

PAR Goes to School – A Faculty of Education and the Personal, Political and Institutional Fault Lines in the Sandbox

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It is generally recognized that the latter twentieth century and early twenty-first have given rise to significant shifts in the epistemological, ethical, and political underpinnings that support research in educational institutions. The subject/object relationship that traditionally defined empirical research – almost exclusively quantitative - has been in many ways usurped by new and dynamic action research methodologies, including but not limited to PAR, all of which rely upon a participatory, bottom-up, transformational and constructive approach to meaning making and knowledge building.

The magnitude and impact of this shift, however, which appears to be significant and enduring, is not without growing pains. Across research contexts, a range of unexpected challenges, tensions, and even full-blown obstacles continue to encumber the advancement of innovative projects, institutional agendas, and multidisciplinary initiatives. In fact, unforeseen shocks and fault lines appear on a regular basis in the institutions of higher learning which initially resisted fully, but which eventually have come to tolerate such new approaches.

It is important that these impediments be acknowledged, named, and theorized if action methodologies are to continue to evolve and exert a positive impact on the educational research horizon in its broadest sense. This paper will attempt to take up this challenge. Drawing on examples of situations encountered in a North American Faculty of Education (one facing significant change), the paper will identify a number of contexts in which an action research approach was adopted with a view to moving toward pedagogical and institutional change. It will map onto these the conditions and contexts that both generate and are generated by the fault lines of PAR in terms of its goals, expectations, and methodologies. In so doing, this paper will attempt to identify and describe what are referred to as the encounter-contexts, those which lead to frustration, disheartenment, despair, and defiance, and yet which also house within them the potential for hope, optimism and positive action and outcomes. It will discern obstacles to and tensions within an action research approach, and will outline a series of frequently interpersonal, fundamentally institutional, and vitally political challenges that must be addressed if a PAR “mentality” is to play a positive role in impacting the expectations, practices, and outcomes of our educational institutions.