

## Educational research, democracy and praxis

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Dominant approaches to educational research rarely examine the philosophical underpinnings, specifically epistemological and ontological assumptions, in relation to the research process. Usher argues that the failure to examine these assumptions leads to research being understood as a 'technology', as simply a set of methods, skills and procedures applied to a given research problem. I argue that when research is understood in Usher's terms as a 'technology', it serves only the *status quo* and does not enable us to interact and transform society. In this article I critically examine different research approaches in terms of their potential to contribute to transformation of societies. I argue that instead of educational research merely contributing to social change it can be a process of change itself. Additionally, I raise challenges for educational research in South Africa and elsewhere, in the context of processes of globalisation and internationalisation currently prevalent.

### Introduction

South Africa is faced with several new challenges since becoming a constitutional democracy in 1994. Pendlebury (1998:333) argues that South Africa's most urgent and difficult challenge is to transform all spheres of public life so as to establish enabling conditions for a thriving democracy. Pendlebury (1998:334) points out that education, which was a primary site of contestation under apartheid, now is a primary site of transformation. She argues that transformation is not only paramount for education's own sake but also because education is recognised as crucial for transforming other spheres of social life. Enshrined in the South African constitution are important values for the transformation of education, namely democracy, liberty, equality, justice and peace. A question that requires answering in this regard, is how these values can be enabled in the various sites and discourses of education?

My concern in this article is to raise some issues regarding the relationship(s) between educational research and democracy. I deem this to be important for two reasons. Firstly, as I mentioned earlier, the promotion of democratic values are particularly important at this point in South Africa's history. Secondly, I believe that greater possibilities exist for doing research that is openly committed to establishing a more democratic social order. I say this because we are in a post-positivist period in the human sciences, which Lather (1986; 1991; 1992) argues is marked by much methodological and epistemological ferment. Since the mid-1980s in particular we have seen an explosion of ideas and practices in a quest to understand social reality. Ethnography, phenomenology, hermeneutics, interpretive, feminist, critical, narrative inquiry are some of the terms that have been used as frames of reference for examining social reality. Phenomenology and hermeneutics have long histories in continental European philosophy (dating back to the 19th century) — its application to educational inquiry is relatively new. In addition in the 1990s there has been a proliferation of 'post' frameworks such as post-modernism, post-critical, post-paradigmatic and so on (Lather cited in Goodman, 1992:118). In this article I specifically wish to explore possibilities for enabling democratic 'ideals' through educational research. Before doing so I turn now to a discussion on democracy so as to clarify my use of it in this article.

### What is democracy?

Democracy is a polysemous term. It is a complex area of human understanding that cannot be reduced to a simple, fixed, unambiguous definition. As Gough (2000a:2) writes:

we can no more provide a precise three-line definition of [democracy] than of everyday words like 'love' or 'justice' — these are terms that will always be the subject of exploration, speculation and debate.

Of course, it may be argued that there is also a danger of that term democracy could be rendered meaningless if it becomes so fuzzy to convey anything useful.

Waghid (2001:31) argues that there are two broad conceptions of democracy: democracy as a representative system of political decision-making, and democracy as a sphere for social and political life in which people may enjoy equal opportunities and are engaged in self-development, self-fulfillment and self-determination. For him, representative democracy means that collective decisions concerning the community as a whole are made by elected members of the community. On the other hand democracy as a sphere of social and political life is constituted by values such as liberty, equality and so on. Also, the latter kind of democracy is a participatory form of democracy whereby people directly participate in economic, political and social life.

My concern in this article is not with democracy as a political system, but rather with how democratic values can be (re)constructed within social practices such as educational research. I accept that educational research, like all other social practices, occurs within particular spatio-temporal settings that are partly constitutive of the actions and interactions that take place within them. However, agency of the subject should not be left unrecognised as I believe that human beings are able to make choices within social settings that might contribute to transformation of the settings themselves. The point I wish to make here is that although recent political change in South Africa and a postpositivist era in the human sciences do provide greater opportunities for enabling democratic values through educational research, human agency is crucial to changing the status quo. Poststructuralist theory provides useful insights in this regard. Davies and Banks (1992: 3) point out that a poststructuralist analysis goes beyond recognising only the constitutive force of discourses, to an acceptance of the possibility of the subject's agency:

Poststructuralist theory argues that the person is not socialised into the social world but interpellated into it. That is, they are not passively shaped by active others, rather they actively take up as their own the discourses through which they are shaped.

The democratic values I refer to above are not fixed but constantly re-constructed through social processes of engagement. I find Waghid's (2001:31-33) idea of democracy as reflexive discourse useful in this regard, where democracy liberates thought and practices so as to offer more choice, freedom and possibilities for emancipatory politics. With respect to educational research, however, not all approaches provide enabling frameworks for achieving in Waghid's (2001:31-33) terms "more choice, freedom and possibilities for emancipatory politics". Therefore I turn now to a discussion on knowledge interests and educational research with the view of briefly exploring some of the underlying assumptions of dominant approaches to educational research.

### Educational research and knowledge interests

Habermas (1972) has argued that different 'knowledge/research traditions are linked with particular social interests. He points out that positivistic research employs technical/instrumental reasoning where the ends are predefined and are attained by following known rules and predefined means (e.g. the scientific method). Habermas described this kind of knowledge as being informed by a technical interest. On the other hand, interpretive or hermeneutical sciences employ practical modes of reasoning (Habermas, 1972). By this it is meant that appropriate decisions are made in the light of the circumstances of the situation and not by pre-defined means and ends. Positivistic research is associated with prediction and control and interpretive research with enlightenment, understanding and communication (Usher, 1996:22). However, neither of these research traditions has an interest in research that changes the world in the direction of freedom, justice and democracy. Habermas (1972) therefore has isolated a third type of 'knowledge-constitutive interest' which he links with critical science, that is, an emancipatory interest. This knowledge interest involves the unmasking of ideologies that maintain the *status quo* by denying individuals and groups access to knowledge or awareness about the material conditions that oppress or restrict them (Usher, 1996:22). Importantly, critical science is concerned with the actions that can be taken to change oppressive conditions.

Critical researchers argue against the limited notions of positivist and interpretive approaches. This does not necessarily mean that they reject absolutely research conducted within these frameworks. However, in terms of assumptions, critical approaches argue that positivist and interpretive approaches are epistemologically flawed and politically conservative. Critical research challenges the objectivist epistemology (knowledge is impersonal and objective) and realist ontology (reality exists independently of our knowledge of it) of positivist science. Although critical research shares with interpretive research the view that knowledge (of reality) is socially constructed, it criticises the latter approach for its emphasis on primarily understanding social reality in lieu of contributing to transforming it. It is important to note that critical approaches to research accept as 'axiomatic' that our social world is characterised by injustice, exploitation as well as political and economic domination. As Lather, (1991) so cogently puts it, critical research is about, "what it means to do research in an unjust world". For the critical researcher the world is unjust by design, that is, that it is the result of human will and intention. Also, that the social world is oppressive for many groups, particularly along the lines of gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexual preference, age and disability and so on. Furthermore, that our social world is characterised by inequitable distribution of resources worldwide. Unlike positivist research which accepts the *status quo*, or interpretive research which seeks to understand how individuals or communities experience social reality, central to critical research is the ideal of changing our world to one that is more just and equitable. The research process thus becomes a process of change itself. The distinctive features of critical research are: that it is openly ideological (it is not value neutral), socially critical, overtly political, and emancipatory in orientation (i.e. it aims to liberate the participants involved in the research). The question now is how do we conduct research that embodies democratic values? It is with this in mind that I turn now to a discussion on *research as praxis*.

### Research as praxis

Praxis is different to the everyday usage of the 'practice'. To gain an understanding of the term praxis it is useful to look at how Aristotle distinguishes between praxis and poiesis. Carr (1995) neatly captures this distinction:

*Poiesis* is a kind of making or instrumental action. It has an end in view or an object in mind prior to any action. It is activity that brings about specific products, and it requires a kind of technical know-how or expertise (*technè*). Praxis is also directed at a specific end but its aim is not to produce an object but to realise some morally worthwhile good.

In other words, with praxis, the end in view can only be realised through action and can only exist in the action itself. Also Schwandt (1997:124) points out that the ends of praxis are not fixed but are constantly revised as the goods internal to an activity are pursued. In this context praxis would have in mind democratic values such as equality and liberty, plurality and difference, dialogism and solidarity, and power (see Waghid, 2001 for an explication). Waghid (2001:34) also points out that praxis emphasises the importance of collaborative participation, equality and individual liberty in forms of social relations. These values are not fixed but are reconstructed and re-imagined within different contexts so that democracy is reflexive. Against this background, I turn now to a discussion on case study research in environmental education that I was involved with/in, and use it as a basis for reflecting on what it might mean to do research that embodies democratic "ideals". The case study research that I will briefly report was framed within a critical tradition and had as its intention the professional empowerment of research participants.

### Case study

The case study I describe was one of six professional development case studies forming part of Activity Two of the South Africa/Australia Institutional Links project entitled Educating for Socio-Ecological Change: Capacity-building in Environmental Education. The project was funded by AUSAID (Australian Agency for International Development) and administered by IDP Education Australia. The structure of the project as a whole was quite complex, involving a total of eight tertiary institutions in two countries (South Africa and Australia). The project was structured into four 'Activities': Activity One was concerned with curriculum development; Activity Two was concerned with professional development; Activity Three was concerned with evaluating existing environmental education curricula in South Africa and Australia; and Activity Four was concerned with the development of a methodology text to support post-graduate research in higher educational settings. The overall focus of the project was the professional development of new and existing staff at South African higher education institutions. Specifically, Activity Two sought to enhance research and professional capacity by working collaboratively with colleagues in a process of workplace-based participatory research aimed at the development of authentic case studies of changing environmental education practice (Lotz & Robottom, 1998:20).

Collaboration among participants started before the funding was received and before the project formally commenced. For a period of approximately one-year project participants developed the project proposal jointly. I now provide a brief description of the Activity Two.

### Activity Two

In Activity Two participants examined developing case studies of changing practice in environmental education. The developing case studies was a process of professional development in two distinct ways: firstly as a moment in professional self-development, as participants reflected on the meaning of their own theories and practices. Secondly, that the case studies may be useful for the professional development of other teacher educators and for use in teacher education programmes. The starting point for Activity Two was for participants to identify environmental and environmental education issues related to their own professional practices. Issues identified by different participants included: AIDS as a social problem; waste management issues; water pollution; waste disposal and litter in public open space; ecological disturbance from mining; and issues related to sustainability. These issues were used as foci for developing environmental education programmes at the participating institutions. In developing these programmes different environmental issues emerged such as participation in professional development programmes, pedagogical issues, issues associated with change processes in the context of bureaucracy, structural and resource limitations of institutions and inexperience in working with local knowledge (Le Grange, Lotz, Makou, Neluvhalani, Reddy & Robottom, 2000:3).

The first step in the process was for each participant to take photographs representing issues closely related to their work and workplaces. At a next workshop session each of the participants clarified the focus of their case studies through a process of critical engagement with other activity participants. The other participants provided feedback on the photographs, enabling participants to identify the "gaps" or shortcomings in the pictorial records of their individual cases. The "gaps" in the pictorial records identified by participants were mainly photographs depicting historical and/or cultural influences on the cases. Also, photographs of environmental issues in the first pictorial records did not represent all the dimensions (i.e. biophysical, social, political and economic) of the issues that had been identified. The photographs thus served as the basis for initial individual and collaborative reflection on our practices. As participants we returned to our places of work so that we could take additional photographs intended to fill the "gaps" that were identified at the first meeting. At a next meeting we individually wrote captions for the photographs and shared them with other Activity Two participants for critical discussion. Following this, each participant began to develop individual case study commentaries from the photographs in preparation for presentation at a next meeting. Draft case study commentaries and captioned photographs were presented at a next meeting. These were circulated among at least two other participants who provided critical feedback orally and in the form of annotations on the text. Feedback was also provided in a plenary session (for more details on activity two case studies, see Lotz & Robottom, 1998; Jenkin, Le Grange, Lotz, Mabunda, Madisakwane, Makou, Mphaphuli, Neluvhalani, Reddy & Robottom, 2000; Le Grange, 2000).

### Critical reflections

In Activity two of the Australian/South African institutional links programme the value, *liberty* was evident in that participants chose to explore issues that were of interest and concern to themselves. Also, the issues related closely to their particular workplaces. Values of *equality* and *participation* were closely related in this instance, since all participants were involved directly and as equitably as possible in all dimensions of the professional development process. The dimensions included identifying the issues to be addressed, collection and analysis of data, development and dissemination of materials and reports. As noted earlier, the process of professional development was collaborative. *Collaboration* in this case did not mean that the individual disappeared, but rather that space was provided for individual reflection on their professional work and development. However, peer review and positive critique of each other's work supported individual reflection by participants. As a consequence the tension between being collaborative and contextual was overcome. The collaborative nature of the activity fostered *dialogue* between participants which was key in the development of the project. Meaningful dialogue, however, depended on *relationships of trust*, which were enhanced during the professional development process. We found that when relationships of trust were well established, critical review from and dialogue between peers were more open, honest and easily accepted. The fact that the professional development needs were grounded in real environmental issues located in different contexts enabled us to respect the *diversity* of local contexts including the people working within them.

To enable these democratic processes within a professional development project meant that at times some individuals had to give the project direction. At the beginning stages those researchers who had more experience made significant inputs on professional case study research in environmental education for instance. As the process unfolded participation became more equitable. The point I wish to make here is that conditions for equitable participation do not necessarily exist before one commences such research processes but are rather enabled through praxiological engagement.

Reflecting on the project more broadly provides useful insights on possibilities for enabling democratic processes in local contexts in view of processes of *globalisation* and *internationalisation* currently

prevalent. By *globalisation* I mean the processes of cultural unification, which are occurring across the planet, particularly in terms of culture and media. It also refers to unification, which is centred on economic activity leading to larger and larger political groupings. According to Gough (2000b:335) *internationalisation* involves the promotion of global peace, social justice and well-being through intergovernmental co-operation and transnational social movements, agencies, and communities. It is important to note that the broader Australia/South Africa institutional links project was conceived in the context of improved relations between Australia and South Africa following the dismantling of legal apartheid. The Australian government made funds available through AusAid to support the development of South Africa's democracy. Both Australian and South African participants were aware of a danger of new forms of colonisation rearing its head in a project of this kind, involving international donor funders (helpers) and 'developing countries' (the helped). An Australian academic who worked with us on the project neatly captures this concern. He writes: "Clearly, our [Australian] participation in the project is intended to be catalytic in some way — we are here to 'help' — and I am very uncomfortable with being positioned as a 'helper'. I try to heed the advice of Lila Watson, an Australian Aboriginal educator and activist, who is reported as saying, "If you've come to help me you're wasting your time. But if you've come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let's work together" (Gough, 1998). Our interest was to ensure that we work in such a way that we respect what each individual brought to the process including their ways of knowing.

We found inspiration in the work of Turnbull (1997) for exploring possibilities of doing collaborative professional work in local spaces without disparate knowledges being absorbed into an imperialist archive. Turnbull (1993; 1997) argues that all knowledge traditions are spatial in that they link people, places (sites) and skills. This, according to Turnbull, enables us to conceive of all knowledge systems as sets of local practices so that it becomes possible to decentre them and compare them equitably instead of local knowledges being absorbed into an imperial archive. Smith (1999:44) points out that Western knowledges, philosophies and definitions of human nature form what Foucault (1972) has referred to as a cultural archive. According to her it could also be referred to as a 'storehouse' of histories, artifacts, ideas, texts and/or images, which are classified, preserved, arranged and represented back to the West. Foucault (cited in Smith, 1999:44) has also suggested that the archive reveals 'rules of practice' which the West itself may not necessarily be able to describe because it operates within the taken for granted rules. Hall (cited in Smith, 1999:44) argues that although shifts and transformations might occur within Western thinking this happens without changing the archive itself, nor the modes of classification and systems of representation contained within it, being destroyed.

Turnbull (1997) points out that achievements such as Indonesian rice farming, the building of gothic cathedrals, Polynesian navigation and modern cartography represent diverse combinations of social and technical processes rather than being the "results of any internal epistemological features to which 'universal' validity can be ascribed" (Gough, 1999:42). Turnbull argues that disparate knowledge traditions should not only be viewed in terms of representativity but also in terms of performativity so that knowledge can be "reframed, decentred and the social organisation of trust negotiated." With this understanding it may be possible for different knowledge traditions to co-exist within transnational spaces rather than one knowledge system displacing the other. In the project, Educating for Socio-Ecological Change, we attempted to conceive of our work in such a way so as to enable different knowledge traditions to co-exist and be performed together. In our project we were able to draw on the experiences of Australian researchers and an existing knowledge base on participatory case study research developed in Australia. As South Africans, we had knowledge of local issues affecting our communities and our professional practices. Drawing on both these sources of knowledge enabled us to

co-construct knowledge in a new transnational space. The extent to which we were successful may, however, require further investigation. Suffice it to say at this point is that possibilities do exist for workers from donor countries and recipient countries to work together without their traditions or interests being displaced and absorbed into an imperialist archive and without democracy being threatened in new transnational spaces.

### Concluding comments

Positivist approaches have limited possibilities for transforming social life. Fixed settings and predetermined goals, often done by outside experts do little to change social conditions. Instead of viewing research as a recipe for democratic change it might be more useful to conceive of it as a process that could embody democratic values. More importantly, that it is a process in which democratic values can be re(constructed) and re(imagined). Research as praxis in which the internal goods (democratic values) of the research activity are constantly revised is a meaningful concept in this respect, and further exploration of its usefulness in various research processes could be beneficial to all of us involved with/in processes of knowledge production.

From the case study work described in this article it could be concluded that educational research aimed at empowering participants through democratic processes might be guided by the following principles: that the research should be *contextual, responsive, emergent, participatory, critical* and *praxiological* (see Le Grange *et al.*, 2000: 3). Contextual means that the research process respects and relates closely to the workplace issues of participants. Responsive means that the issues explored are those of interest and concern to participants themselves. Emergent means that the knowledge that emerges from the investigation of the local issues should carry weight in that it contributes to the knowledge base the particular field of study (in this case environmental education). Participatory means that all participants are involved as equitably as possible in all dimensions of the research process. Critical means that the research looks beyond the surface layers of what is being investigated. Praxiological means the research represents a conscious and continuous interplay between theoretical and practical considerations.

Furthermore, Turnbull's (1997) notions of spatiality and performativity offer a conceptual framework for enabling the co-existence of seemingly disparate knowledges in new transnational spaces brought about by processes of globalisation and internationalisation. This will enable different knowledge traditions to be viewed more equitably rather than one knowledge tradition dominating others.

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