From the Editor

As we move well into Fall 2012, we took some time at the beginning of a hectic new academic year to sit back and reflect on trending issues in higher education teaching and learning. It became clear to us here at the Research Academy, as we determinedly pursue many different research tracks with our faculty, that the fragile balance between research and teaching is always a foremost concern for educators in higher education. So, we thought, how do we address this conflict? How are others addressing the conflict? We pose several ways to address the pressure of producing research and providing quality learning experiences for students: involve students in research (please refer to our books and articles section for resources and templates for engaging students with research) or turning our research eye on our own teaching practice to produce and contribute to scholarship on teaching and learning.

Our featured author, Dr. Jean McNiff, Professor of Educational Research, York St. John University, UK provides us with strategies for performing action research, an approach that allows us to query our own teaching practice to produce and contribute to scholarship on teaching and learning.

We include a review of Stylish Academic Writing (Helen Sword, Harvard University Press, 2012), which argues for bridging the divide between stylish writing and the impenetrable prose commonly found in research writing. This book raises the question: at what cost do we conform to rigid writing practices to publish our research? How can we write for research purposes as well as model stylish writing for students?

Thanks for reading and enjoy the rest of your semester!

Julie Dalley
Assistant Director, Research Academy
Editor, The Teaching Times

Action Research for Professional Development:
Concise Advice for New Action Researchers (excerpted)

What is Action Research?

Action research is a term that refers to a practical way of looking at your own work to check that it is as you would like it to be. Because action research is done by you, the practitioner, it is often referred to as practitioner based research; and because it involves you thinking about and reflecting on your work, it can also be called a form of self-reflective practice.

The idea of self-reflection is central. In traditional forms of research—empirical research—researchers do research on other people. In action research, researchers do research on themselves. Empirical researchers enquire into other people’s lives. Action researchers enquire into their own. Action research is an enquiry conducted by the self into the self. You, a practitioner, think about your own life and work, and this involves you asking yourself why you do the things that you do, and why you are the way that you are. When you produce your research report, it shows how you have carried out a systematic investigation into your own behaviour, and the reasons for that behaviour. The report shows the process you have gone through in order to achieve a better understanding of yourself, so that you can continue developing yourself and your work.

...Continued on page 2

Table of Contents:

Action Research for Professional Development: Concise Advice for New Action Researchers (excerpted) .... 1

News and Events ............ 4

Hey, Academic Writers, You Can Have Style and Substance ....... 7

Around the Web ............... 9

Books and Articles ............ 11
How do I do action research?
The basic steps of an action research process constitute an action plan:
- We review our current practice,
- identify an aspect that we want to investigate,
- imagine a way forward,
- try it out, and
- take stock of what happens.
We modify what we are doing in the light of what we have found, and continue working in this new way (try another option if the new way of working is not right);
- monitor what we do,
- review and evaluate the modified action, and so on … (see also McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead, 1996, and forthcoming)

Two processes are at work: your systematic actions as you work your way through these steps, and your learning. Your actions embody your learning, and your learning is informed by your reflections on your actions. Therefore, when you come to write your report or make your research public, in other ways, you should aim to show not only the actions of your research, but also the learning involved. Some researchers focus only on the actions and procedures, and this can weaken the authenticity of the research.

A number of models are available in the literature. Most of them regard practice as non-linear, appreciating that people are unpredictable, and that their actions often do not follow a straightforward trajectory. The action plan above shows action reflection as a cycle of:
- identify an area of practice to be investigated;
- imagine a solution;
- implement the solution;
- evaluate the solution;
- change practice in light of the evaluation …

This action research cycle can now turn into new action research cycles, as new areas of investigation emerge. It is possible to imagine a series of cycles to show the processes of developing practice. The processes can be shown as a spiral of cycles, where one issue forms the basis of another and, as one question is addressed, the answer to it generates new questions.

Remember that things do not often proceed in a neat, linear fashion. Most people experience research as a zig-zag process of continual review and re-adjustment. Research reports should communicate the seeming incoherence of the process in a coherent way.

Action planning
A number of action plans are available in the literature. The action plan that has grown in popularity around the world is the one developed by Jack Whitehead. The aim is to encourage you, a practitioner, to ask critical questions about your own practice, and find the answers for yourself. No one else can give you answers. Other people can comment and advise, but only you can say what is right for you and your situation. It could be that there are no answers to your particular issue, but the process of asking questions is as important as finding answers.

Here is a modified version of Jack’s action plan. On the next page, the plan is explained in greater detail.
- What issue am I interested in researching?
- Why do I want to research this issue?
- What kind of evidence can I gather to show why I am interested in this issue?
- What can I do? What will I do?
- What kind of evidence can I gather to show that I am having an influence?
- How can I explain that influence?
- How can I ensure that any judgements I make are reasonably fair and accurate?
- How will I change my practice in the light of my evaluation?

There is always a dilemma between suggesting action plans and avoiding making them appear as prescriptive. In action research, everyone takes responsibility for their own practice and for asking their own questions. You do need to ensure, however,

...Continued from front

Action research is open ended. It does not begin with a fixed hypothesis. It begins with an idea that you develop. The research process is the developmental process of following through the idea, seeing how it goes, and continually checking whether it is in line with what you wish to happen. Seen in this way, action research is a form of self-assessment.

The aim is to encourage you, a practitioner, to ask critical questions about your own practice, and to find the answers yourself.
that are allowing the situation to be as it is, and finding ways of changing the conditions. The main point is to identify an area you wish to investigate, and be reasonably clear about why you wish to get involved.

It is important, in your first action enquiries, to be reasonably sure that you can do something about the issue you have identified. You should be practical and ask, ‘Can I actually do something about this issue? Can I influence the situation, or is it outside my scope?’ If it really is outside your scope you should be realistic and leave it. Having said that, do not give up altogether. Aim to address one small aspect of your work. While it might be true that you cannot change the world, you can certainly change your bit of it; and if everyone changed a small bit at a time, a lot of change could happen quickly.

Once you have identified a research issue, you should formulate a research question. This can be stated in terms of ‘How do I …?’

The main ideas are:

- I am asking a real question about something that is important to me, and I am hoping to find ways of engaging with it;
- I am a real person;
- I am trying to improve something; this might be my own understanding, or it might be an aspect of the social situation I am in (Remember: improvement does not mean perfection. Any improvement is still improvement, no matter how small).

Why are you interested?

You need to be reasonably clear why you want to get involved. The reasons for our actions are often rooted in our values base, that is, the things we believe in and that drive our lives. If you believe that all people have equal rights, you will try to ensure that your workplace is a place in which everyone does have equal rights, and you will organise your own work so that everyone has the opportunity to exercise their rights. The trouble is, we often work in situations where it is not possible to live in a way that is congruent with what we believe in. You might believe in equal rights for all, but your workplace could well be a place where the rights of some people are denied. As your research progresses you might find that you are the one who is denying equal rights to others. You should expect surprises like this.

Action research is a way of working that helps us to identify the values that are important for our lives and to live in the direction of those values, that is, take them as the organising principles of our lives. It is unlikely that we will ever get to a situation where our actions are entirely congruent with our values. But we are not aiming for ‘end products,’ we are aiming to find right ways of living.

What kind of evidence can you gather to show why you are interested?

If you are in a situation where things are not as you would wish them to be, how can you show that situation so that other people can relate to what you are experiencing? How can you show what the situation was like, which made you resolve to do something about it? You need to gather data about the situation, and you can use a variety of methods for this – journals, diaries, notes, audio and videotape recordings, surveys, attitude scales, pictures, and so on. You can use different data gathering methods at different times if you wish. You will compare this first set of data with later sets of data, to see whether there is any change and whether you can say that you have influenced the situation. Aim to gather as much data as you feel is right; most people gather too much to begin with.

You need to begin identifying working criteria to help you make judgements about whether the situation might be improving. These criteria would be linked with your values. If you believe that all people should be treated fairly, a criterion will be whether you can show that people are being treated fairly. The criteria you identify might change as the research project develops. Your data will turn into evidence when you can show that it meets your nominated criteria.

What can you do about the situation? How do you act in order to influence it in an educative way?

You need to imagine ways in which you might begin taking action. You might want at this stage to consult with others about how you could move forward. These others could be your critical friend or your validation group. A validation group is a group of people you invite to look at your research from time to time, and offer critical feedback. The decisions you come to about what action to take will be your own decisions; you take responsibility for what you do. You need to consider your options carefully and decide what you can reasonably expect to achieve, given the time, energy and other resources you have.

Having decided on a possible strategy, you now need to try it out. It might work and it might not. If it does, you will probably want to continue developing it. If it does not, you will probably abandon it, or part of it, and try something else.

What kind of evidence can you gather to show your educative influence?

This is your second set of data, which will also turn into evidence when you can show that it meets your nominated criteria. You can use the same, or different, data-gathering methods that you used before.

…Continued on page 6
This is what makes action research a powerful methodology for personal and social renewal. You are thinking and searching all the time. You are never complacent or content to leave problematic situations as they are, because you refuse to become complacent or lazy. As long as you remain aware, alert, constantly open to new beginnings, you will continue growing into all the persons you are capable of becoming.

How do you modify your practice in the light of your evaluation?
You will probably carry on working in this new way because it seems to be better than the way you were working before. It is more in line with the way you wish things to be. You are living in the direction of your values (though you might still have far to go).

This does not mean closure. Although you have addressed one issue, others might have emerged which now need attention. Perhaps in addressing one issue, you have unearthed other issues that you had not expected. There is no end, and that is the nature of developmental practices, and part of the joy of doing action research. It resists closure. Each ending is a new beginning. Each event carries its own potentials for new creative forms.

How do you explain your educative influence?
Remember that the focus of the enquiry is you. You are always in company with others, so what you do is bound to have an influence on them. How can you show that your influence was as you wished it to be?
To gauge your impact on them, you need to get their reactions to how they perceive their influence on you. How can you show that what I say I am doing constitutes a fair and accurate claim?

You should try to show, through this set of data, whether there is an improvement in their performance, or their knowledge, or their beliefs, or their confidence. They might suggest that you need to look at the research again and gather further data, perhaps, or tighten up the link between your data and your criteria. Once you have other people's validation you can say in all honesty, "I am claiming that I have influenced this situation because I started looking at ways in which I could improve what I am doing, and I now have the endorsement of other people to show that what I say I am doing constitutes a fair and accurate claim."

How do you ensure that any judgements you make are reasonably fair and accurate?
If you say, "I think that such and such happened," you can expect someone to say, "Prove it." The answer is that you can't. You can't prove anything. The word "prove" does not exist in action research. You can however produce reasonable evidence to suggest that what you feel happened really did happen, and you are not just making it up.

In saying that you believe you have influenced your situation for good, you are making a claim to knowledge. You are also producing evidence to back up the claim. Now you need other people critically to consider your claim and agree that you have good reason for making your claim. They might agree that you are justified in making your claim, and their agreement would be validation of your claim.

They might suggest that you need to look at the research again and gather further data, perhaps, or tighten up the link between your data and your criteria. Once you have other people's validation you can say in all honesty, "I am claiming that I have influenced this situation because I started looking at ways in which I could improve what I am doing, and I now have the endorsement of other people to show that what I say I am doing constitutes a fair and accurate claim."

Perhaps you used surveys and interviews to gather your first set of data; now you might be able to show a development in your own thinking and learning. This is an integral part of the action research process.

Perhaps you have an open question about something you were working before. It is more in line with the way you wish things to be. You are living in the direction of your values (though you might still have far to go). This does not mean closure. Although you have addressed one issue, others might have emerged which now need attention. Perhaps in addressing one issue, you have unearthed other issues that you had not expected. There is no end, and that is the nature of developmental practices, and part of the joy of doing action research. It resists closure. Each ending is a new beginning. Each event carries its own potentials for new creative forms.

Don't write in jargonistic hieroglyphics that require readers to decode their meaning.
Students and practitioners like myself confuse big words with good writing or sound argument. Instead, they should be open and willing to soften their writing to make meaning more concrete and knowledge more accessible. Sword presents a guide to crafting stylish writing cause (p. 6). Scholars have long been making the case for better academic writing, going back to the classic article (which Sword references on pages 6-7) by Patricia Nelson Limerick, “Dancing with Professors: the trouble with academic prose,” (New York Times Book Review, 1993). Limerick famously critiqued the academic snoozer that favors impenetrable, jargonistic papers that few understand, and that even fewer still will admit they cannot understand.

But what is good writing? And what does bad writing look like? In addition to spotlighting accomplished academic writers, Sword peppers her chapters with snippets of badly written prose plucked from numerous (one thousand, to be precise) articles and essays from a broad swatch of disciplines: science, math, history, medicine, law, psychology, anthropology, philosophy, education, literary studies and more. She also takes aim at style guides, and their conflicting messages that can lead a writer to constrain or even limit personal voice at the expense of their disciplinary expertise or authority— and who infuse their writing with style and voice that engages the reader and delivers thoughtful, insightful, authoritative, but most of all, accessible, knowledge. Examples include Nathaniel Mmmis, physician (p. 38); Ruth Behar, anthropologist (p. 45); Stephen Greenblatt, literary critic, author, and scholar (p. 83); and Robert J. Conoin and Andrea Lunsford, English scholars and researchers, writing as “Ma and Pa Kettle” (p. 128). Alongside these exemplars of stylish writing, Sword presents a guide to crafting stylish prose in a book that is short, concise, and replete with tips and tricks (Things to Try found at the end of each chapter—extremely useful for writing instructors). The author demonstrates with concrete examples and suggestions that “the most engaging writers are almost invariably those who pay the closest attention to the real people—specialists and non-specialists, colleagues and strangers—in whose ears their own words will echo” (p. 44). We forget that our audience needs to be limited to a select few academics; we should write as though our ideas have resonance beyond our disciplines, and as far as the layperson with a curious mind.

Sword consulted 70 academics from across the disciplines who gave her a list of ideal characteristics of good academic writing: writing should be elegant, with carefully crafted sentences; it should have energy, possess an intellectual commitment; it should display passion, with engaging prose; it should tell a compelling story and avoid jargon; it should be a work of aesthetic and intellectual pleasure with originality, imagination, and creative flair (p. 8). She dismisses the mythological tenet that individual voice and personal agency should be eliminated from academic writing. Rather, she insists, it is through the use of personal pronouns that we connect more intimately with our audience and attach our expertise more closely to our work and immersion in our discipline: “Academic writers drive to convey a completely neutral perspective; as merchants of truth rather than fiction, we see it as our job to inform our readers, not to play with their expectations or their minds. Yet that neutrality, when closely examined, turns out to be something of a myth” (p. 94). Why do we research and write if not to establish our own authority in the field?

Sword’s strongest argument comes in Chapter 10: Jargonitis, a term often used as a pejorative to describe text that is “obscure and often pretentious language marked by circumlocutions and long words” (p. 112).

---Continued on page 10
Here she sways the reader by pointing out the exclusionary nature of jargon in academic text (i.e., “I belong, you don’t”), how academese has reduced the writer to ostentation, obfuscation and obscurity, and how jargon can become a substitute for legitimate thought, a placelholder for fully developed and creative ideas.

Struggling with meaning and difficult and complex ideas has long been considered an integral part of academic training; our style and authority is formed and informed by the literature we review and the research we build upon in our own work. Is it necessary? Mostly not, Sword says. “Sometimes, however, the line between technical precision and intellectual pretension becomes a fine one.” (p. 117). Sword points to the invocation of Michel Foucault by numerous scholars, many who appear to never have engaged directly with his body of work. “Foucauldian” references in humanities and social sciences scholarship are a straw man and intellectual pretension becomes a necessity; becoming exclusionary for the general public, and学术ese that both confounds and confirms you. (p. 119).

Sword concludes her book with two chapters that deal with the more intangible elements of good writing: passion, persuasion, playfulness, making the abstract concrete, challenging the reader, engaging the reader’s imagination, abiding in elegance; in other words, “paint a big picture on a small canvas” (Chapter 13: “The Big Picture” and Chapter 14: “The Creative Touch.” pp. 147-172). She shares the following advice from evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, which neatly packages her argument:

Do not talk down. Try to inspire everybody with the poetry of science and make your explanations as easy as honesty allows, but at the same time do not neglect the difficult. Put extra effort into explaining to those readers prepared to put matching effort into understanding. (qtd. on p. 157).

Noticably lacking in this otherwise comprehensive book is any reference to the emerging trend of digital writing and the new literacies that govern those writing forms. Some literature exists that suggests that writing online offers us a more relaxed style and format online. Sword does discuss augmenting text with images (p. 108), however, that is as close as she comes to addressing multimodal academic writing.

This is the core of the resistance to change in American education. If we do move to more stylish academic writing, Sword’s work is an informative and useful place to start: it provides foundational instruction on how to write clearly, how the license to write freely, and the motivation to make the leap.

Sword’s lesson comes down to courage on the part of the scholar: you must choose if you want your writing to stand out from the crowd or conform to the disciplinary academese that both confounds and confirms you. This book gives you license to take some risks with your academic writing, and provides solid evidence of other scholars who have gained world-wide acclaim, in some cases became household names, for daring to step outside the writing box and be stylish.

Helen Sword is Associate Professor in the Centre for Academic Development at the University of Auckland.

To find out how stylish your own writing is, take Sword’s WritersDiet Test. http://writersdiet.com/WT.php

---

**Books and Articles**


**First Semester: Graduate Students, Teaching Writing, and the Challenge of Middle Ground by Jessica Restaino. CCCC Studies in Writing and Rhetoric, 2012. Print.**


Submission guidelines

To submit an article or essay for publication, please send a one-paragraph prospectus to Julie Dalley at dalleyj@mail.montclair.edu or a complete manuscript ready for publication.

We welcome a variety of submissions that address the many topics that can be found concerning higher education teaching and learning, and encourage you to write and discuss your experiences, practices, research and emerging scholarship. We print essays, articles, book reviews, and research summaries. We do accept certain items that have already been published, with the proper permissions included with the submission. All essays and articles should be a maximum of 2,200 words, including a brief bio of the author and a complete list of works cited. We reserve the right to accept or decline to publish any one piece based on our publishing policies and criteria; however, you don’t know if you don’t submit, so please share.