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[Jean McNiff Discusses Action Research] [Why is research important? Why is action research important?] Why this research is important, well, and action research in particular? All kinds of research are important.

Action research is very important in the sense that we're all consumers of research in one way or another, so we get bombarded with a lot of information from all different angles. We need to know about that information and make sure that it's authentic, that we know where it comes from, that we can actually believe what we're told.

And that means bringing a critical perspective to things and actually interrogating what we're told through the media and through the culture. So that's one important element. Another important element is that we are also producers of research, and that is so important because we need to be opposed to interrogate, as I said before, what to be heard and contribute to public debates.

That needs to be done from a position of knowledge, which involves research, and not from the position of the ignorance, which is kind of knee jerk reaction. So we need to know what we are doing in the real world. Because as researchers, we are positioned as people who know.

People who work in higher education have got a special responsibility for that as well, because they're seen as people who ought to know about what they are doing. There are so many other aspects to it which we'll come back to as we go on. [How would you define action research, and how would you describe the value of learning about action research to a student or early career researcher] What action research is and what's important to know about action research, it's-- I'll tell you what it isn't first of all.

So it's quite distinctive from conventional scientific and social scientific research. And we all know what that is. It's about trying to find an answers to questions, about testing hypotheses, accepting and refusing them and so on. Action research is real world research, so it's practice based.

It's located in the practices of practitioners. Now when we speak about practitioners, usually that's taken to mean anyone who is not an academic. The people who tend to write, and to go into the public domain, tend to be people working in universities who call themselves academics.

And they tend to make a distinction between academics and practitioners, so practitioners are assumed to be people who work in these places called workplaces. Well I don't see it like that, because I see universities as workplaces. I work in university. I am a person working there.

I am a practitioner. So I don't see any difference there between people who work in places called universities and people who work in places called factories, and shops, and hospitals, and so on. However, when you do action research, whoever you are and wherever you're located, you're actually responsible for what you know and communicating for what you know.

And given that research is about finding out things and coming to a new place in knowledge where you think you know now what you didn't know before, that's the outcome of doing research. If it's action research, it's research in the action where you actually research your action in action for action.

So the purposes of the research are very important. Because the purpose of action research is to contribute to greater understanding, greater learning, and for social benefit. So it's the whole idea of people taking control of what they say, what they do, what they think, and generating their own theories of practice from within their experience.

[What first inspired you to start research in the field of action research?] I have to get quite historical about this, and go back to the 1980s. At the time, I was working as a deputy head teacher, or a vice principal, in a very large secondary comprehensive school.

And as a deputy head, my responsibility was to look after the welfare of the girls, and eventually look after the welfare of the boys as well. At the time, a new curriculum initiative was being launched, and this was called Personal and Social Education.

I'll refer to that as PSE, Personal Social Education. These days, it's changed this title also to include health. At the time, people didn't know what this was. Whether it was curriculum topic, if it was where should it go on the curriculum? How should it be taught? Who should teach it, and so on.

People didn't have a clear idea around what PSE was at all. So because I was the welfare lady at the time, it was my responsibility to find out about what PSE was, and this is what I did. Part of that was to go on a course which was run by a man called Leslie Button.

He was a pioneer in the literatures at that time, not only for PSE, but also for action research. Because he said that the way we understand what we're doing is to investigate our practices in action. So that was my introduction to action research, and that was way back in the 1980s.

Because I did have the responsibility for learning about what action research was, learning about what PSE was, I thought I should do some further study. So I decided to do a doctorate, and looked around for a university which would offer me support in doing action research.

And then I conducted my doctoral studies. The interesting thing was, when I came to write my thesis-- because I wrote a thesis, a full thesis, about this topic called Personal Social Education-- and it was through the writing of the thesis that the penny dropped suddenly the it wasn't actually that I was talking about a subject.

I was talking about me and my learning, and my learning with the children. And that was a big revelation. So the upshot of that was that I wrote a second thesis which was about me, my learning, my learning with the children, how I learned from them, how we worked together collaboratively, how we created knowledge together and came to a higher level of knowledge than we were before.

So my second thesis, which was the one that I submitted, that used the first thesis as data to show how my own thinking had changed from looking at things like Personal Social Education and action research. Looking at them as things, as in boxes and neat and tidy subjects which were there to explore, to a whole new understanding that it was about people, and people are always in process with one another.

We're always dynamic. We're always moving. We're always learning. So that was the second thesis. And then of course, after learning that, there was no going back. It was just, everything was forward moving. [Which key thinkers have most inspired you, and who continues to inspire you?] There's so many, but I think some of the main names will come out.

But before I talk about the key thinkers, just to frame this, and as I was saying before, we all have different views of the world. And over time, I know that my own views have changed. And I see the world differently these days from the way I would've seen it when I was 21.

The vision of reality that attracts me I draw from my vision of life itself, that it is emergent, it's developmental. The now, the present, holds the future already within itself, and also it's past.

So every moment is the beginning of the next. I think, when I was 21, I saw the moment as everything that the positive lead up to, whereas I don't see that now. It's like a seed, an acorn, has the oak tree already latent within itself. So that vision inspires everything I do.

And I love to read other thinkers, and I have learned from them. I hope people learn from me now about the importance of communicating that sense that reality is not that we come to a point where we know an answer and that's a full stop. It's actually the beginning, and the beginning is all little question marks, because we don't know what's going to happen.

And it's our responsibility to try to contribute to it and to shape it as we think good futures should be. The very idea of openness and creativity and emergence is, for my understanding, good. And so key thinkers for my first degree, which was in German, I studied the German literature and Goethe was a very big influence in my thinking then, because he saw everything as about opening up.

And his studies into science and nature and color, for example, show that he had this vision of reality that it is about new beginnings. Goethe it was in fact inspired by Spinoza, and Spinoza would have been one of the most important things because right through the history of ideas for that view this is all about opening and new beginnings.

And then my master's degree was in applied linguistics, and I came across the work of Noam Chomsky, who has been a tremendous influence in my thinking. Because in terms of linguistics, he challenged the idea that the study of linguistics should be about finding definitive structures, finding definitive answers, everything coming to closure.

And he introduced this idea around the generative transformational nature of linguistic inquiry. Well I've taken that idea and developed it to all fields of practice. I actually went to visit him on two occasions. He's a great friend and a great ally and support.

And yeah, it's wonderful, because it's that idea to put opening up, we're opening up to new possibilities. The very form of theory that we generate does not have to be a kind of definitive theory where you know answers. It's a kind of dynamic, organic vision of theory where it's about finding new questions.

As soon as you come to the point we think you've got an answer, it actually generates all kinds of new questions. Other thinkers-- I mean, this is all very political when you bring it into the real world and into educational research, because it challenges the whole idea that there are final answers, and that you can come to a final answer.

And Isaiah Berlin was great on that in that he challenged-- and Popper-- they challenged the idea that you know what you're doing in the moment. Because they say, well how can you know what you know until you get the point where you know it, and you don't know what you don't know? So it's that adventure, that joy, of finding things out.

And Richard Feynman, he rooted his ideas in the idea of nature. That it is about growth, about learning. It's in the thinking of Dewey, who was one of the key influences in the field of action research, although he never called himself an action researcher. The language wasn't available. And I don't think he would have done at the time, either.

That it is about growth, about learning that you can't have definitive outcomes. The only outcome you can have of learning is more learning, and perhaps better learning. And better learning means that that in itself brings new learning. So it's about processes rather than products.

And for people who think analytically and like to come to firm answers, and for policies that say you've got to have firm answers to what you're doing, this is really bad news. Because it's challenging that whole concept that you come to a point where you apply a theory to your practice.

And you come to a point where you say, no, I need to understand what I'm doing. I can bring in those propositional theories, I can learn from them, but I have to internalize them and make my own, and then find my own way of doing things, and trust in my own personal knowledge that I'll do it right.

And if it doesn't come right the first time, it's like this videotape. If it doesn't come right the first time, you stop, you edit, and you go forward into a better direction. And that, for me, is one of the choice of doing action research. It's not about closure. It's about opening up to new possibilities. [What recent piece of research has had an impact on you, and why?] The piece of research-- well, there are so many.

I think every piece of research I do or I'm involved in is so important. The Cambodian work, that I'm speaking about, for example. This is quite recent for me. I'm very fortunate to work with a group of people who are from North Norway, and they have formed their own NGO.

They're working in places with a high incidence of landmines, which means a high incidence of landmine injuries, a lot of lost limbs and lost lives. And the people that I work with are medics, and nurses, health professionals.

And they invited me to work with them. I have been working with them for three years on a part-time basis. But this is something new, because they have been working for years in areas off high landmine infestation, where unnecessary lives-- lives have been lost unnecessarily, and huge incidents off amputations.

They have gone to places like Laos, and Iraq, and Cambodia-- and that's where I'm working with them now-- and they bring their expertise. This is completely voluntary. There is funding for it, but they didn't get paid. And they go to these places, where they work with the local people.

They help the local people to use their local knowledge to help themselves. What's lovely about it is that these people with very high medical and nursing knowledge bring their knowledge, they share it with the local people, and together, again, they come to a new level of knowledge and understanding about how they can cope with these difficulties.

The area where they're working is near the Thai board. And in that particular area, there's something like 20%, of men particularly, who have lost legs, lost limbs, or have had amputations. So it's very high incidence. But also what's happens there is that they all work together, both the medical teams and local people, and they have-- they do for themselves-- they have found ways to create prosthetics, for example, out of drain pipes and out of the spent shells that they actually dig up out of the ground.

So they're not reliant on other NGOs to give aid. They actually learn themselves how to cope with their own difficulties. In all the time that I have worked in Cambodia now, I have never had anybody complain, on us, or say poor me.

They don't feel sorry for themselves. They get on. They're lucky to be alive. They're lucky to be peaceful. That's another aspect that this particular project has brought about is this it is very much about post conflict societies. We work with people who, just a few years back, were enemies.

They were fighting on opposite sides. They were killing one another. And now they're working together. And this, although it's always there, they move into the new future where they say, this is our country. This is our lives, and it's up to us to make them better. It's the most amazing work. And my job there is to support the medical people in helping them to disseminate the work that they have been doing.

They have written it up for the scientific journals and for the medical journals. As yet, they have no trick not for educational and the sociological aspects of it, and that's what we're working on now. It's quite astonishing. [What do you see as the key strength of action research?] One of the key strengths, that it's-- it puts research into the hands of the individual practitioner, and into groups of individual practitioners working collaboratively who want to find ways of improving what they are doing within a particular social context, and thereby trying to influence the social context that they're waking in.

The strength, in that sense, is that people feel in control of what they're doing. They don't have to go outside to find themselves to their situations. These are not necessarily problems. These are every date dilemmas or questions about where do we go next with this?

These are developmental questions. It's not that something's got to be bad in order to get better.

Everything that we do, we are constantly trying to get better. The Olympic champions are constantly trying to get better. So you don't have to be bad to get better. Life is a process of trying to make it better and develop it, move into new spaces.

This is one of the great strengths of action research, I think, is that when people inquire into up doing in the action, they come to new understandings. But it's theirs. And when they work collaboratively, they really do have an amazing power. Hannah Arendt talks about concepts of power.

And when she says that power is used to impose ideas, that's no longer power, that's violence. Power is people coming together, and working together, and finding new ways of doing things. And it's so important to communicate that to young people especially, because these days we are told do what you're told.

Do what the policy documents say. Do what I tell you. Sit down. Be quiet. Do as you're told. And that's the way to stasis. That's destructive. Because when you get to stasis, there's no other way out. It implodes. It's very destructive. Whereas when you're in a culture, in a frame of mind, when you have an epistemology that says, look, everything is possible, what you need to do is find the best way.

But make sure that you take responsibility for what you're doing. And make sure that you check with other people that this is right for them as well. Because it's not only you, it's other people. And we're never alone. Historically, we're never alone. Socially, we're never alone.

So we're always in company with others, and it's up to us, all of us, to find ways of challenging autocracy, and bringing new person-centered forms of inquiry, person-centered forms of listening, to create a more peaceful and productive world.

[What role do values and virtues play in research? How has your research been influenced by value and virtue?] This concept of values and virtues is an interesting one. Action research itself is acknowledged to be values laden. Conventional research is allegedly supposed to be values free, values neutral, which is nonsense, because that research is always done by people.

So when a researcher goes into the laboratory to do scientific research, that researcher does not leave their values at the door. They bring their values with them. So in a sense, all research is values laden. In action research, it's a strength that we recognize values.

My understanding of the actual definition of the concepts of value and virtue, if I subscribe to a particular value like freedom, then if I can live in a way that shows that I am living out that value, for me, that would then become a virtue.

So I don't see virtues as particular attributes. Here we are in Chicago, and some years back, I was also in Hot Springs, and both places where Al Capone lived. And when we were in Hot Springs, we were passing the gangster museum. And so Dierdre Capone, who is the niece of Al Capone, she was in a shop-- then the gangster museum shop-- and she was selling books called Uncle Al Capone.

So of course we got one, which was signed. And I learned a lot about Al Capone. And many-- for him-- and you could say, in a quite objective fashion, that he had very strong family values. And we would endorse strong family values. And he had a great understanding of social order, and he encouraged social order.

Now those values which would be shared by archbishops, so they're all sort of good values, socially accepted values. What we might disagree with was his methods of enforcing those values. But to Al Capone, the concept of the value of family values, these would be virtues for him, which I guess we would all share.

So what I'm saying is that we can have different values, and they're relative to ourselves. I struggle

with that concept of relativity, because there are certain practices in life like cruelty, wanton cruelty and so on, that I don't think can be endorsed by any kind of human standard.

So this is my own inquiry, ongoing, is to how do I understand these issues. But the idea of values is so important for action research, because when you take an action in the world, you need to give thought to the kind of action that you are taking, and why you are going to take that.

So values give you the reasons for your actions. Methodologically, they also come to stand as your criteria, how you judge the quality few actions. That's why I like the work in Cambodia, South Africa, at the places I've worked, because they are such strong values around justice, the right of humans to enjoy a peaceful life.

And how do we, as researchers, how do we then judge the quality of what we're doing? How do we justify the idea that we work with others and try to change social situations? So that's where we ground our understandings in values. [What does being an ethical researcher mean to you? Why are ethics important?] Ethics, of course, is very important because it's linked so strongly with the idea of values.

And to me, the idea of just holding your knowledge lightly and testing it is ethical practice. I know we all have these guidelines, and they're so many words on paper in many cases because ethics can be contradictory.

One ethical position can contradict another ethical position. In a few months time, I'm doing a paper on, when is ethics unethical? And I think that's the case, ethical behavior can sometimes come through is unethical. Again, you've got to ground yourself somewhere.

You've got to have a solid ground on where you stand from where you proceed. And to me, the idea of ethical behavior has always got to be with keeping your mind open, being open to other possibilities. And that means mentally adopting a mindset where you're open to other ideas, and you don't close down, and you check out-- before you make a decision-- to your own behavior, that you look at it with responsibility and with discernment, and you say, is this right, what I'm doing?

Of course, you might be wrong, so that, again, is where you need constantly to check with other people and go through all of these multiple tests. It's a very hard way of living. But to me, it's the only way in which you can live a life of which-- that you can stand over, that you can look at.

And you say, I might not have been right all the time, but I did my best to try to be right in the broadest possible sense. We all have to be accountable for what we do. And it's looking at the fact that we all tell different stories. And there is no one over arching story that says, that's the right story.

Because for every story, there's another story, and you've got no recourse to a grand narrative that says this is the right way to be. It's trial and error. It's doing the best you can with what you have got, and hoping that you're right at some point. [What advice would you give a student embarking on an action research project for the first time?] What I have said before is do not listen to people who tell you you can't do it.

Do not listen to people to tell you that action research is just about professional development. It is not just about becoming a better teacher, or nurse, or mechanic, or engineering. It is about creating new knowledge and generating theory.

It is about becoming a researcher and that means becoming a theorist. Do not listen to people who tell you cannot generate theory, because you can, and you should, and it's not difficult. Because in broad translation, a theory means an explanation.

And everybody can and should explain what they're doing. And as any kind of professional, you should be able to give reasons and purposes for what you're doing. You should be able to say, I am

good at my job. If you're not able to say, I am good at my job, you shouldn't be doing the job.

But to be able to say, I'm good at my job, you need, then, to explain what you're doing and to give reasons and purposes, and that is theory. So that's what I would say to new researchers. [What new research directions do you find most exciting? Where do you like to take your own research?] My writings, I suppose, are about action research.

But I've actually moved on from action research in the sense that I'm more interested in the philosophical underpinnings, the idea of ethics and so on. And I am writing about this. So I actually write for two different fields. One is, I write the textbooks and I'm constantly updating the textbooks, so that's the action research.

And you tend to get type cast, and so on I'm seen as about action research. But articles and other kinds of writings are about others aspects around community development, international development, ethical perspectives, the more philosophical aspects of what action research stands for.

And that's where I hope to continue, please God, into the future.