

Positioning One-self in Action Research Report: An Insider's Perspective (Little Voice of an Action Researcher: The Journey of Understanding 3)

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ABSTRACT

Educational action research has gained ground in Malaysian schools, teacher training colleges and universities since it was introduced in 1989 (Chuah, 1998). Reading indigenous action research reports in the process of understanding and establishing further my skills and knowledge in action research at times has been quite a task. Various types of feelings were evoked, mostly a feeling of detachment. I found that the voices of the participants especially the action researchers were mostly not "heard" in the reports. This paper discussed the importance of positioning one-self (the action researcher cum practitioner) in action research reports from the insider's perspective who has been involved directly in the world of action research since 1997. It also relates dilemmas created as a result of positioning one-self in action research reports and ways to address such dilemmas.

THE STARTING POINT

Educational action research has gained ground in Malaysian schools, teacher training colleges and universities since it was introduced in 1989 (Chuah, 1998). Reading indigenous action research (AR) reports in the process of understanding and establishing further my skills and knowledge in action research at times has been quite a task. Various types of feelings were evoked, mostly a feeling of detachment. I found that the voices of the participants especially the action researchers were mostly not "heard" in the reports. Some action researchers prefer to address themselves as "penyelidik", "pengkaji" (researcher) or "guru" (teacher) instead of "Saya/Kami" (I/We) in their reports such as some examples from *Prosiding Seminar Penyelidikan Pendidikan Kebangsaan 2003 (PSPPK 2003)*: pp 19-36, pp 129, pp 181, pp 197-206, pp 207-220, pp 221-229, pp 231-240, pp 241-251 & pp 272). There are AR reports too that do not have the researchers' voices heard at all (*PSPPK 2003*: pp 151-159 & pp 177-186). Other than that, most of the action researchers' preferred to present their reflections based on evidence from other sources of data such as from test results, questionnaires, interview transcripts, reflections from students,

colleagues or other participants (*PSPPK 2003*: pp 25-36, pp 92-93, pp 100-104, pp 129-136, 142-145, pp 158-163, pp 173-175, pp 193-195, pp 204-206, pp215-219, pp 223-224, pp 236-240, pp 246-249, pp 258-260 & pp 272-277; *Prosiding Seminar Kajian Tindakan 2003*: pp 11-19, pp 28-29, pp 38-40, pp 50-53, pp 61-65, pp 78-80, pp 88-93, pp 102-104, pp 117-128, pp 138-147 & pp 151-153).

Upon reflection on my own initial experiences before the year 2000, I was not comfortable using 'I' in writing my AR reports other than being reminded of the status of academic paper and thesis. These situations were reflected in my initial writings (Chuah, 1998, 1999 & 2000a). Changes came about when I became more convinced and understood better educational AR methodology. I began to use terms such as 'I' to replace 'researcher' (Chuah, 2000b, 2001a, 2001c, 2002, 2004 & 2005). I do not intend to be prescriptive in this article but merely to raise issues and dilemmas related to the importance of action researchers placing themselves in AR reports. This is based on an insider's perspective who has been involved directly in the world of action research since 1997. Hopefully, further insight into the world of education AR through constructive discussions could be made.

IMPORTANCE OF POSITIONING ONE-SELF IN AR REPORTS

I would like to draw your attention to what Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) wrote about writing. For them, "*writing is all about communicating*"(p 98). AR reports like other research reports should be able to communicate and convey the data, findings, ideas and suggestions to the audiences. The audiences need to make sense of the data in the reports in order for the research to be of value. I agree that action research is only of value when it is able to communicate findings and be used by others, other participants and the action researcher herself/himself. I am fascinated with what deMarrais (2004) stated in her article when she referred to herself as a qualitative researcher and using her skills in interviewing and understanding contexts to:

"communicate research findings in ways that could be used effectively and ethically by policy makers... I was pleased to be able to ensure that the views of teachers and administrators as evidenced in the research were articulated so that upcoming policies might actually provide support for staff development to improve school practice" (pp 294-295).

Here, the role of the AR writer(s) is of importance. Thus, the AR writers need to understand the research design and the research methodology

itself. I would like to refer to AR definition given by Kemmis (1988) and Elliott (1981) in *Garis Panduan 2001*. Kemmis (1988) defined AR as:

“...a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants (teachers, students or principals, for example) in social (including educational) situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of: (a) their social or educational practices (b) their understanding of these practices, and (c) the situations (and institution) in which these practices are carried out” (p 42).

Here, AR studies teacher’s own practices and is for the improvement of the teacher’s own practices with the hope that students would gain skills or achieve a better result compared to before.

To Elliott (1981) in *Garis Panduan 2001*, AR is:

“the study of social situation [classroom/school] with a view of improving the quality of action [managing classroom/managing teaching and learning/managing school] within it – carried out by practitioners seeking to improve their understanding of events, situations and problems so as to increase the effectiveness of their practice” (p. 33).

He reiterated AR *“as the improvement of practice”* (Elliott, 2003: p. 173).

Both definitions highlighted issues related to **improvement of one own practices** and the attempt to improve the quality of education for the people in his/her care. Thus, the **self** is one of the participants in AR. The **self** plays the role of **insider** and at times as **outsider**. This differ from what Samuel, Sithamparam and Marohaini (2004) wrote in relation to their positions as researchers cum writers in their qualitative studies which were referred to as ‘*out of the stage researcher*’ (writer’s translation) (*‘penyelidik di luar pentas’*) and ‘*on the stage researcher*’ (writer’s translation) (*‘penyelidik di atas pentas’*).

Participants in the first AR (Chuah, 1998) that I conducted comprised of myself as the researcher cum teacher trainer and educator (who implemented the planned actions), the teacher trainees and my critical friends. In the second AR (Chuah, 2000b), the AR participants were myself, 20 course participants in *Kursus Dalam Perkhidmatan (KDP) 6 Minggu* and two critical friends. Due to the nature of AR, AR reports need to be in the first person which means that action researchers need not fear to use ‘I’ in their reports.

As Somekh in CARE (1994) stated:

“To do otherwise is difficult to defend methodologically. The practitioner-researcher examines his or her own behavior in a particular social situation as part of the investigation. At the core of action research lies the process of reflection in which research data is used to inform an ever-deepening understanding of the complexities and richness of social interaction in groups. Action research reports need to document some aspects, at least, of the researcher’s personal reflection in order to establish the validity of the research. Interpretation, judgement and decision-making can only be made by the researcher. In this sense, the self is a research instrument and the report must demonstrate that the action researcher is aware of the many factors which are creating personal or professional uncertainty and stress, and may have influenced interpretations, judgements and decision” (p 14).

Other than using ‘I’ in my AR reports and writings, I also included my own reflections in relation to pedagogy, AR methodology and others in relation to data and evidences (2000b, 2000b, 2001a, 2001c, 2002, 2004, 2005).

POSITIONING ONE-SELF LEADS TO DILEMMAS?

Educational action researchers face dilemmas when too much emphasis is placed on one-self in AR reports. This happen especially when too much is focused on self-exploration and personal growth. The content or action itself in relation to education such as pedagogical issues, for example, is not given much focus in the reports, what more if data is not presented as evidence. Such cases would create situations where AR is being question for its legitimacy as another form of research method. This brings us to the question of what are the limitations or boundary for action researchers in positioning one-self in AR reports?

Another dilemma created as a result of positioning one-self in AR reports, which is related to the earlier dilemma raised, deals with the issue of biasness towards the action researcher or participants of AR and truthfulness or “*credibility*” (term used by Mertens, 1998: p 181). Such situations usually rise due to self-reflection written in journals, diaries of action researchers and other AR participants. How should action researchers address such dilemmas in their AR reports?

SOME WAYS IN ADDRESSING SUCH DILEMMAS

Mertens (1998: pp 181-183) suggested among others in establishing credibility in qualitative research that can be used too in AR reports. Among the ways proposed are prolonged, substantial engagement, persistent observation, peer debriefing, member checks and triangulation. Altrichter (1993) proposed that action researchers need to:

“confront different perspectives on the same situation and use ‘discrepancies’ as a starting point for the development of your practical theory” (p 47).

But I got interested in the procedure known as *“clarifying action perspectives”* suggested by Elliott (1980: p 317) where different perspectives from participants of AR are used. This was used in my second AR (Chuah, 2000b: pp 37-38) as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Analysis on implementation of educational AR exposure course

| What I hope from this course | What I did during the course | Participants' perspectives | | | |
|--|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--|
| | | Course participants | Critical friends | | I |
| | | | Joe | Suzy | |
| Premise for Reflective Discussion (Action) and Course objectives | My actions | What they went through and observed | What was observed | What was observed | Why particular actions were taken (<i>reflection-on-action</i> and <i>reflection-in-action</i>) |

* translated from the original table in Bahasa Melayu (Table 3: p 37)

Course participants, two critical friends and my own reflection, written together with my field notes, were my sources of data. They provide evidences for further reflection on the implementation of action in AR. These data were included in the AR reports. For example, in discussing the used of reflective discussion in AR, I reported the following in Bahasa Melayu:

“Terlalu lama perbincangan reflektif digunakan yang dikatakan sebagai sesi soal jawab:transkripsi rakaman audio dengan Adi, 30 tahun berpengalaman mengajar 9 tahun (salah seorang partisipan dalam PT)menjelaskan kekaburan arah tuju perbincangan reflektif. “Masa aktiviti seronok. Bahagian soal jawab; tidak tahu apa yang dikehendaki” (Adi,

5/10/2000/T10, ms 2). Beliau menjelaskan lagi, "Cara sesi soal jawab tidak jelas. Jika tahu objektif, lebih senang. Bila ditanya kumpulan kami, Bersedia, kena fikir 2 atau 3 kali apa yang nak dicakap sebelum jawab" (Adi, 5/10/2000/T10, ms 2). Muna, 29 tahun berpengalaman mengajar selama 8 tahun menceritakan bahawa beliau dimaklumkan oleh salah seorang ahli kumpulan Bersedia tentang ini. Beliau berkata, "...ada yang keluar dan tanya, "Boleh faham?" Cikgu A tanya: "Apa sebenarnya yang dia hendak?" Cikgu A kata dia t[ida]k faham..." (Muna, 29/9/2000, T6/1, ms 8). ...Rakan kritis saya, Suzy mencadangkan agar masa lebih diperuntukkan untuk kursus ini agar untuk membolehkan penerokaan berlaku. Beliau mencadangkan:

Suzy: "Untuk sesi atau bengkel akan datang, mungkin anda boleh memperuntukkan lebih masa, mungkin separuh hari agar anda adalah(sic) lebih ruang untuk meneroka. Bahagian refleksi adalah penting di mana anda boleh membina konsep-konsep" (Suzy, 3/10/2000, T8, ms 7-8). Persoalan lain yang timbul ekoran daripada perubahan ini ialah kenapakah masa terlalu lama saya gunakan untuk melaksanakan perbincangan reflektif sehingga perubahan dibuat serta merta ke atas aktiviti seterusnya? Bila saya mengkaji transkripsi rakaman audio secara keseluruhannya, memang jelas bahawa terlalu masa yang lama (sic) saya peruntukkan untuk perbincangan reflektif terutama sekali semasa perbincangan reflektif untuk peringkat tinjauan dalam aktiviti memadamkan api lilin yang cuba saya kaitkan dengan peringkat tinjauan dalam PT. Catatan kajian saya menyatakan: "istilah tertentu dalam peringkat tinjauan khususnya masalah amalan sendiri, guru sendiri masih belum difahami oleh peserta kursus. Peserta kursus masih lagi menggunakan istilah masalah guru, masalah guru lain" (Catatan Saya, 21/9/2000, ms 5). Saya telah mengikut apa yang saya rancang seperti dari segi bentuk soalan reflektif yang hendak digunakan..." (Chuah, 2000b, ms 41-42).

Other than that, to provide credibility to the AR reports, action researchers need to pay due attention to collecting and checking data stages. I learned the hard way by paying due attention during these stages where numerous strategies were used. When I conducted interviews with the course participants and critical friends in my first and second AR, I repeated the questions posed to them at different times during the interviews. Interview transcripts and interpretation of data were shown to my critical friends too (2000b: p 31). I even posted data interpreted to six course participants of my

second AR and all of them returned the interpreted data. Only one requested for a minor amendment.

Various stages in checking on the credibility of data could also be used in AR. I would like to share the various stages that I used in checking on the credibility of data during the pilot study on *Garis Panduan 2001*. The first stage was repeating the important points provided by participants during interviews. I then showed the participants the interview transcripts for reading. I proceeded to do content analysis which was then categorized into similarities, differences and unexpected categories. A report was written based on the interpretation and then shown to the pilot study participants (Chuah, 2001b: pp 2-14).

Other than that, I also used what Mertens (1998: p 183) named as “*thick description*”, that is, “*extensive and careful description of the time, place, context and culture*”. Thus, AR reports need to give thick description of planned action, the actual actions during implementation other than perspectives of AR participants. This is more so as AR is related to case study. Case study is based on context and situation of the teacher who is researching. It is a form of inquiry to reflect on practices and as a form of report regarding self experiences (Shulman & Colbert, 1989 in Merseth, 1996: p 729). Case(s) are put forward to readers to make sense of the case.

Mertens (1998) also discussed the issue of ‘transferability’ and stated that it is for:

“the reader to determine the degree of similarity between the study site and the receiving context. The researcher’s responsibility is to provide sufficient detail to enable the reader to make such a judgment” (p 183).

Thus, in describing what happen, AR report is usually in a form that:

“tells a story about the event by relating it to a context of mutually interdependent contingencies, i.e., event which ‘hang together’ because they depend on each other for their occurrence” (Elliott cited in *Prosiding Seminar Kajian Tindakan 2003*: p 155).

By doing so, the reader would generalize and not the researcher (CARE, 1994, p 77-81). For Stake (1978):

“case studies...may be epistemologically in harmony with the reader’s experience and thus to that person a natural basis for generalization” (p 5).

The reader is hoped to:

“...vicariously experience these happenings, and draw their own conclusions” (Stake, 1994: p 243).

Like other research reports, AR participants are to report their findings based on evidence collected. Positioning of one-self in AR reports need not raise issue of credibility when AR reports highlight not only the success or improvement of the students' performance or the positive learning aspects among AR participants but weaknesses and loopholes of action(s) too. The later is strongly encouraged to be included in the AR report to enable the next cycle of AR to be carried out. Here, reflection would assist AR participants to plan again and make decision on which area/ aspects to modify in the next cycle of AR.

CONCLUSION

I have discussed the need and importance of positioning one-self in AR reports from the insider's perspective with the hope that AR will be understood based on its paradigm. It also relates dilemmas created as a result of positioning one-self in action research reports. Various ways are proposed in this paper to overcome the dilemmas faced. Action researchers need not fear to have their voices heard in their reports as the nature of AR itself condone such reporting. Action researchers just need to provide evidences when positioning one-self in AR reports.

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