

# INAUGURAL LECTURE

of

## Prof Lesley Wood

**ACTION RESEARCH FOR THE 21ST CENTURY: EXPLORING NEW  
EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS**



29 August 2013



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## **ACTION RESEARCH FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY: EXPLORING NEW EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS**

**Lesley Wood – Inaugural lecture 29 August 2013.**

### **Introduction**

*'We should not mislead ourselves and say the whole [education] system is in crisis ... It is the education of an African child that is in crisis' (Motshekga, 2010)*

Apartheid in South Africa was officially abolished with the country's first democratic elections in 1994. Yet, almost twenty years later, quality of life has improved for only a small percentage of members of the 'previously' disadvantaged groups. Poverty and disease continue to curtail the freedom of the majority of South African citizens, negatively impacting on their life opportunities and their right to human dignity. The intellectual conundrum facing social scientists today is therefore how the expected fruits of democracy can be more evenly dispersed throughout society, and specifically within the education system.

I believe that our role as academics privileges us to suggest new ideas, new ways of thinking and being and to ask sometimes embarrassing questions that trouble dominant epistemologies (Said, 1994); to speak out against the injustices that prevail in society; and to "offer a vision of a new society based on new ways of seeing and living" (Volks, 2012:9). However, Said (1994) also warns us of the danger of intellectuals forming small cliques who propagate dogma, sticking to rigid conceptions of what constitutes valid knowledge (only that generated by the academy), who can create knowledge (only intellectuals) and how such knowledge should be created (through strictly circumscribed research methodologies).

Due to this entrenched thinking about research there remains a disconnect (Tinkler, 2004) between the academy and community. In this day and age, there is a need to embrace conceptualisations of research and knowledge that challenge traditional understandings, understandings that were and are valid within certain contexts and times, but that may no longer be as relevant for social scientists tasked with addressing extremely complex issues in today's society. We require epistemological and methodological research paradigms that are emergent, collaborative and rooted in a democratic value system; paradigms that recognise that knowledge is not the sole prerogative of a select group of scholars; paradigms that acknowledge the cultural and intellectual assets embedded in communities, integrating indigenous knowledge with existing propositional theories to create a new

scholarship for a new epistemology (Schön, 1995); while recognising that any knowledge has to be reinvented on a continual basis to maintain its relevance in this fast-changing world. In particular, I am proposing that an action research paradigm may offer suitable ways to navigate new educational pathways suited for improving and sustaining social life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I will first explain the concepts that underpin this paper, before suggesting some alternative ideas on how we can approach research in ways that will enable the production of “transformative knowledge” (Odora Hoppers & Richards, 2011: 35) that enables “transformative human development” (*ibid*, 30).

### **Research in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

We have to invent, or rather reinvent, what we value as legitimate knowledge, since we live in a very different world from the one that existed when academic notions of scholarly knowledge were first validated. We now live in an age where the traditional paradigm of instrumental rationality is no longer suited to addressing the intractable and complex problems we face as social scientists (Odora Hoppers & Richards, 2011). “Wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973:155) create social messes that a techno-rational approach to problem solving cannot untangle. Social, environmental and economic turbulence (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012) is becoming the norm, rather than the exception. In Africa, HIV and AIDS have affected millions of people, both directly and indirectly; poverty is endemic; yet education still tends to be underpinned by a neo-liberal discourse on economic empowerment, where knowledge is regarded as useful only for ‘earning a living’ rather than for improving quality of life or for ‘learning to live’.

We are still preparing teachers to work in an ideal school situation – one that does not exist in the majority of schools in our country. In a perverse way, the HIV and AIDS epidemic has offered us an opportunity “around which dramatic and positive social change can be forged, in parallel with, and indeed affected by and affecting, the other turbulent changes which have come with our new democracy” (Crewe, 2012:8). As social scientists, we have an ethical responsibility to lead this change through our research.

Odora Hoppers and Richards (2011) believe that the academy in Africa needs to adapt to its context, since the knowledge and systems imposed by Western colonizers have not only *not* been able to improve the quality of life of the majority of our citizens, but have actually contributed to increasing poverty and social exclusion. Only a small percentage of people in South Africa can access formal education, especially at tertiary level. Since a school leaving certificate is no longer enough to secure a job, the formal job market remains closed to the majority. This against a background where the formal job market itself is shrinking, as companies face economic meltdown and are forced to

retrench. We have no shortage of knowledge in this information age, but what difference is this making to the lives of the poor and oppressed – the majority of people who inhabit this planet? Universities are still separated from the community since the majority of people cannot afford access to formal tertiary education, and even if they have recourse to finances, epistemological access (Boughey, 2007) remains a barrier.

The need to safeguard intellectual autonomy, our academic freedom, has actually created a divide between universities and broader society. We end up talking to ourselves, peer reviewing each other's work (Greenwood and Levin, 2000), ending up with "narrow scholasticism" (Benson, Harkavy and Puckett, 1996:206) rather than "humane scholarship" (*ibid.*:206) that can help to develop knowledge that could lead to a better understanding of how to address the 'wicked' problems we face in education, such as HIV and AIDS, gender inequalities, child abuse, poverty – problems that create a vicious circle of social injustice to effectively eradicate any hope of quality education in communities most affected by such social crises. Can we remain sitting in our comfortable ivory towers, making pronouncements about how others should change their lives and issuing recommendations on how they can improve and how problems can be ameliorated, without any real understanding or conception of what life is like for the majority of people in the real world? How can we ethically continue to justify separating enquiry from action (Torbert, 1997)? I was struck by one of the community participants in my research project, who, while reflecting on the process of participatory action research, exclaimed that, for the first time, she felt research was "human". She explained herself by saying that she felt that she was dealing with real people, making a difference in their lives - and that the interaction was also helping her to grow and critically reflect on her own understandings and paradigms. Does this mean that our participants previously experienced our research as *inhumane*? One could say that collecting information from people, using it to write up a scientific article (that only seven people on average read), is actually *unethical*, since there is little benefit or positive change for those who have supplied the knowledge. As researchers, we remain outside, unaffected by the fact that their lives have not changed once we leave the scene. This is the paradox – while writing *about* social justice and human rights, we are actually promoting cognitive injustice (Visvanathan, 2002), denying the validity of the knowledge and silencing the voices of those we claim to help. Thus, we hold conferences *about* poverty eradication in a five-star hotel, while those most affected stay safely and quietly in their slums – rather hypocritical, not so? Such behaviour is justified because, as members of the academy, we have power (Foucault, 1980) to mask our seeming indifference by the need for maintaining scientific objectivity. Yet, as Zinn (1994) warns, the voice of the poor might not always be just, but unless we listen to it, we will never know what justice is.

Engaging with communities in participatory research to collaborate towards ways to improve their quality of life is therefore an important approach for learning and development in the 21st century. All people need to learn how to learn in new and different ways in these turbulent times (Zuber-Skerrit, 2012). I believe that the academy, and we as educational researchers, should spearhead and facilitate such learning, rather than pursuing an exclusionary and elitist research agenda. I am happy to note that research paradigms are shifting and that the time appears to be ripe for the introduction of more participatory and democratic approaches to research. There is a general realisation among many academics that the dignity of human beings lies in their capacity to join with others in building better relationships and a better world (Odora Hoppers & Richards, 2011). What the notion of 'better' is, evolves through collaboration to raise awareness of alternative realities and the possibility of engaging in action for change. If we do not begin to reconceptualise our research in this way, society will remain unjust with relatively few enjoying a decent quality of life; and poverty, corruption, crime, disease will continue to be determining characteristics of the lives of many. So, how can our educational research contribute to changing this scenario?

### **What is educational research?**

There is a difference between education research, which is research conducted in various disciplines of education for the creation of knowledge to advance that discipline or field, and educational research, which is research that results in the creation of knowledge useful to both researcher and participant (Whitty, 2005). Such research is **integrated** with teaching/learning and community engagement, each enhancing the other. As we **engage collaboratively** with communities, we co-create knowledge; we **research** new contextually and culturally relevant ways to improve social circumstances. This knowledge enhances our learning and informs what we **teach** in our programmes.

Schratz and Walker (1995) coined the term research *as* change, research that becomes educational, because all concerned learn from the process - academic and community researchers alike. Sen (2005:155) talked about the need to develop "human capacities" for emancipatory action - by developing the capacity to form an intention through the raising of consciousness (Freire, 1972) and then the capacity to act through a cycle of critical reflection and action, freedom is attained from both self-imposed and external oppression. In this way, given that education is a right of all, not just those who can afford to access formal education, educational research contributes to informal education, accessing indigenous knowledge systems, ideas and actions to address complex social issues.

I am thus arguing for formal conceptualisations of research to be reinvented and altered to allow space for alternative paradigms. In making this call, I do not want to initiate a polemic, an either-or situation, but rather create a space that allows for the development of paradigms and related methodologies that are more suited to our changing world (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). Universities should be sites for practising new ways of living, thinking, teaching and learning (Moore, 2005), and as an educational researcher I am committed to leading a paradigm shift towards the promotion of research that fosters more sustainable change through subtle shifts in thinking and directions.

### **New educational pathways**

Kelly (2006) suggests that we do not actually need more knowledge, but should rather focus on creating sustainable relationships among people to work towards improving education and other social practices. I like the ideas emanating from environmental education about *phronesis* – practical wisdom, as opposed to factual knowledge, linked to the spiritual aspects of education and notions of education for humanity, rather than mere cognitive development. In teacher education, this would require a focus on the identities of the teachers, the development of self-knowledge and accountability for improving their own practice, the recognition of the interdependency of all humans and a desire to embody democratic and life enhancing values in practice, as opposed to merely teaching content knowledge, narrowly defined by school curricula. Literature is reflecting a move towards Aristotle’s argument (nothing is really new), that theoretical knowledge (*episteme*) and skills (*techne*), must be supplemented by practical wisdom (*phronesis*) (Birmingham, 2004; Flyvbjerg, 2006; Grint, 2007). As Flyvbjerg (2006:374) points out, contemporary research has focused too much on trying to find generalisable truths, in the process ignoring the pursuit of *phronesis*, which has the potential to “awaken [people]... and engender committed action.” Some of the changes of direction that we need to make while exploring the pathways to sustainable and relevant knowledge are discussed below.

**From exclusion to inclusion:** As mentioned, current research paradigms tend to be exclusionary and view the academy as the determiner of what knowledge is valid; the cost of university and formal education is prohibitive for most people; and access requirements eliminate most of the population. Educational research needs to become more inclusive, recognising the valuable knowledge housed in communities - knowledge that can contribute towards the generation of culturally and contextually relevant theory for addressing the wicked problems we face. Such inclusive relationships entail an awareness of belonging to an interrelated and interdependent community of life constituted by human and non-human entities (King, 2010); an emotional affinity with human and non-human others manifested through a sense of kinship, love and care (Martin, 2007); and

commitment to act in ways that enhance the well-being of human and non-human others in the world's community of life (Attfield, 2003).

**Ignorance to knowledge:** Indigenous knowledge systems are currently not given credence by many in the academy, subjugated by the knowledge hegemony of former colonisers. We need to start recognising the valuable knowledge that community members possess for improving their own social circumstances, admitting that even those without formal schooling can be very knowledgeable (Odora Hoppers & Richards, 2011). Global leaders have set admirable Millennium Development Goals (MDG), that shape a great deal of our social science research; yet, in spite of the vast amount of knowledge at our disposal, progress towards attaining the MDGs is slow, to say the least. Is it not time to start challenging how we strive to attain the MDGs, placing more - or just as much - emphasis on the production of Mode 2 knowledge (knowledge generated within the context of application), rather than just Mode 1 knowledge (knowledge produced within strictly defined disciplinary boundaries)?

**Dependency to self-directed learning:** Current approaches to research position the academic as the all-knowing expert. This encourages participants to acquiesce to what they regard as the superior knowledge and skills of the 'researcher'. Yet, what do we *really* know about the lived realities of our participants? Are we really in the best place to make recommendations for improving their teaching or social practices, if we have gathered data *from* them, rather than worked *with* them to try out better alternatives? The old adage of teaching a man to fish, rather than to feed him fish, holds true here – collaborating with community members on deciding what needs to be researched, what action should be taken, who should do it, how the data should be analysed and what this analysis means is more likely to develop independent learning and the ability to use the learning in meaningful ways in the future than is conducting research 'on' and 'for' them.

**Oppression to freedom:** Freire, through his many writings, taught us about this – freedom is attained through a process of reflective critique, followed by action to equip people as “protagonists of their own transformation” (Lykes & Mallona, 2013:116). As academic researchers in this process, we are also challenged to continually question our own role in the research process, as well as our thinking and practice.

**Loss of dignity to feelings of self-worth:** Collaboration as equal partners in research helps restore dignity to those most often written off as the poor, the diseased, the lazy, and the worthless. Instead of being labeled as “the problem”, active involvement in improving their quality of life helps participants to perceive themselves as leaders and innovators, as researchers and agents of change.

This changed perception holds many benefits for the psycho-social wellness of participants and those they influence on a daily basis. Freire (1995) also taught us that the basis for all educational action should be genuine love and concern for the dignity of others.

**Self-centredness to other-centredness:** The worst sin of mankind is indifference, as Elie Wiesel (1999), a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps, wrote in a speech reviewing the calamities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was not the harsh conditions that were unbearable, but the knowledge that you did not matter to those who were guarding you; that your life was of no importance to others: that is the worst sin of mankind. As a social scientist, I cannot mask my indifference by the cry for 'scientific objectivity' – I want to get involved in the lives of others out of human compassion; and through this I reap much that enriches my own professional and personal growth. For example, if we do not start to take HIV and AIDS seriously in our curriculum in higher education, if we do not direct our research resources towards helping people to mitigate its effects on education, then we reduce "the other to an abstraction" (Wiesel, 1999:2).

At the risk of mixing my metaphors, I want to echo the words of a school principal and co-researcher in several projects who suggested that we need a new operating system for education and educational research, a rethinking of why we do things and how we do them. Odora Hoppers (2005) makes the point that the university in Africa has not yet fully realised the need to rethink "the basic software and hardware of its system" with regard to both knowledge production and human resource production. So how can research best begin to explore alternative pathways?

#### **HOW DO WE NEGOTIATE THESE PATHWAYS?**

Action research provides us with a culturally and socially responsible (Berryman, SooHoo & Nevin, 2013) way to generate knowledge that will help us to negotiate these pathways. As Freire (1995) said, education is not about training people to adapt to the world: we should be enabling them to change it. Against the historical background of colonisation and Apartheid in South Africa, this is an important point to acknowledge, yet often one that the dominant powers resist the most.

Action research that will help us to negotiate these pathways entails much more than simply a methodology or research design: it is a paradigm, grounded in definite, life-enhancing values and principles that underpin an inclusive and dynamic worldview (Bargal, 2008). It is based on constructivist and critical theories that acknowledge that there can never be a final solution to any problem; that there are many equally valid ways to envisage what is perceived as reality; and that ongoing improvement is attained through critical reflection of the *status quo*, which leads to action. Action research requires participants to identify ontological values that become standards by which

they can judge their intentions and actions (Whitehead, 2008). These values should always promote the social good and include, *inter alia*, democracy, respect, equality, promotion of quality of life for all (Stringer, 2007), as well as authentic collaboration (Piggot-Irvine, 2012).

From an epistemological viewpoint, action research regards knowledge as context-bound and collaboratively created, with all interpretations fluid and changing (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). Action research therefore abolishes the notion of the academic researcher as the 'expert' who imposes his/her own knowledge to guide the process. Instead, it regards participants as practitioner-researchers who, by dint of their insider knowledge, are viewed as the most capable of finding workable ways to improve their own educational/social situations. The process rejects traditional hierarchical notions of supremacy in favour of true democratic collaboration, where inclusivity is practised and all participants are seen as equally competent to make a worthwhile contribution to the enquiry. The focus is therefore on helping participants to take responsibility for their own thinking, attitudes and actions (Wood, Morar & Mostert, 2007). This allows for the formation of a personal identity among participants as co-researchers, since change occurs as a result of critical self-reflection rather than external imposition. Shifts on cognitive, affective and behavioural levels are therefore more likely to be sustained, as they become part of the personal and professional identity of the participant (Batagiannis, 2011).

I disagree with Townsend (2010) that action research is concerned more with practice than with theory, since it allows for the creation of unique and personal "living theories" (Whitehead, 1989:43) or grounded theories (Charmaz, 2006). Action research contributes to improving social situations, while simultaneously generating knowledge that can influence educational practice and research in a significant way (see [www.actionresearch.net](http://www.actionresearch.net) for many examples of doctoral theses and links to articles). Because of the authentic involvement and critical self-reflection required of the participants in the action research process, outcomes include an increase in self-confidence and self-awareness, improvement in problem-solving ability, and the development of a desire and capacity for lifelong learning (Zuber-Skerrit, 2011). Another important outcome for participants, such as current South African school leaders who experience severe social, economic and political constraints, is hope: a sense of knowing that change is possible and that it is in their power to improve their own situations (Schoen, 2007). Action research follows a rigorous process of enquiry, which aims to improve the identified educational/social concern (practical outcome); create useful educational knowledge through a critical reflection on what was learnt and its significance for future practice and research (knowledge outcome); and bring about epistemological and ontological transformation in the participants (emancipatory outcome).

I have experienced this every time I work with teachers whom I initially encountered as demotivated, overworked, closed to new ideas and skeptical of their role as agents of change. It is not easy to negotiate collaboration with teachers in such circumstances – but when you do achieve this, it makes such a difference in their lives and in the climate of the school. Ultimately, the learners benefit. Again and again, I have experienced that action research motivates participants – they reignite their passion for teaching, develop new agency and are excited about trying new approaches - many teachers with whom I have worked have realised that research can be exciting and have subsequently enrolled for further studies themselves.

The negotiation of these pathways is a leadership issue. We as academic researchers need to take the lead, learning from the wonderful ideas gleaned from other continents. None of this is new thinking, as Zuber-Skerritt and Teare (2013) remind us - it has its origins in Plato and Aristotle, rediscovered and developed in a growing literature over the past 60 or 70 years, starting with thinkers such as John Dewey (1938), Paolo Freire (1972), Orlando Fals-Borda (1998), Reg Revans (1971, 1982, 1998, 2006) and Kurt Lewin (1926, 1948). However, I do not see much evidence of it being implemented in educational research in South Africa - we still publish while others perish. Action research and notions of community engagement are still greeted with skepticism by many academics. By taking the lead, we can legitimise this approach and find a space for it, without entering into destructive debate. The action research paradigm does not recognise polemic; it relies on dialectic reasoning (Winter, 1989) to come to mutual understanding. As Odora Hoppers and Richards (2011:25) say: *Don't tell me how wrong my thinking is, convince me of a better approach that is fit for our 21<sup>st</sup> century context.*

### **Concluding remarks**

Reinventing knowledge is necessary for the academy to remain relevant in this world. We need not do away with all traditional forms of knowledge creation, but we do need to create a space for alternative approaches. We should start applying parabolic, holistic and lateral thinking (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013) in our research and teaching practices. We need to pay attention to developing our own and others' personal viability (*ibid.* 2013), rather than hiding behind 'expertise' earned by producing research that is disconnected from real lives. In this complex 21<sup>st</sup> century, people need to be more adaptable; we need to privilege the development of educational relationships over the mere learning of facts – in a world of uncertainty and shrinking resources, people are our most precious resource.

As researchers, we need to create knowledge that is based on the recognition of the value that people have to offer, but this will take time and patience, since our education system has enshrined neo-liberal thinking that separates those who have from those who do not and entrenched pathogenic and deficit approaches to community 'development' rather than an asset-based understanding of community engagement through participative action research. But that remains our challenge: a challenge that offers exciting opportunities for researchers who are committed to making relevant and contextually appropriate contributions to knowledge. And so I conclude, action research can help us explore new educational pathways fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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