civilly, establishing public
spheres in which people realise and enact their communicative freedom, and through
communicative action reach towards intersubjective agreement, mutual understanding and
consensus about what to do – despite our indissoluble individual life experiences and
subjectivities. Through the exercise of communicative freedom, people develop communicative
power and a sense of solidarity with one another – even if the strength of shared commitment is
sometimes fragile and temporary. And this solidarity can underpin their decisions, giving them
legitimacy – not only for them, but also for others with whom they share their findings.

Practitioner research and action research have the capacity to open communicative spaces in
which ‘the way things are’ is open to question and exploration. It can imagine and explore how
things might be. It can learn from the consequences – social, cultural, material-economic,
personal – of how things are and other ways of doing things that we deliberately set out to test.
It aims both to understand reality in order to transform it, and to transform reality in order to
understand it (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2001, 2005).

But transforming realities is not always comfortable. It frequently requires confronting
powers-that-be. It may require each participant to confront the others in a work setting or a
collaborative group. It requires truth-telling, and it may demand the telling of unwelcome truths that
require parrhesia or “speaking truth to power”. It requires truth-telling both with respect to the
truths that arise from our work (our findings) and the methods by which we arrive at them. It
requires that we critically evaluate how we have done our work – whether our findings are
justified by our methods. And it requires truth-telling among co-participants in projects, with the
wider communities and institutions we serve, and in our relations with government and the
institutions of our professions. It requires civility and courtesy – not just in the research but also
in conferences like this one.

Now it is time for you to reach your verdict on what I have had to say, and perhaps on me.
In the interests of supporting the conditions for truth-telling and parrhesia, I hope you will
consider the nature of our conference as a community of enquirers into the nature and
consequences of action research and practitioner research, and for those of you who (like me) are
concerned with education, and the nature and consequences of an education worth having and
making in our societies. As you consider our field, I hope you will conclude that it must be one
in which there is genuine debate about what the proper work of action research and practitioner
research is and means – debate that may require persistence both in assertion and argument, and
persistence in listening and self-questioning. And if there are differences among us, perhaps we
must adopt a pluralistic stance – but a pluralistic stance of a particular kind.

In his December 29, 1998 Presidential Address, “Pragmatism, Pluralism and the Healing of
Wounds”, to the North-eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association, published as
an Appendix to his (1992) book The New Constellation, Richard J Bernstein wrote of different
kinds of pluralism evident in the responses of US philosophers to one another in the
modernity/postmodernity debates:
… pluralism itself is open to many interpretations, and we need to make some important distinctions. For there is a danger of **fragmenting** pluralism where the centrifugal forces become so strong that we are only able to communicate with the small group that already shares our own biases, and no longer even experience the need to talk with others outside of this circle. There is a **flabby** pluralism where our borrowings from different orientations are little more than glib superficial poaching. There is **polemical** pluralism where the appeal to pluralism doesn’t signify genuine willingness to listen and learn from others, but becomes rather an ideological weapon to advance one’s own orientation. There is **defensive** pluralism, a form of tokenism, where we pay lip service to others “doing their own thing” but are already convinced that there is nothing important to be learned from them.

The type of pluralism that represents what is best in our pragmatic tradition is an engaged **fallibilistic pluralism**. Such a pluralistic *thos* places new responsibilities on each of us. For it means taking our own fallibility seriously – resolving that however much we are committed to our own styles of thinking, we are willing to listen to others without denying or suppressing the otherness of the other. It means being vigilant against the dual temptations of simply dismissing what others are saying by falling back on one of those standard defensive ploys where we condemn it as obscure, woolly or trivial, or thinking we can easily translate what is alien into our own entrenched vocabularies (pp.335-6).

Each and all of us have work to do here along these lines – listening to each other respectfully and engaging respectfully in debate with one another about the nature, consequences and quality of different kinds of action research and practitioner research as they are practised today.

Bernstein concluded his Presidential Address by quoting John Courtney Murray (1960, p.14) who Bernstein believed best expressed the *thos* of an engaged fallibilistic pluralism:

> Barbarism … threatens when [people] cease to talk together according to reasonable laws. There are laws of argument, the observance of which is imperative if discourse is to be civilised. Argument ceases to be civil when it is dominated by passion and prejudice; when its vocabulary becomes solipsist, premised on the theory that my insight is mine alone and cannot be shared; when dialogue gives way to a series of monologues; when the parties to the conversation cease to listen to one another, or hear only what they want to hear, or see the other’s argument only through the screen of their own categories…. When things like this happen, [people] cannot be locked together in argument. Conversation becomes merely quarrelsome or querulous. Civility dies with the death of argument (Bernstein, p.339).

This civility should not only be evident but should be modelled in debates between participants in action research and practitioner research work. It should be evident and modelled through debate in the public spheres I hope will be characteristic of critical participatory action research work. It should be evident and modelled in the relationships between practitioner researchers and their co-participants – whether clients, colleagues or superordinates in the double task of education for transformation and the transformation of schooling for education. It is this civility that I rely upon today, as you determine whether my contribution to the conference theme of quality in practitioner research has been quarrelsome or querulous, offensive or constructive, and as you determine what my verdict is to be. Whatever your decisions, I hope I have invited you to think differently, substantively and historically, about what counts as quality in practitioner research.
REFERENCES


