



Theory and Practice in Action Research: Some International Perspectives. Christopher Day, John Elliott, Bridget Somekh, and Richard Winter, eds. Oxford: Symposium Books, 2002. 246 pp.

MARY C. DALMAU, *Victoria University of Technology, Australia*

dalmaumc@comcen.com.au

The editors of *Theory and Practice in Action Research* introduce the text with a brief critique of the escalating pace, complexity, and bureaucratization of public service roles, and the increasing fragmentation of values and social networks in the societies in which professionals live and work. They also note the disparity between—on the one hand—an emerging sense of professional dissatisfaction and alienation—and on the other hand—the increased agency of many professionals and professional organizations, who find ways to question the nature, purposes, processes, and outcomes of their work, and who collaboratively recreate their practice. The authors make the case that Action Research is critical to the revitalization of professional practice and lifelong learning, as reflection alone is “a necessary but insufficient condition for change” (p. 7). Representing, informing, and supporting such practitioner action research is the primary focus of the authors. However, this text extends well beyond the somewhat simplistic step-by-step guides to action research that I have seen used with teachers and graduate students. One of its most energizing qualities is the way the writing remains grounded in the work of individuals, even as it contributes to the critical theoretical, methodological, and ethical discourse of practitioner research in general, and action research in particular.

International and inter-disciplinary perspectives enrich the text. The contributors, public service professionals from schools, universities, and health and social services agencies, represent many years of professional development through action-research in the United Kingdom, Canada, Brazil, South Africa, Hong Kong, Thailand, United States, and Austria. Sixteen chapters are divided into four sections that effectively represent the contents: (1) Conceptualizations of Action Research; (2) Praxis and Partnership in Action Research; (3) Action Research for Change; and (4) Action Research in Practice Sections.

Part 1, Conceptualizations, sets a courageous and insightful tone that continues throughout the text. Four authors—Noffke (history and future challenges), Winter (knowledge and knowledge creation), Biott (occupational and researcher identities), and MacLure (postmodern postscript)—provide informed analyses of current understandings of action research, and also open up important avenues for theoretical



inquiry and future development. In Part 2, Praxis and Partnership, authors Somekh, Couture, O'Hanlon, and Green expand this focus to include the nature of partnership relationships and knowledge creation in research; the ethical and practical dilemmas of individual and institutional collaboration; and the moral responsibilities of inquiry and action. In addition to extending the discourse of action research, the perspectives and questions raised in these sections are important for anyone who researches human and social life, whatever their discipline or research approach.

The four topics covered in Part 3, Change, consider the place of action research in the work of public service professionals to bring about a just and equitable society. In Walker's rich and provocative chapter, she presents telling examples from the field to illustrate "the importance of a professional development process that involves critical self-reflection about the ideological structures that shape the construction and use of professional knowledge" (p. 142). Valla (popular surveillance of health and education services in Brazil) and Posch (changes in the culture of teaching and learning) situate their work in complex, rapidly changing structural contexts and elucidate the sometimes conflicted role of professionals as collaborators with local communities "in the construction of local knowledge that can be used to improve the well-being of its members" (p. 143). Finally, Chuaprapaisilp describes possibilities in the Thai Buddhist culture for the enhancement of the action research process through mindfulness. The authors of Part 4, Practice Settings, continue the critical analysis of action research in and across different settings: Titchen and Binnie in nursing, Munn-Giddings in social work, Strauss in teacher research, and Watts and Jones in inter-professional practice.

My criticisms of the text are few: (1) Representation: While I laud the international focus and the recognition that action research has developed differently in different milieus, I would have like to have seen a strengthening of the contribution of non-western and multi-language voices. (2) Editing: The editors provide pithy and informative introductions to each section. I was disappointed that they did not conclude with a powerful chapter that brought together the significant understandings and questions that were presented by the authors. (3) Index: a thematic, cross chapter index would have enhanced the power and usefulness of this text.

This book is a treasured addition to my professional library that I will use in teaching and to extend my own research. The following words of the editors also express my appreciation of the depth and openness of this contribution to the research literature: "What shines through in each article is the authors' intelligent commitment to thinking 'outside the box' of everyday taken for granted assumptions, their



Anthropology & Education QUARTERLY

commitment to growth in themselves and others, and their willingness to challenge existing orthodoxies in order to seek improvement” (p. 75).

©2003 American Anthropological Association. This review is cited in the September 2003 issue (34:3) of *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*. It is indexed in the December 2003 issue (34:4).