Schwab's Challenge and the Unfulfilled Promise of Action Research

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Introduction

Action research began as an ambitious epistemological and social intervention. As the concept has become reified, packaged for methodology textbooks and professional development workshops, it has degenerated into a cure that may be worse than the disease. The point is not the trivial one that action research, like any practice, sometimes shows up in cheap or corrupt forms. The very idea that action research already exists as a live option is mystifying, distracting us from the deep challenge that action research ultimately represents. Though Joseph Schwab is sometimes credited as a forerunner of action research, it is likely that he would see the new talk of 'the teacher as researcher' as indicative of the very epitomization of which he warned. Dewey's new conception of knowledge, action, and communication—and the vision of the teacher as learner it entails—requires nothing short of a radical rethinking of teaching and inquiry, schooling and teacher education. In what follows, I make the case that the promise of action research remains unfulfilled and recall us to the force of Schwab's challenge.

A Double Negation

Only in formal logic does the negation of a negation get you back where you started. Actual concepts, embedded in cultures and histories, do not work this way: double reversals lead to strange new places. Action research is a case in point. To see why,

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we must defamiliarize the modern notions of research and methods. A useful guide here is Bruce Wilshire (1990) who offers a redescription of modern disciplinarity as kind of extended purification ritual. As Wilshire shows, the disciplines represent not only a division of epistemological labor, but also a process of abstraction away from the messy particularity of the lifeworld. We know a serious discipline by its narrowness, and we know a sophomore by his silly habit of trying to connect his coursework with lived life.

Consider the radical *askesis* undergone by philosophy. As those three little letters, Ph.D., remind us, philosophy was once synonymous with the serious search for understanding in any form, from dialogue in the *agora* to rolling balls down inclined planes. With the rise of experimental science, philosophy has repeatedly hived off each part of itself seen as newly set on an empirical foundation. Its deepest self-laceration may have been its ceding of questions of human development to empirical psychology and the new social sciences of education.[1] From Plato to at least Rousseau, philosophers still turned to the scene of education not as an applied afterthought but precisely in order to understand the psychological, the ethical, and the political. By the time we get to the twentieth century, philosophy has become the study of abstract and fully formed human beings, if not simply of words and concepts themselves. This helps us to appreciate the irony that the word "philosophy" is encoded in the name for our highest degree. The idea was that you have not fully matured as a knower unless you have come to understand the place of your specialized discipline within the full ambit of human knowing. The mature knower seeks not only knowledge but understanding, even wisdom. Now philosophy is just another mode of specialized research and the letters 'Ph.D.' signify command in this or any other specialized field. William James (1987) was alert to this irony when, in 1903, he warned of the tightening grasp of the 'Ph.D. Octopus'. For James (1987, 1111), far from being a proper prerequisite, the demand to 'exhibit a heavy technical apparatus of learning' could warp the aspiring scholar and derail him from fulfulfilling his potential as a thinker and teacher.

With the rise of the research university, we find not only hyper-specialization, but a dichotimization of knowing and doing and an overshadowing of practical intelligence by propositional knowledge. Dewey (1916, 9) saw this as 'one of the weightiest problems with which the philosophy of education has to cope.' The expansion of formal education leads us to overestimate the importance of what one consciously knows because one is 'aware of having learned it by a specific job of learning.' We create 'sharps in learning' who take pride precisely in the marks of a failed educational engagement: when learning remains 'abstract and bookish', 'remote and dead' and fails to rise to the level of 'ordinary vital experience' in which knowledge is forged with a 'depth of meaning' and is 'transmuted into character' (Dewey 1916, 8).

What makes the problem of scholasticism weighty for Dewey (1916, 269–70) is that the separation of knowing from doing grows out of, and further reinforces, a classing of people as knowers or doers, 'a division of human beings into those

[1] On the divorce of philosophy and psychology see Lear (1998, 7 and passim).

capable of a life of reason and hence having their own ends, and those capable only of desire and work, and needing to have their ends provided by others.' In the sphere of education, this means a distinction between teachers and educational researchers. While it is certainly possible to make the transition from the former to the latter, the gap between the two pursuits persists. This is where the purification rituals described by Wilshire come in handy: to become a priest of the modern research university, to make the ontological leap from a doer to a knower requires sacred rites indeed. That many current educational researchers are former teachers does nothing to elevate the intellectual status of teaching. The hierarchy remains intact, forming one part of the famous lack of a career path in teaching in which the only way to move up is to move out, into administration or research. Indeed, far from elevating the practice of teaching, the close proximity of educational research to practice has tended to lower the status of educational research, contributing to what Labaree (2004) calls 'The Trouble with Ed Schools.'[2]

Thus, we find hierarchies within hierarchies. Within the academy, educational research has a lowered status because of its proximity to practice. Within education, we find teachers as the serfs of the vast empire that is educational practice-policy-research. Teachers have always experienced relatively low levels of autonomy. The heteronomy of teachers has several sources including Lortie's (1975) famous 13,000 h 'apprenticeship of observation' (leading all who have been students to think they understand teaching), the fact that teaching is a feminized profession in a sexist society, and the understandable desire for all to have their hands on what we imagine as our great lever of social change (see, for example, Perkinson 1991, and Labaree 2008). Already in 1932, Willard Waller could speak of the authority of teachers in 'unremitting danger' undermined by students, parents, school board, and even one another (Waller 1932, 10–11). And this was before the rise of social science, technicism (the tendency to view practice not as the exercise of situated, practical wisdom but as the application of research about the most efficient means to given ends), and the audit culture. The rhetoric of accountability and standards has driven a new era of hyper-reform, rooting out what little autonomy teachers still possessed. Concepts such as 'evidence-based practice' and 'value-added measures' have given the hyper-reformers new tools for bullying and blaming teachers. Neither Michelle Rhee nor Scott Walker invented teacher blaming, which David Berliner calls our other national pastime, citing vivid examples from the 1920s. Nonetheless, despite this long, depressing history of 'semi-professionalization' (Etzioni 1969), the bullying and scapegoating of teachers has improbably gotten even worse.

It is helpful to situate the rise of action research—from Dewey and Lewin, through Schwab and Corey, to Stenhouse, Elliott, Carr, and Kemmis—within this context, as an intervention targeting both epistemological dualisms and social

[2] The problem is not merely one of perception. Far too many doctorates are granted in education, many to practitioners seeking only professional advancement but with no real proclivity toward scholarship. On this, see McClintock (2004, paragraphs 26–7). Here and in the paragraph that follows what I say applies especially to the U.S., though parallels surely exist in other national contexts.

divides.[3] The goal was not merely to add one more tool to the methodological toolbox, nor simply to encourage teachers to try their hand at an unreconstructed social science, but to think our way past the knowing/doing dichotomy and interrupt our professional version of Dewey's classed society in which some know and set aims while others (teachers) do as they are told. In this way, the ambition and the promise of the program of action research is clear, but how well have we lived up to that promise? Have we healed the rift between action and reflection, or merely soldered a deactivated cognition on to a decognitivized action? Now teachers can be researchers too. Does this negation of a negation signify a return or merely a double alienation?

Action Research as Methodolatry and Clip Art

Action research aims to rethink both the nature of inquiry and who participates in it. In traditional, nomothetic, social-scientific educational research—with its founding trope of the data-collecting, distantiated knower wielding methods to fend off bias and randomness—teachers show up only as subjects (though, in a case of language as wish-fulfillment, we call them 'participants'). For a long time, this was the only game in town. As mentioned previously, there were researchers who had once been teachers, but one role had to be abandoned for the other to be taken up. What does it mean to promote teachers as researchers? There are at least three basic models.

In the first model, the dominant conception of inquiry remains the same. Teachers are encouraged to think of their classrooms in social scientific terms, to run small-scale experiments, collect data, and so on. Thus, while we start to see some teachers thinking of themselves as researchers some of the time, the gap between teaching and research remains. This conception is plagued with problems. It perpetuates the idea that knowing and doing are separate, which leaves teachers *qua* teachers in a position of perceived social inferiority, and saddles teachers with a kind of double consciousness (the part of me that is like the mere doer and the part of me that is like the knower).

This conception of the teacher as researcher is liable to suffer from the methodolatry pervasive in educational research. Methods are simply tried and true procedures for heading off common pitfalls of inquiry. The most we can say is that when adapted to a specific case and employed insightfully they help us avoid some sources of misunderstanding. To be circumspect enough to avoid the other sources of misunderstanding, let alone to be able to pose fertile questions, to notice what matters, to argue cogently, to frame insightfully, this requires a robust and well-rounded education. Even a thorough training in methods would be radically insufficient to produce someone capable of breaking new ground on questions of importance. Educational research is plagued by 'methodolatry,' the tendency to fetishize

[3] See, for example, Lewin (1946), Corey (1953), Schwab (1969), Stenhouse (1975), Elliott (2006), and Carr and Kemmis (1986).

methods, as if they themselves contained the powers of the scholar's educated imagination, the expansive network of tacit knowledge that enables one to select, modify, and intelligently make use of methods not to mention to engage in all of the aspects of inquiry that go beyond methods as such.

About the first model there is bad news and really bad news.[4] The bad news is that it is likely to create only would-be social scientists, wielding reified, brittle understandings of methods and procedures. This either will or will not help such teacher-researchers achieve a kind of parity with university-based researchers, and either way, the news is not good. If we do find parity, then this means that the standards for social science in education are extremely low, that our doctoral programs in education themselves tend to treat research as a recipe, the ingredients of which (research question, literature review, theoretical framework, method, limitations, findings) are thin and hypostasized (for more on this, see Higgins 2007). If we find a lack of parity, then this conception has done nothing to lift the condescension built-in to the traditional model. Those teachers who research their classrooms become something like educational research's junior varsity.

The really bad news about this model is that it is likely not only to fail to enable teachers to see their classroom in powerful new ways, as if through the eyes of Freud or Weber, Geertz or Ehrenreich, but it may well also blind their teacherly eyes.[5] As van Manen (1991) argues, pedagogy is about perception, a special mode of tact rooted in the teacher's relationship with the student. Teaching is, for Manen, an existential stance, a special form of intentionality: the teacher orients himself to the student as becomer, opens himself to the experience of the student. If van Manen is right, a teacher who steps out of this relational stance to become a scientific observer, framing his students as participants in an action research study, will, paradoxically, notice less. Imagine a carpenter looking at a cabinet. She is seeing more than we would, seeing details of materials, design, and geometry hidden to us. Now imagine that this carpenter is hired by a sociologist and asked to determine the average number of cabinets per household. Whether or not this helps the sociologist see more about, say, décor and class, what seems clear is that the carpenter is seeing less about cabinets. Action research may all too easily amount to one of the worst-of-both-worlds compromises identified by Dewey (1916, 257): rather than rethink a dichotomy, we forge 'an inorganic composite' and produce something 'perhaps worse than if either ideal were adhered to in its purity.' Under the thrall of action research, we may find a teacher who, while never fully apprenticing herself to one or another craft of scholarship or research, has nonetheless alienated herself from the relationships to her students and work that afford singular access to sources of practical wisdom.

The second model, like the first, affirms that traditional social science is capable of generating knowledge about education, but adds that such knowledge is not in a form suitable for guiding practice. The second model therefore calls for a division of labor, holding that while there may be a place for basic educational research,

[4] For a colorful use of the trope of bad, worse, and really bad news, see Egan (2008, Chap. 2).

[5] I refer to Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Clifford Geertz, and Barbara Ehrenreich.

action research is needed to generate the kind of grounded, situated knowledge that can influence practice. This model suffers from at least two major flaws. First, it is simply false that ideas far removed from the terms and texture of practice cannot be useful to improving practice. We can easily imagine a teacher who, say, finds his own participatory action research on homogenous and heterogenous grouping uninstructive while it is Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed* (2011) that gives him a whole new way to come at his social studies class or deal with class tensions in his school. Indeed the catalyst for a given teacher in a given term may have no topical connection at all. As Kafka (1977, 15–16) once asked, "If the book we're reading doesn't wake us up with a blow on the head, what are we reading it for?' For Kafka (1977, 16), what we need from books is 'an axe for the frozen sea inside of us.' While someone somewhere right now is leading a professional development exercise, projecting a power-point slide picturing the action-reflection cycle, a teacher somewhere else has just found his axe in the form of Neil's *Summerhill*, or maybe it was Neil Young's lead riff in 'Cowgirl in the Sand', jolting him from a cynicism that had without his knowing it infected his entire practice. In short, the notion that the only ideas that can influence practice are those derived from and couched in the terms of classrooms is patently false. The second flaw is that its distinction between and general and situated knowing is likely to collapse back into the pure/applied distinction and reinforce the dichotomies and hierarchies of which Dewey warned.

There are, then, irremediable flaws in both models. In the first model, teachers try their hand at traditional social science. In the second, teachers supplement basic research with their own brand of situated inquiry. This suggests that what is needed is a third model in which teachers take the lead in inquiry, and inquiry itself is rethought along the lines of participatory action research. So it seems that all we need is Dewey's ideas about the inseparability of knowing and doing and we are ready to launch a new paradigm of participatory action research. Not so fast, says Schwab, who reminds us of the doing that is necessary for this knowing, who forces us to ask whether we truly have the stomach to reconceive teaching, schools, and teacher education from the ground up so as support the teacher as intellectual, as someone richly and rigorously reflective.

Schwab sounds this caution in the very title of the essay on which I would like to focus, speaking of 'the "impossible" role of the teacher in progressive education'. Schwab (1959, 139) begins the essay by noting that education is plagued by 'epitomes'. Ideas to think with become ideas to think about until they finally degenerate into inert, 'isolated terms,' 'rendered with a specious simplicity.' Such epitomes abound in education—achievement, accountability, differentiation, grit, metacognition—their speciousness hidden behind protective coatings of obviousness and self-importance. And in educational research, as we have already noted, we have a special way of dignifying and thus disguising our epitomes: we call them methods.

That 'action research' has tended to degenerate into another of our epitomes, to become another victim of our methodolatry, seems as undeniable as it is ironic. Schwab did not live long enough to see the rise of Powerpoint, a technology beautifully designed to ease and accelerate the process of epitomization (for more on the message that is the medium of powerpoint, see Tufte 2006). Action research has

become as easy as selecting an image from the ocean of professional development clip-art. One typical image shows the sequence "Plan-Act-Observe-Reflect" spiraling around a central upward arrow marked "continual progress"[6]. Such diagrams are designed not to provoke epistemological reflection about the relation of knowledge and action but simply to evoke the basic meme of modernity. Scientists (or scientists and engineers in tandem if you prefer) poke nature, observe how she flinches, reflect a bit, and plan a new intervention. The result: 'continual progress.' What might at first blush appear like a return to *phronesis* turns out to be something more artificial, encouraging the teacher to view her classroom as a series of (uncontrolled) experiments.

Any idea can degenerate into slogans and clip art, it will be replied. It is easy to attack a thing by its abuses. Action research, the skeptic will remind me, was meant not as one more method in the toolbox of the traditional social scientist but as a rethinking of the nature of inquiry. True enough, but what also comes all too easily to us is the assumption that, having named something, it exists. Talk of action research as a live option in the current landscape amounts to a kind of mystification, distracting us from the structural changes necessary to realize the transformation of teaching and inquiry it entails. If Schwab's choice of the word 'impossible' seems too pessimistic, we can take comfort in the fact that he puts it in scare quotes. On the other hand, no one ever said it would be easy.

Schwab's Challenge

Action research, as I have tried to show, was an important intervention that has largely fossilized into a banner or method. Educational research, however, does not need one more method; nor do teachers need one more hat to wear. What is needed, Schwab suggests, is nothing more nor less than to make good on the promise of genuine education. 'The effective "learning situation"', Schwab (1959, 147) writes, 'is not the one which leads by the quickest, most comfortable route to mastered habit and attitude, used precept and applied knowledge, but the one which is provocative of reflection, experiment, and re-vision.' At the heart of progressive education (and indeed, in another way, in traditions of liberal learning), Schwab reminds us, is the idea that the scene of learning itself must feature inquiry. If inquiry is to be interwoven with practice, and not a task for a special caste of researchers, this must become part of primary and secondary schooling. Given that even in so-called "higher education" we are witnessing a regression to the FedEx model of education, content plus delivery, this may seem a tall order. For Schwab, though, the 'impossibility' centers around a simple but profound corollary of this basic premise: that teachers themselves must be learners and indeed intellectuals.

As Schwab (1959, 158–9) explains,

[6] See https://valenciacollege.edu/faculty/development/tla/actionResearch/ARP_softchalk/mobile_pages/index.html

> The teacher must be a learner—even unto the fourth level of Dewey's intellectual space. It is not enough for the teacher to master certain ways of acting as a teacher. This is only a capable apprentice. It is not enough to be master of flexible ways of acting. This is only to be a competent 'hand' who can function well when told what to do but who cannot himself administer. It is not even enough to possess organized knowledge of ways and means. This is to interpret a policy and tend to its efficient execution but not to be able to improve a policy or change it as problems change. Only as the teacher uses the classroom as the occasion and the means to reflect upon education as a whole (ends as well as means), as the laboratory in which to translate reflections into actions and thus to test reflections, actions, and outcomes against many criteria, is he a good 'progressive' teacher.

Schwab imagines teachers as intellectuals but certainly not as denizens of an ivory tower. It is neither erudition nor method per se that Schwab is after but intellectually mobility. Schwab pictures the intellectual life as one of dynamic movement between various levels of what he calls 'Pragmatic Intellectual Space.' Based on his reading of Dewey, Schwab (1959, 155) identifies six levels of reflective practice: 'mastery of problematic situations,' 'sensitive mastery of variable problematic situations,' reflection on patterns of actions and consequences, 'reflection on ends and means,' 'reflection on the conduct of discovery,' 'invention of means and ends of discovery.' Each practice, Schwab suggests, opens upon fundamental questions about what is true, what is worthwhile, and how we can come to know what is true and worthwhile.

But Schwab does not stop there. He stresses not only the movement among levels of reflection radiating from a particular mode of practice but 'polyprincipality,' or the ability to converse across practical domains where one will be confronted with 'unfamiliar vocabularies' and 'alien considerations'(Schwab 1969, 598). The traditional intellectual seeks breadth of vision in the general, abstracting away from the concrete situations and commitments of practice. Schwab's progressive teacher-intellectual also seeks breadth of vision, but through polyprincipality not abstraction. Schwab's teacher cultivates the ability to think dialectically, comparing rival traditions of action-reflection concerning the means and ends of human growth.[7]

And this suggests, in turn, a progressive mode of teacher education. Teachers, Schwab (1969, 620) suggests, need to be initiated into 'the arts of deliberation.' In this way, teacher education,

> Ought to exhibit the material… as matter for reflection rather than as matter for docile mastery. It ought to exhibit proposed ends and methods of instruction in some of their difficult, tangled, and doubtful connection with the imperfect and incomplete researches on society, the learning process, human personality, and similar topics, from which they stem. (Schwab 1959, 148)

The battle cry for alternative certification and the attack on university-based teacher education is that pre-service teachers don't need 'theory,' that learning what Dewey or Freire thought about education is irrelevant to pedagogical practice. And, of course, if by learning, we mean transmission, and if by theory we mean a

[7] Much of what I say here echoes my exploration of the teacher as intellectual in Higgins (2011, Chap. 8). On education as a dialectical conversation about the ends and means of human growth, see pp. 254–71. For implications for teacher education, see pp. 271–78.

second-hand account of their conclusions, we can agree. Good riddance. What follows from this, though, is not learning on the job after a six-week boot camp, but that learning is about transformation not transmission, and that theory is a practice not a body of information. Thinking with and about Dewey and Freire can be transformative. University-based teacher education at its best, is an invitation to engage in serious reading and discussion of primary texts and fieldwork, to apprentice oneself to thinkers and traditions of thought, to learn how to think with some depth and precision.

It is not only that changes in learning imply changes in teaching and teacher education, but schooling itself will have to change if teachers are to be dynamic, organic intellectuals:

> The schools, in turn, ought to be so organized that at least some of their capable and energetic teachers find in the classroom and in each other the opportunity to reflect on ends and methods and try alternatives which experience and reflection suggest. (Schwab 1959, 148)

Former UK Minister of Education, Michael Gove, in his effort to replace university-based teacher education, called for the establishment of 'teaching schools,' on analogy to 'teaching hospitals'. As a plan to replace academic pre-service teacher education with learning on the job, this will not do. That said, Gove's rhetoric raises a crucial question. What would it mean to build schools from the ground up, as places of learning for the teacher? Here it will suffice to mention four core principles.

First, the culture of teaching must be supportive rather than punitive. Teachers cannot adopt an attitude of inquiry toward their practice in an environment in which their performance is measured by high-stakes rigid assessments, let alone in a climate in which "value-added" scores become public shame lists. Second, one can obviously not explore alternatives when pedagogy is tightly scripted according to "what works" recipes. The third and fourth principles are complementary. Teachers spend most of their time in a state that is simultaneously crowded (with students and interactions) and isolated (deprived of opportunities to participate in genuine communities of practice). To flourish as reflective intellectuals, teachers need both some sort of studio space, a space of retreat, and opportunities to discuss and collaborate with their colleagues. If this sounds radical, consider that for all of the spurious international comparisons and false borrowing that surrounds talk of success in Finland and China, it seems that one thing that Finland has done well is to create a professional culture around teaching. Finnish teachers spend somewhere on the order of 4 h a day in the classroom, using the rest of their time, like professionals, to reflect, collaborate, design, and prepare (Anderson 2011).

Finally, educational research must change to accommodate these other changes. Schwab (1959, 144) speaks of a pragmatic rhetoric, a mode of indirect communication that eschews proving for 'moving men to reconstruct and test by practice.' Educational writing is potentially miseducative insofar as it takes itself to be offering solutions to known problems (the first level of pragmatic intellectual space). Instead, Schwab calls on us to write in a way that creates challenging experiences for teacher intellectuals, giving teachers solutions to problems that they didn't even

know they had, or guidance on problems they are about to have, or other provocations to think more dynamically about educational means and ends. He challenges us to invite teachers to raise practical educational deliberation to the level of criticism and art, the modes by which we open ourselves to think about the concepts we have come to think with and attune ourselves to what matters and why it does.

Schwab is well aware of the difficulty of the challenge he has set for us. Action research was once just another name for this challenge. The irony is that it has become a concept that reinforces both on the level of form and content, the old dualisms and the anti-intellectual conception of teaching. If we care about genuine intellectual life and the teacher as a leading participant in that life, then we ought to adopt as our platform that we are both for and against action research. That just might unstick us a bit to explore pragmatic intellectual space.

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