

The Action Researcher: Conversations with a Novice

Juin Ee Teo
teojuinee@hotmail.com

I am new to action research and my knowing of action research is limited. Should I be apologetic about my inexperience or insecure about my beginner status?

The first thread of this catalytic paper suggests that all knowing is limited and that a beginner's knowing is limited in different ways from an expert's knowing. It argues that framing beginners' knowing as 'limited' in an undesirable way restricts expert-novice interaction to reproducing authoritative ways of knowing and doing, designed to help the beginner shed his or her 'novice' identity.

It suggests that conversations between experts and beginners should pause and stay with the freshness of beginners' eyes, to explore and celebrate the unique situation of 'beginning'. It argues that a generative positioning embodies both the identities of beginner and expert, refusing to divorce the beginner in the expert and vice versa. Through exploring Edward Said's 'Beginnings' (1978) discussed in Allen (2003), I hope to open a space for conversations on how our societies often respond to the 'Learner' or 'Beginner' with caution, controls and rites of initiation to discipline the beginner into expertise.

Threading into action research practice, I argue that 'action research' is a methodology of 'beginnings' – we begin and begin again in the iterations of research (Allen, 2003). This is a strength of the methodology that can be fed with appreciation for the power of beginners to invent, to create and to learn. It is a strength that is weakened by perceptions of beginners as 'amateurs' who need to follow authoritative or prescribed ways of knowing and doing action research. It is a methodology that withers in the soil of rigid knowledge and relationship hierarchies.

In the second thread of this catalytic paper, I ask "What is methodology? What does Action Research Methodology look like?" and offer my response to open up a space for reflecting on methodology as embodied practices in living contexts. My response builds on Michael Crotty's (1998) scaffolding of 'four elements of a research process' (p.4) and offers a re-visioning of his diagram for consideration. I suggest that experiencing the stories of methodologies-in-process is more educative for beginners than conventional ways of 'training' new researchers, positioning them as shoppers in a supermarket of authoritative off-the-shelf methodologies located in various paradigm aisles. The former works with images of the beginner as inventor, author, creator while the latter I argue, works with images of the beginner as consumer, user, reproducer – what kinds of researchers will beginners become?

The closing weave of this paper suggests that all action researchers, whether beginning or experienced are 'Learners' and that this is an 'L' badge we can wear with pride only because of the humility it thrives on.

REFERENCES:

Allen, J. (2003). A question of language. In M. Pryke, G. Rose & S. Whatmore (Eds.), *Using social theory: thinking through research* (pp. 11-27). London: Sage & The Open University.

Crotty, M. (1998). The foundations of social research: meaning and perspective in the research process. St Leonards: Allen & Unwin.