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Contributors: Jane Zeni

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20 Ethics and the ‘Personal’ in Action Research

Jane Zeni

Action research is intrinsically engaged. Those conducting action research are insiders and stakeholders — working alone or in partnership with outside consultants — and it should be their questions that drive the inquiry. As action research has assumed a larger role in education, the need for appropriate ethical guidelines has become evident. However, the personal engagement and insider stance that are central to action research have complicated the effort to develop workable standards for research ethics.

The ethical challenges specific to engaged, insider research have become clearer to me over the years as I have collaborated with teachers doing classroom inquiry and researched my own practice as a teacher educator.

Some projects I have initiated and directed. In the mid-1980s, through my work in the National Writing Project, I wrote a grant and recruited a dozen secondary teachers whose students were writing with computers. We documented what happened to the writing and the teaching process in classrooms equipped with the new tools (Zeni, 1990). Although I was an insider to the Writing Project, the data I gathered came from other teachers' classes — because at that time my own writing classes at the university did not have access to computers. This first study raised few ethical dilemmas, but when I proposed a similar grant to the St. Louis Public Schools, the questions exploded: 'What are you going to say about our teachers? If it's bad news, who will you tell? If it's good news, who will get the credit?' At the time I was shocked. Later I came to see the possible dangers and distortions of action research.

In other projects, I was hired by teacher groups or schools as a consultant. Here, the power relations were different; the grants and the leadership rested with the school people. I was not a true insider — I was not examining my own [p. 255 ↓] practice — but often I developed close, collaborative relationships with my research partners (Krater et al., 1994).

In still other projects (many unpublished, a few published), I too gathered data to address problems in my own classrooms or in the English Education program I directed at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. Some 'projects' involved the thin data that many teachers collect routinely: as I puzzled over the small but disturbing number of student teachers who withdrew before completing their practicum in the schools, I kept track of their ages, prior work experience, academic records, and anything else that might help me anticipate or prevent their failure. A few projects were complex and longitudinal: a colleague and I analyzed the online conversations of student teachers, leading to improvements in the personal and academic support we provided during this stressful apprenticeship (Singer and Zeni, 2004). Often my projects were fully interwoven with my teaching. For example, my English methods students felt some urgency to root out their own usage errors before they would be marking the papers of their own students. I assigned an error analysis log, offering people with substantial usage problems a chance to earn course credit by addressing them; for my part, I analyzed the logs and reported the results at our last class meeting. Student feedback suggested that many came to see error correction more as academic inquiry than as punishment.

Despite my efforts to behave in a fair and respectful way, and to guide my research students accordingly, ethical dilemmas, questions, and roadblocks have emerged, usually catching me by surprise. Gradually, I realized that action research calls into question the ethical norms that guide the academic modes of inquiry, both quantitative and qualitative. The norms of quantitative research have defined the ethical researcher as an outsider; any personal involvement with the people or engagement with the events in a research setting is considered bias. The norms of qualitative research have allowed for the ethical researcher who is involved with participants, and who affects and is affected by events in the research setting; however, those relationships are limited, kept in check by anonymity and informed consent.

Neither quantitative nor qualitative guidelines offer a good fit for action research. It is no surprise, therefore, that research textbooks and mentors often cite universal principles that hamstring the action researcher, while ignoring real ethical dangers to students, colleagues, or others. I have found that analyzing exemplary cases (Mitchell, 2004; Smith, 1990) is a better route to understanding the ethics of the local, situated dilemmas of action research.

Negotiating Dual Roles

Rather than focusing on methods or paradigms, I would define action research by the ‘insider’ stance: The researcher also plays another professional role in the research setting, with relationships and responsibilities that continue after a specific project ends. Each role — researcher and practitioner — brings its own [p. 256 ↓] ethical standards, and untangling these roles can present knotty challenges. I will illustrate with two cases.

Wanda Clay's dissertation was a self-study of her work as an instructional coordinator in an urban school. She reflected in her journal after her coaching sessions, triangulated by asking teachers to write the minutes of team meetings, and questioned her own actions — was she trying to improve instruction or enhance her data? Some of her journal entries even represented her thoughts as a dialogue between her Researcher self ('R') and her Practitioner self ('P'). In an essay revisiting this experience, Clay (2001) writes, 'Facing these dilemmas in my role as practitioner-researcher, I sometimes felt torn in two.' The following research memo captures the duality:

R: OK, so the second year is over. How do you feel?

P: I don't know, kinda funny. I know that the changes we made had a profound impact on the people who left, yet I don't feel responsible in the same way I did last year.

R: How so?

P: Well, last year I wanted small miracles. I mean I thought everyone would buy into the changes, and our context would be transformed. But

this year I knew we were engaged in a struggle. I mean people were fighting change left and right, and I accepted that I was seen as the maker of the change.

R: And you are okay with that?

P: I have to accept that it isn't easy and there will be casualties of reform. My so-called power doesn't afford me the opportunity to work miracles. (p. 33)

Now consider the dual role when the 'insider' is a parent. Although many educators have written case studies of their own children's learning, to untangle one's ethical requirements as parent and as researcher may prove daunting. Puchner and Smith (2006) had discussed their own efforts to raise a son and a grandson, each with an ADD diagnosis. Accustomed in their professional work to writing careful documentation, each kept a log and noted how their actions affected the child. Soon, however, they were asking, 'How much does this child understand of what we're doing?' and 'How is my increased focus on this child going to affect others in the family?' Listening to their concerns in our Action Research Collaborative study group, I suddenly pictured a dilemma from Gilbert and Sullivan. After checking the musical reference, I messaged them:

Your 'consent' dilemma reminds me of the Lord Chancellor in *Iolanthe*, who is legally responsible for all the 'Wards of Court.' He spends much of his time 'giving agreeable girls away' to various young suitors, but eventually finds himself more than a little attracted to a ward named Phyllis. Here he contemplates his predicament (hypothetically, of course, in the third person) —

Can he give his own consent to his own marriage with his own Ward?
Can he marry his own Ward without his own consent! And if he marries his own Ward without his own consent, can he commit himself for contempt of his own Court? And if he commit himself for contempt of his own Court, can he appear by counsel before himself, to move for arrest of his own judgment! Ah, my Lords, it is indeed painful to have to sit

upon a wool-sack which is stuffed with such thorns as these! (*lolanthè*, Act I)

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After analyzing their own predicament, Puchner and Smith chose to set aside their research, at least temporarily. They could not foresee the potential impact of those 'thorns' on their families. In this ethical dilemma, the parent or grandparent role took precedence over that of researcher.

In Search of an Ethical Basis for Action Research

Even in less dramatic stories, the action research stance violates conventional norms. While pursuing an inquiry, the researcher usually exercises some power over other participants — whether through grades, allowance, diagnoses, or performance reports. Decisions about ethical principles such as anonymity or informed consent, if made in advance, must often be revised or renegotiated with other stakeholders in response to unforeseeable events.

This is our reality, but I would argue that the power and interpersonal complexity of the 'insider' role do not necessarily create an ethical threat. In fact, the bonds of caring, responsibility, and social commitment that engage action researchers with other stakeholders may be the most appropriate basis of ethical decision-making.

The rest of this chapter will explore ethical issues by foregrounding Noffke's (1997) 'personal' dimension and building on the engaged insider stance. I will frame my discussion with the themes of *responsibility/accountability*, *action/social justice*, and *caring/respect*. These themes will intertwine as I reflect on some ethical decisions and dilemmas in my own experience with action research.

Responsibility and Accountability

The ethical standard of *responsibility* — the special trust that teachers or other professionals must exercise while investigating issues in their own schools -most clearly distinguishes action research from traditional modes. In 1987, high school teachers Marian Mohr and Marion MacLean published *Working Together: A Guide for Teacher-Researchers*, based on a decade of experience in the Northern Virginia Writing Project. In *Teacher-Researchers at Work*, they went on to articulate an ethic of research as an integral part of good teaching:

[Teacher research] is enmeshed in the context of the classroom. It is designed so as not to expose students to harm in any way but rather to include them as participants in the process through which they and their teacher learn about learning. It offers students the model of an adult learner at work. (MacLean and Mohr, 1999: x–xi)

Lincoln and Denzin propose 'professional ethics' for the current 'moment.' Although their own work is not action research, they echo MacLean and Mohr: researchers should focus on their 'responsibility and obligation to participants, [p. 258 ↓] to respondents, to consumers of research, and to themselves as qualitative field-workers' (2000: 1117–18).

In classroom action research, the daily activities of teaching assume a dual role, as research activities. Several good handbooks (MacLean and Mohr, 1999; Hubbard and Power, 1999) illustrate this sleight-of-hand. Meetings with individual students become informal interviews; discussion circles and projects become focus groups; the full range of student work becomes data as well. One ethical question is central: 'Do the research methods support or interfere with my primary professional role?' (I recall the brilliant middle-school math teacher who became so enamored with writing field notes that he sat at his computer during class, observing and writing rather than engaging with students.) The challenge in planning action research is to make the methods transparent. When successful, the inquiry involves students as co-researchers and contributes both to student and to teacher learning.

Although *responsibility* is now widely cited as an ethical standard, many teacher researchers, universities, schools, and grant agencies still regard anonymity as the norm for student participants in classroom inquiry. However, if the research is shared with a wider audience through conferences or journals, anonymity is almost impossible. The child described in a good case study will be recognized by others from the community; most action research is written, not in the traditionally abstruse style of scholarship, but in a literary or journalistic voice that really might be read by parents or friends.

Ironically, when researchers discuss anonymity with their students, from primary school through university, most say they prefer their real names. (When told they must have pseudonyms, many children ask to create their own fanciful names, thereby reclaiming their stories.) As van den Berg comments:

The qualitative research community thus seems basically to have decided that the subjects of its enterprises need protecting, and that there are certain ways in which this is to be done (which apparently seldom, if ever, involve consulting the researched).... The notion of protection, then, presupposes an unequal relationship between the researcher and the people she or he claims to be researching *with*
(2001: 84–5)

A further irony is that anonymity may violate another ethical principle: credit for intellectual property (Anderson, 1998). Teachers admonish their students to cite sources accurately and to credit the ideas of others. Meanwhile, research manuals admonish those teachers to use a pseudonym when quoting from their students. Suppose the student work cited is a prize-winning poem? Suppose the ‘student’ is an adult in college? At what point does a student deserve credit more than protection?

To resolve such dilemmas, van den Berg (2001) proposes the principle of *accountability*. If action research draws on personal and professional relationships, open communication with participants should be the norm unless there is real evidence of risk. Consulting other stakeholders is especially important as the teacher tries to draw interpretations. To study his own program at a South African university, van den Berg referred draft reports back to his students for [p. 259 ↓] comments, corrections,

or questions. And when their views differ? Instead of uncritically accepting the students' version of the story, or stubbornly maintaining the original, he wove multiple voices and interpretations into the text. Such a narrative, I believe, can better represent the lived experiences of participants.

Action and Social Justice

Action should be an ethical standard for action research, reminding the professional to risk naming the big social issues and not to ignore injustices simply because they have always existed. I see the emphasis on 'action' as a broad difference between the British tradition (including Australia and South Africa) and that of North America. Teacher research in the United States tends to minimize the political edge, the concern with large social issues. Some fine analyses in the American tradition (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993; Zeichner, 2001) do incorporate the political with the personal and the professional. However, the popularized U.S. version of teacher research can be merely a small-scale trial of a new instructional method with no social context. In my own work I prefer the term 'action research' to signal my engagement with building a just, caring community inside and outside the classroom.

I see 'engaged action' as broader than radical political activity. (I began my teaching career in an alternative school of the 1960s, where we took field trips to participate in Civil Rights and peace marches.) Instead, I believe that the 'personal' is essential to engaged 'action.' To tease out some of the ethical issues, I will discuss my experience with an action research team in Webster Groves, Missouri.

For seven years (1987–1994), these secondary English teachers grappled with the big question, 'Why are the African American students in our community still underperforming in comparison with their White classmates?' (The 'achievement gap' was not yet a catchphrase.) Team leader Joan Krater, an eighth grade teacher, recalls: 'We wanted to believe that we educated ... all our students equally — but each year's writing assessment told a different story.' Everyone saw 'the dismal performance of too many African-American students in our integrated suburban schools,' but nobody took action. 'The problem lurks in the corners of department meetings and backyard barbecues. Teachers speak of it in whispers or shake their heads and change the

subject' (quoted in Krater et al., 1994: 15–16). Minnie Phillips, team member and high school teacher, adds:

College professors point to secondary teachers, secondary teachers point to elementary teachers, and elementary teachers to parents. Our hands are tied, we insist, by administrative policies or state and federal mandates. Television, of course, remains the universal culprit, as are on occasion the state of youth, the state of the economy and the state of the world in general. (quoted in Krater et al., 1994: 17–18)

Finally a new teacher — a year out of college and not yet schooled in the 'blame game' — voiced the question. As the faculty discussed the assessment results, [p. 260 ↓] Theresa Wojak raised her hand. 'Why do Black writers score lower than Whites?' Krater and Wojak wrote a small Missouri Incentive grant to support a teacher study group, and a dozen colleagues joined them.

That summer, the predominantly White team read extensively in the emerging scholarship by African-American educators. They also analyzed 500 essays by Black and by White student writers, seeking to understand the error patterns as well as the strengths teachers might build on. During the school year, they tried out some recommended approaches that seemed to fit the issues they had identified in student writing. To keep the documentation manageable, I suggested each teacher focus on just a few of their African-American students as case studies. Teachers agreed to keep research logs, collect writing samples, and attend a monthly team meeting.

As I consider this project's origins, the 'inside/outside' design, and our action research process, I am especially proud of how we handled the power relations. Krater was coordinator of the annual assessment as well as team leader. During the first two years I rarely attended the monthly meetings; the teachers had hired me to advise them on research design, synthesize their logs, and meet with them for a week in June as they planned their next steps. Gradually, seeing the energy and commitment of the teachers and the progress of their students, I was drawn more fully into the project. In year 3 I asked to be considered a team member. In year 4, Joan Krater suggested that we write a book together. *Mirror Images: Teaching Writing in Black and White* was published by Heinemann in 1994.

Writing a 500–page book with 15 contributing researchers was the most challenging scholarly task I had undertaken. Chapters were planned in after-school meetings, circulated for comments, and revised repeatedly. (As the only team member with a prior publication record, I wondered about dominating the group. My worries ended when my draft of Chapter 2 was rejected by middle-school teacher Cathy Beck, who then spent an hour on the phone talking me through a — much improved — revision.) Negotiating authorship meant defining each person's stake in the project (including mine as an assistant professor nearing a tenure review). Eventually, we created a title page listing 15 authors in three tiers. Joan Krater, Nancy Cason (her successor as team leader), and I were named as primary authors; we actually wrote the text. Cathy Beck, Minnie Phillips, and Sandra Tabscott were reviewing authors; they commented on every chapter and proposed revisions. Nine contributing researchers are also listed; they shared their stories, field notes, and annual reports along with insights expressed orally in team meetings.

Just as the book seemed complete, some unexpected feedback caused me to rethink my view of action research. The Heinemann reviewer asked why, in 500 pages, *Mirror Images* told readers so little about the teachers. There were wonderful stories about kids, but where were the stories showing what their teachers brought into the project and what they learned? At first we were shocked and defensive. The book quoted extensively from team members' logs and research journals; it was full of teacher voices. But no, there was nothing about our [p. 261 ↓] personal histories, our experience (or lack of it) with African-American people, our history of activism (or apathy). After a disgruntled team meeting, eight of us agreed to draft a personal, cultural story. Writing these pieces brought new understandings — along with tears and laughter — among teachers who had worked closely together for years.

Since then, I have guided many people through their initial experiences with action research, and I always incorporate autobiographical writing. Although reflexivity is an accepted principle in qualitative inquiry, researchers need to tell their readers more than their actions and expectations. Nobody is culturally neutral; I believe that researchers should not only report but also discuss the implications of their own race, class, and gender whenever they apply such categories to others. Telling one's own story in a research group reveals many unstated cultural assumptions. From the shared recognition may come the individual commitment to take action.

Noffke acknowledges the ‘limited ways in which issues of social justice have been addressed’ in practitioner studies that ‘highlight subjectivity’ (1997: 329–30). The ‘cultural,’ however, can be the link between the ‘personal’ and ‘political’ dimensions, since personal growth does not occur in a vacuum and individual identity is shaped by social experience. I see personal and cultural self-awareness as central — both epistemologically and ethically — to action research that addresses social issues inside and outside the classroom.

Caring and Respect

What I learned through *Mirror Images* has shaped the way I embarked on later projects. The team believed the most powerful principle identified in their research with African-American students was ‘personalizing’ their teaching. While studying my own practice as a university teacher educator, I have tried to build an environment that is emotionally safe as well as just.

Meyer et al. (2006) propose *caring* as an ethical standard for action research. Although rarely cited in guidelines for research in education and labeled an ethical risk in traditional outsider research, an ethic of *caring* tells me that doing action research should support rather than compromise our relationships.

To illustrate, I recall my struggle to communicate to future teachers my values of cultural diversity and social justice. My direct (preachy?) style had alienated my more conservative students and bored the others. So I asked my Methods class to write ‘The Culture I Will Bring to My Classroom,’ modeled on the personal writings in *Mirror Images*. The next term, as student teachers, they would relate these essays to their own classrooms. Where and how were they already cultural insiders in this setting? Where and how would they need to stretch their cultural boundaries in order to connect with this student population? I was thrilled by the response to the assignment. Students were engaged in sharing their personal stories and polishing their essays, often choosing them for the [p. 262 ↓] end-of-program portfolio. Unlike previous groups, they initiated discussions of culture in my class.

But was my action helping them connect with their own students as culturally responsive teachers (Gay, 2000)? My colleague Nancy Robb Singer and I had developed a student teaching listserv seminar to allow for communication between our monthly on-campus meetings. We became intrigued with the talk we were seeing online — a deeper, more personal, more intellectually challenging conversation than we typically heard in class (Singer and Zeni, 2004). Our norms for the listserv emphasized student voice and choice. Although the faculty took part, we did not set questions and we tried to keep a minimal presence. If we sat on our hands, another student teacher would usually respond to a colleague's issue, and we decided that the experience of collaborating in a professional group was more valuable than the wisdom we might impart.

Watching the listserv, Singer recognized more fully the new teachers' vulnerability, the roller-coaster of emotions. Early in the semester, Andrea wrote:

I thought I would be scared out of my wits at this point, wanting to hide in a corner. But now that has passed I am ready to teach — I feel like a dog straining on a tether. I want those students. I want to teach....

Six weeks later, Andrea's emotional tone had changed:

I am not really sure how things are going. I still feel kind of lost. I thought I would have a better sense of balance by now I think I still want to be a teacher, and I know that I am learning incredible amounts, but I'm tired of feeling like I am screwing up. I am too much of a perfectionist to enjoy watching myself make mistakes when people with real lives and futures are at stake.

Hangin' On,

Andrea (quoted in Singer and Zeni, 2004: 42–3)

In another month, Andrea found her balance. She finished the semester, signed a contract, and began her teaching career. Like most of her peers, she told us the listserv had offered valuable support that was there when she needed it.

In each cohort, one student teacher seemed to adopt the role of nurturer, responding quickly with comfort and affirmation as well as advice. (Having determined not to be the source of all wisdom, we discovered that we also did not have to be the source of all caring.) During certain points in the semester, we noticed a pattern of intense listserv activity. Singer restructured the seminar at those points, adding face-to-face meetings and tailoring assignments to the hot issues (such as classroom management) that were threatening new teachers' survival.

We tried in our seminar to build mutual trust, modeling the safe-yet-challenging climate of a teacher study group. We talked openly about our methods, our goals, and our interpretations.

There are ethical risks in exploring the personal writing of a vulnerable population, so we keep the 'teaching' goal at the center of our 'research'... Our student teachers know that we are analyzing their messages, and they know why.... We believe it is an ethical responsibility in teacher action research to refer our tentative findings to the community about which we are writing. (Singer and Zeni, 2004: 34)

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We handed out drafts of our paper, asked students for feedback, and credited their insights in our text. Later, we circulated revisions as email attachments.

I like the terms 'pastoral' or 'covenant' relationships to describe the personally engaged teaching and collaborative research that has been my goal. I cringe when teachers describe their students as subjects in an experiment: 'I am doing action research on Bobby.' In this statement, power and agency reside in the teacher; there is no hint of a personal relationship, of mutual learning, of respect; students have been transformed into data.

Conversely, in a case reported by Cohn and Kirkpatrick (2001), experienced high school teachers were transformed into data by student observers. In their school—university partnership, student teachers collaborated with their mentors in teaching and in action research. An ethical crisis arose when a few students gave presentations at a research

conference painting their mentors in an unflattering light. After the embarrassment and soul searching, the team leaders' solution was quite simple: to their action research criteria they added *respect* — 'The tone of the report is professionally respectful.... It does not make its point by criticizing or negatively presenting one's colleagues. The focus of the report is a study of the actions of the researcher, not the actions of one's colleagues' (p. 143).

Respect as an ethical standard seems related both to *caring* and to *accountability*. I agree that when conducting, sharing and publishing classroom inquiries, a research partner should minimize the risk to other professionals' reputations. Kemmis (2006) argues instead for the public's right to know what happens in the classroom, for 'telling unwelcome truths' in order to transform practice. Certainly if an observer finds abuse or discrimination or other illegal behavior, the responsibility is to report. Otherwise, however, I view respect and confidentiality as paramount when I am a guest in someone else's professional world. Fishman and McCarthy (2000) show readers the back-story, the interweaving of caring and respect, truth and transformation in their research partnership.

A Personal Ethic for Action Research

Drawing together the three themes in this chapter, I will offer some questions for ethical reflection by action researchers working in the schools.

Responsibility and Accountability

A teacher researcher is first of all a teacher — responsible to students, administrators, parents, and the community (Mohr, 2001).

Who else among the stakeholders has an interest in my question?

To whom am I accountable professionally?

How will I refer my interpretations back for comment so that my work has more than my own perspective?

Whose permission should I seek to pursue this inquiry?

If I publish or present my work, should I protect others with pseudonyms OR credit them by name?

Action and Social Justice

While focusing on a micro-society such as a single classroom, action researchers should consider forces in the larger society that play out in school and work toward more democratic classroom communities.

Where is the 'action' in my research?

If I am trying a new teaching technique, what are its assumptions about learners, learning, and society?

Will my research aim to interpret the experience of students or others who differ from me in culture (including gender, race, class)?

How can I prepare myself to better 'read' their experience?

If I publish or present my work, can I incorporate the voices of participants whose backgrounds differ from mine?

If the report is collaborative, how should we negotiate authorship?

Caring and Respect

Action research should enhance the personal, covenant relationships that connect the researcher and other participants for their mutual benefit.

How will my research activities come across to students, parents, others? Will they feel interested, bored, honored, annoyed? (How can I find out?)

Will the research be a learning experience for others, or just for me?

Can I involve my students (colleagues, parents, others) as my co-researchers?

If I publish or present my work, who might be hurt or embarrassed? Can I justify such damage by the public's right to know?

Can the stakeholders read, understand, and critique my report? (Voice is an ethical as well as a rhetorical choice.)

What About Institutional Ethics Boards?

In most universities and in many schools, an ethics committee reviews and approves all research proposals. While the composition and authority of these boards vary across the international scene, they raise concern among action researchers because of their grounding in traditional scientific models of inquiry (Pritchard, 2002). Looking for common ground, I have served on my university's institutional review board, and also on an ethical review committee of teacher researchers in a nearby school district. Elsewhere I have described some promising approaches to such reviews (Zeni, 1998; Zeni, 2001). Here I will simply [p. 265 ↓] urge that action researchers not allow external reviews to constrict our thinking about insider research ethics. We should resist the temptation to seek universal, 'yes/no' protocols and keep our ethical theorizing 'close to the settings, the decisions, and the actions [we] have taken' (Smith, 1990: 272).

Today, when public money and status are again linked with large-scale impersonal research, we need action researchers to tell the human stories. We need them to insist that research to improve one's own practice is a professional responsibility, part of good teaching. We need them to show that good research can aim higher than gains in test scores, and that democratic classrooms are possible. We need them to insist that any

research in the schools treat persons with caring and respect, and to demonstrate the power of personal commitment.

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