Overview of Action-Research Methods: Introduction to Action-Research Seminar Series

Handout for Session 1 written by WISR Faculty Members, John Bilorusky and Cynthia Lawrence-Wallace, November 6, 2002

History of "Action-Research" at WISR

The teaching and learning of "action-research" has been a theme at WISR since WISR's inception in 1975. Over the years, most all of WISR faculty have been very committed to the importance of action-oriented inquiry. Individually and as a group we have believed that research that involves many of the people involved in any action effort has great potential for the creation of imaginative and powerful insights, for empowering participants, and for bringing about community improvements and progress toward larger ideals of social justice, the greater realization of human potential and the like.

Although statistical research can serve useful, even if limited functions, we have learned that qualitative methods often bring to light profound insights--from interviews, personal experience and observations, and everyday action—that cannot be so easily discerned from quantitative and standardized methods of inquiry. What we mean by action-research is not a precisely defined set of methods but a collage of attitudes, frames of mind, and orientations to inquiry, learning and action. The "qualities" in action-research as we have come to talk about "it" with students over the years are manifest in one's everyday job and community activities, as well as in more formal undertakings (ranging from dissertations and theses, to efforts to do a major evaluation of an existing program, to the creation of a new program or community agency). "Action-research" as we promote it can certainly include specific techniques, such as strategies of note-taking or interviewing, but it is much, much more than a set of techniques or methods.

In 1980, WISR was one of about 80 institutions of higher education nationally to receive a major grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education to do a nationwide demonstration project on some aspect of the improvement of higher education. Our project was funded for three years and focused on "Extending the Teaching, Learning and Use of Action-Research Throughout the Larger Community." As part of that project's efforts, Terry Lunsford and John Bilorusky conducted a series of seminar/workshops for WISR students and others in community agencies, and wrote some learning materials on action-research to serve as a basis for discussions in those seminar/workshops. Copies of the articles written for that series, as well as a few other learning materials written over the years are available for students to borrow, and if they choose, to make copies of those materials.

An annotated bibliography of those articles on action-research is attached.

Qualities of WISR's Visions of Action-Research

Although "action-research" as pursued by faculty and many students at WISR can take varied forms, there are some qualities which tend to characterize what we see to be some of the more compelling and promising visions of action-research.

To further our discussion here is the beginning of a list. Action-research . . .

- Is exploratory (rather than narrow or habitual)
- Is reflective (rather than rote or unthinking)
- Promotes engagement (rather than aloofness)
- Is inquisitive (rather than disinterested or accepting)
- Is collaborative and participatory (rather than disconnected from dialogue and participation with others)
- Is emergent (rather than formulaic or mechanistic)
- Is concerned with the "bigger picture"—with other theories, readings, larger societal issues and implications (rather than focusing on trees to the exclusion of the forest and the landscape beyond the forest)
- Promotes telling and listening to stories and tangible examples (not just abstractions)
- Is concerned with human values and social justice (not with so-called value-free research, or with research and efforts which only serve the status quo)
- Involves taking one's own experiences and insights seriously, as a basis for thinking, writing, conversations with others, and larger action (rather than relying only on the knowledge from books and the ideas embedded in existing policies and practices within organizations)
- Involves looking beyond oneself, as well—as in doing reviews of literature and interviews with others (rather than assuming we can't learn from others, even those whose thinking or purposes we believe to be flawed in important ways)
- Involves writing and rewriting in our own voice—to think out loud with oneself, to communicate and share with others, to stimulate collaboration and participation with others, and to refine ideas and strategies (writing is part of an ongoing creative process, rather than an end point or an opportunity to set knowledge "in stone").

Excerpts Pertaining to Action-Research

We recently wrote an article about WISR and some of the special magic we have seen and experienced in the learning here at WISR over the years. In this section, we are including some admitted disjointed excerpts from that article. These excerpts pertain to some of the themes of "action-research" at WISR, even though they are discussed here from the viewpoint of how we try to promote learning at WISR.

We encourage learners to not just study topics they want to, but also to realize that implicit in their insights are emerging theories to be communicated to others.

We invite learners not only to write about what they're interested in, but also to write in their voice, to use the first person, to wonder and ask questions out loud on paper.

We see learning projects as open-ended, not as "products-to-be-graded." We tell students that they may often end a paper by coming up with new questions more than definitive conclusions.

We urge learners not to formulate thesis and project topics by what "sounds good" (e.g., not to focus on coming up with a "good" hypothesis to test, where the answer is really known in advance and can then be verified. We urge learners to search for the questions that are important to them, and to others, for the things that they are sincerely and deeply curious to learn more about.

We are actively hospitable and even encouraging of learning endeavors which seek to reflect on issues of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression and social injustice. We rather consciously and emphatically find ourselves supporting learning and actions which are intended to promote equality, human liberation and justice.

We encourage learners to probe beneath the surface of things, to look concurrently at both the immediately practical tasks before us in community work and the bigger picture (society as a whole). We want learners to become more conscious of how they evaluate and judge evidence, and to be alert to get more information, to broaden their experiences. We suggest concrete research strategies for accomplishing these things.

We also improvise and brainstorm about specific ways each student can proceed with their inquiries, when we are in the midst of thinking with them about their unfinished projects as well as their yet-to-be-formulated projects. What research methods are likely to facilitate the learner in productively addressing the questions, interests, problems, and actions with which they are engaged?

We endeavor to help learners to do more than simply think or write about their community involvements, for we encourage them to be creative, intellectually and practically. Our students are very apt to write books and articles putting forth the insights and ideas growing out of their experience. Many work on establishing their own non-profit organization, to try to fill some unmet community need in a distinctively innovative way.

We encourage learners to critically reflect on their community/job experience. People often get involved in routines and find it difficult to take the time and give the attention to looking beneath the surface of what they are doing, or to think about the bigger picture. We try to encourage learners to take notes on what they are doing and then write papers about their insights, and the questions, problems and challenges they encounter, what works, what doesn't work, and how their efforts might contribute to longer-term changes.

We also ask learners to read what others have to say about social change, about the factors that contribute to it, and their vision of how it should happen and where it should lead. We ask them to critique these ideas and theories about social change, in terms of what they agree and disagree with, and in terms of how these ideas relate to the specific types of activities in which the student is engaged, be it work with youth, therapy with trauma survivors, health education, or job training. In this way, students can stand back from the details of what they are doing and think about it in terms of the bigger picture.

We encourage the learner to take his or her own ideas more seriously as a basis for developing theories about a topic in which he or she is an expert. Very often, people think theories are something developed by other people, by so-called famous people, and don't take their own insights seriously enough. Autobiographical writing, or at least writings about one's own experience, as they pertain to ideas, questions, concepts developed on a particular topic,, is a good way to help students begin to develop their own theories, which they often have but don't realize that they have. We believe that most of us know more than we realize that we know, and we just need the right kinds of support and dialogue to help us become aware of our knowledge, as such, and then to articulate it.

We spend a lot of time commenting on student rough drafts, and encourage our students to submit rough "drafts" that are still in the form of bits and pieces of as-yet unorganized ideas, as well as more polished drafts that have a beginning, middle, and end to them.

We sometimes suggest that learners interweave reviews of literature with their own ideas—not so much to support their own ideas (which usually can be supported by examples and evidence growing out of their own rich experience) as to think about how their ideas fit in (or don't fit in) with the body of writings that other people have put forth on similar topics.

We often encourage learners to interview others to test out their ideas, to see how others' experience is similar to or different from their own, and to use these interviews as a basis for involving others in taking some kind of action on the problems of concern to the learner.

We try to encourage learners not to accept "pat" answers or narrow, technical solutions to problems, whether those approaches are ones they are advocating or whether they are adopting someone else's recipe for success. We usually find when questioning students about these formulaic approaches, that the learner's deeper thoughts about the strategy are much more complex, and more subtle, but that the action advocated has been more simply stated, sometimes because the simply stated version sounds "acceptable" and similar to approaches validated by others in positions of high status or authority.

[Consider as one example] the action-research project of a student who is the director of a large, multipurpose agency serving homeless families. She wanted to interview homeless mothers and service providers in other agencies serving homeless. Her concern is: how do these clients experience the rules imposed by the agencies serving them? In particular, she is concerned that although the rules are well-intended, the homeless mothers often experience the rules established by the service providers, who have considerable power over them, as a retraumatizing event, as one that reminds them of an experience with say, a battering partner. The result is that these mothers take their children and flee the very places that have been created to shelter them. This project is not yet complete, but she has already learned much more than she thought she would. Further, the homeless mothers interviewed have experienced the interviewing process itself as very empowering and esteem building. Other service providers have become curious about her interviewing efforts, and now want her to interview them and their clients. She has begun to consider having some mothers discuss these issues directly with service providers, or help her in conducting some interviews.

[An] example of an important outcome is when learners find their own voice in deeper, more authentic and more powerful way than they have been able to previously. Learners who

are about to write their first paper at WISR discover that they can write in the first person, and take ownership of the knowledge they have built and wish to communicate to others. They come to realize that they are not limited by the "behaviors" of academia (e.g., writing in the third person in a neutral, indifferent-sounding way) that they have always assumed was part of professional communication and "research." For example, one student at WISR who had long been well recognized in his field and profession, and who was a very capable and accomplished writer, had a breakthrough in his own writing during his studies for the Ph.D. at WISR. He told us that for the first time, he grappled with issues involved in his "coming out of the closet" with his Marxist convictions in the way that he writes about the insights and lessons that have evolved over the years as he has taught English in Japan and done research in various parts of the world on the topic of intercultural communication.

[We also turned our attention to **how action-research as we try to practice and promote it at WISR relates to "science" and "scientific methods**."]

Our emphasis on knowledge-building and inquiry at WISR is aimed at demystifying science and helping people to learn that science and scientific methods are not fixed abstractions but works in progress that grow out of the efforts of real human beings, with all the strengths and limitations that we as human beings bring to science and inquiry. We are not anti-science, but against the one-dimensional stereotypes of science that suggest that hard science is good because it is aloof and "objective" rather than human and open-ended. We want our learners to come to appreciate that many of the best qualities of scientific breakthroughs in the so-called "hard" sciences often involve very subjective and imaginative involvements of the scientists who often achieve fame. Einstein drew on his intuition in very important ways, as do many other creative, productive scientists. Watson and Crick made a conceptual leap to the double-helix structure of DNA based on a dream about intertwined serpents. At many points in the achievement of scientific breakthroughs, scientists engage in debate as they wrestle with theories and interpretations of evidence that are far from clear-cut and conclusive.
In ways that are very good and important, science at its best is messy and requires the active engagement of learners (including famous scholars) rather than an aloof stance of psuedo-objectivity as students are often taught to believe. One of us completed a B.A. in physics and interned in high energy physics and mathematical physics before being pulled to social activism and the field of higher education reform in the late 60s. This understanding of some of the strengths and limitations of the hard sciences from the inside out has contributed to our writing and our teaching about action-research, participatory research, the philosophy of knowledge and inquiry in the social sciences.

We teach our students that the social sciences are no more "soft" than the natural sciences. Too often, social scientists try to emulate an inaccurate view of the complex, organic, "messiness" that allows people in the natural sciences to sometimes achieve very creative and important insights. In the past couple of decades, there has been a gradual but noticeably growing awareness of "complexity theory" and its applications to many fields of study. This has been a very positive development by calling wider attention to non-linear and organic qualities of knowledge building.

More and more, people are coming to realize the severe limitations of mechanistic, formulaic versions of science which overemphasize numeric manipulations, rigid protocols and aloof, unimaginative research designs and interpretations of data. One of us once interviewed a

professor of physics at the University of California who had been identified by students and colleagues as a very distinguished instructor. This professor (who was also well-respected as a scholar in the field) said that one of the challenges he had in educating his graduate students was to help them develop what he called a "qualitative understanding" of physics. He felt that all too often when students were working on a problem, they would make some numeric mistake of computation but would be unable to catch their mistake because they didn't have a good intuitive, qualitative grasp of the relationships that they were trying to study through unreflectively plugging numbers into a formula.

As learners come to appreciate this "bigger picture" of science and inquiry, they also feel more confident about their capacity to contribute to knowledge building. Partly, they develop more sophisticated skills--in designing research, gathering and judging evidence, and articulating the insights and questions that grow out of their practical experience. Beyond this, they become motivated to see themselves, as well as their colleagues, clients and/or fellow citizens, as active participants who are capable of contributing to knowledge that has the potential to improve our communities and contribute to social justice.