0661

Mission Impossible:collaborative action research as game, ritual and real

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Background

This paper reports the reflective journey we undertook as the leaders of a collaborative action research project involving education practitioners and our navigation through a complex web of co-operation, conflict resolution, bargaining and defection. Drawing on these experiences, we seek to make explicit the cocktail of tensions and disordering of research contexts and practices that have remained largely disregarded both in the literature and in everyday self-accounting. By interweaving the plotlines of 'game', 'ritual' and 'real' we seek to gain an insight into the rational/ irrational behaviour of the various players involved in this ethno-drama, including ourselves. Finally, we posit the claim that educational action research conceived as a 'critical and (self-critical) collaborative inquiry' (Zuber-Skerritt, 1996, p.85) has surrendered its democratic values to an all pervading performativity culture and conclude that collaborative action research conducted in the politicised educational contexts of today cannot be true to its ideal.

We do not, however, conclude by wishing to 'unsubscribe' from the principles of action research. Instead, we want to offer a reading of 'research' as a complex confrontation of at least three plot-lines – action research as a preliminary script and ongoing conscience; game theory as ongoing calculation of interest and profit, and cargo cult as both compromise and cover. This is not, then, an exercise in cynicism or a debunking. It is, instead, an acknowledgement of the research 'project' (variously understood) as a complex and nomadic ethno-drama whose plotlines we have tried to untangle. In so doing, however, we do want to hold on to a certain 'integrity', so that those at the heart of the research, the children, do not become a ball on the playing field of research, or perhaps subject to a fake 'researchism', to draw an analogy from science/ 'scientism'. And yet, we need to accept that 'game playing' and 'ritualised actions' are mechanisms employed to manage fear of failure and to create the illusion of a controllable reality. However, the irony inherent in this belief is that playing games and indulging in cargo cult is an inherent characteristic of the messy world we live in. We therefore would like to put forward a caveat that guards against common idealisations of the action research process and sensitises researchers to the inevitable, ubiquitous conflictual spaces in which they conduct their research.

Research Questions

What are the unacknowledged complexities of participants' engagement in action research?

How can these tensions and contradictions best be represented?

What are the implications of such complex 'gaming' for action research?

Methods

The research is based on an extensive action research project involving teacher educators, school teachers, and researchers. It is addressed in its tensions by recourse to three quite different strands or emplotments - action research (Cook 2009), game theory (Colman 2003), and ritual (Burns 1878). Their imbrication in a research 'ethno-drama' is the focus of the paper.

Frame

see above

Research findings

Action research finds it difficult to avoid utopian accounts of its processes, in relation to 'emancipatory' knowledge, 'participation' and 'empowerment'. This paper offers to ground acttion research in a more 'realistic' political engagement.

References

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