

# Guest Editor's Introduction

## Practitioners of Action Research in International Educational Settings

*by David Alan Sapp*

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David Alan Sapp is Assistant Professor of English and Coordinator of Professional Writing at Fairfield University where he teaches composition, technical writing, and English education. In recent years, he has conducted classroom-based research at the China Agricultural University in Beijing, Universidade do Sul de Santa Catarina in Brazil, Saint Louis University--Madrid in Spain, and New Mexico State University along the U.S.-Mexico border. In addition to serving as guest editor of this special issue, his article "Education as Apprenticeship for Social Action" is available in *Networks* 3.1 (April 2000).

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This special issue of *Networks* focuses on "Action Research in International (non-North American) Educational Settings" and brings together work by practitioners from several educational settings such as Spain, Turkey, Bulgaria, and Hawaii. In these articles, the authors explore the challenges, experiences, and promises of increased globalization in education. This work includes case studies focusing on specific teaching experiences as well as critical descriptions of the lives and values of action researchers in international contexts.

This collection aims to help teachers, students, and researchers act "choicefully" and with awareness in international contexts by exploring relationships among knowledge, action, and reflection. Articles in this special issue approach action research by describing and discussing what practitioners in various educational settings can learn about their instruction and its impact on students. Some of the authors discuss methods for action research, and others discuss the enhancement of the learning process through collaboration, or the impact on participants of educational experiences such as study abroad, distance learning, and cross-cultural service learning. Researching one's own practices is a critical dimension of action research. The authors whose work is included in this special issue illustrate the lessons they have learned and the insights they have gained while reflecting on the process they use as teachers making sense of their own practices.

In all, this special issue of *Networks* was edited in the hopes of bringing a wide range of voices and experiences to bear on our ongoing discussions of action research, teaching, and learning. As these articles demonstrate, there is significant variation in the particularities of teaching in Spain, or Turkey, or Bulgaria, or Hawaii, and these articles show how terms like "reflection" and "action research" can be applied in many different ways by practitioners interested in discovering ways to better understand how their instruction affects students. The cross-cultural negotiation of successful learning environments in these settings also reveals broader themes relating to the importance of cultural and ethno-relativity in teaching and learning, the value of flexibility in course design and implementation, and the importance of self-directed, often collaborative, action research to the development of effective cross-cultural teaching and learning experiences.

In the issue's lead article, "Change in Action: From Reading to Surfing," Ruth Breeze describes the development of an English language course for Spanish undergraduate students of journalism, covering a period in which media technology underwent substantial transformations at her institution. The course was shaped by an initial cycle of action research, then was remodelled through a second research cycle. Breeze promotes continued cycles of action and reflection for this course, and argues that such change is healthy for institutions, teachers, and students. The action research paradigm she utilizes provides her with a useful framework from which change can be processed and growth fostered. Ruth Breeze is Director of Studies at the Language Institute of the University of Navarra, Spain, and Editor of the *IATEFL English for Specific Purposes Newsletter*. She is currently working on a doctoral thesis on language learning.

"Creating a Volunteer ESL Program in Madrid: Action Research for Program Design and Service Learning" illustrates the use of action research in the design and assessment of a volunteer English language program in Spain. In this article, Anne McCabe, Therese Gleason, and Tom Hare suggest that the contextual sensitivity of action research, with its emphasis on the interpretations of the different participants involved, is especially appropriate for designing a program to fit the needs of participants from different cultural backgrounds. In this context, the researchers aim to help American students abroad provide beneficial service to their host community. In doing so, the three authors suggest that action research deepens the learning experience of those involved. Anne McCabe, Therese Gleason, and Tom Hare are affiliated with Saint Louis University in Madrid, Spain.

The next article, "Implementing Learner Training: A Case Study," also relates to language teaching and learning in Spain. Linda Bawcom points out that although some language learners seem to have an inherent ability for language learning, most students need guidance. By implementing learner training, students can learn how to study a foreign language, as well as how to organize and evaluate their learning. Thus, students begin to take responsibility for their own learning and take steps toward autonomy. Bawcom points out that the road to autonomy can be long, bumpy, and replete with unexpected detours for the language teacher. Linda Bawcom has lived in Spain since 1982 and currently teaches English to adults at the Instituto Internacional in Madrid. She is conducting research for her doctorate in the area of corpus-based linguistics.

In "Turkish Student Teachers' Early Experiences in Schools: Critical Incidents, Reflection, and a New Teacher Education Program," Dannelle D. Stevens, Serap Sarigul, and Hulya Deger use action research to analyze 79 "critical incidents" of schooling generated from 24 Turkish student teachers in Stevens' courses. In studying these incidents, the authors are able to reframe teacher education practices in light of strong cultural influences. Their results indicate that the student teachers identify as "critical" an almost equal number of positive and negative experiences, many of which connect in interesting ways to the changing political climate in Turkey. The authors then discuss the implications of their study for teacher education practices in a transitional society. Dannelle D. Stevens, Associate Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Portland State University (USA) and recently Visiting Associate Professor of Education at Bilkent University in Turkey, has also conducted research with teachers and administrators in Thailand, Japan, and Brazil. Serap Sarigul and Hulya Deger, graduate students at Bilkent University, are both Turkish natives with undergraduate degrees from Middle East Technical University.

The next article focuses on one of the central aspects of action research, investigator reflection at the earliest stages of the research process. In "Action Research in International Educational Settings: Bridging the Gap at the American University of Bulgaria," Mari Firkatian and Sandy Feinstein describe their incipient phase of research as one involving observation and description. That is, they aim to report their experiences and reactions to specific dilemmas they encountered as action researchers teaching at the American University in Bulgaria. They offer a retrospective, partly impressionistic glance at their experiences in an attempt to prepare for future comparative research as well as to support the development of context-relevant pedagogies. Working and writing together, they argue that collaboration itself is at the heart of action research, and the permutations of their article demonstrate the action of the theory itself. Mari Firkatian, a faculty member at the University of Hartford (USA), specializes in East European history. Trained as a linguist and historian, her research interests include minority populations, diplomatic history, and intellectual history. Sandy Feinstein has taught in Denmark and Syria while on Fulbright Awards and has published several books and journal articles on pedagogical issues. She currently serves as the Honors Coordinator at Penn State Berks-Lehigh Valley College (USA).

In the sixth article, also focusing substantially on the reflection aspects of action research, Adrienne Cochran argues for better communication in intercultural classes. By drawing on concepts based in Nussbaum's *Cultivating Humanities*, Cochran discusses the strategies action research provides her for teaching non-Western students enrolled in a university humanities class in Hawaii who have little frame of reference in Western history, philosophy, and cultural values. The strategies she explores include focusing on main values and institutions of an historic period, comparing institutions and practices with analogous ones from students' backgrounds, examining interconnections of significant values with key institutions, and asking students to critique values of a particular Western period with respect to their own. Adrienne Cochran received her Ph.D. in philosophy at the University of Hawaii and currently serves as an instructor of Philosophy and Humanities at TransPacific Hawaii College in Honolulu.

The final full-length article of this special issue of *Networks*, "Effective Inclusion Program Suggestions from Around the World," is a meta-analysis of several studies on special education practices around the world. David Aloyzy Zera discusses action research as a complex process of inquiry in which teachers and researchers investigate naturalistic settings and social situations, create hypotheses, reflect on information and the meaning of data, develop new hypotheses, and creatively respond. In this sense, one of the tenets of action research is the ability to pose questions and engage in effective dialogue with others about common issues and concerns. In this article, then, Zera synthesizes and reflects on information from numerous professionals from around the world who are interested in the successful development of inclusion-based special education programs. Doing a meta-analysis of a wide range of studies allows Zera to identify emerging themes which provide substantial data to effect positive change. The extent to which all of the studies reviewed used action research methods is unclear; however, this article illustrates the ways meta-analysis that focuses on particular educational research can facilitate policy changes; a synthesis of findings from a variety of studies and countries makes persuasive evidence. The conference Zera writes about also produced a valuable opportunity for collective reflection. He hopes that common themes may provide information for others to examine and consider when they design an inclusion-based model of service delivery. David Aloyzy Zera is

Assistant Professor in the Graduate School of Education and Allied Professions at Fairfield University (USA).

This special issue on action research in international contexts concludes with a review article by Robbin D. Crabtree. In her review of Martha Hawkes Germain's *Worldly Teachers: Cultural Learning and Pedagogy*, Crabtree recommends this book for many audiences. First, Germain's work is instructive to teachers who have had or seek international teaching experiences. Second, Crabtree argues that *Worldly Teachers* offers clear recommendations for administrators who want to encourage internationalization of teachers and/or curricula. Central to the concerns of this journal, Crabtree argues that Germain's book is a fine example of using and reporting life story research for the improvement of teaching and learning. Robbin D. Crabtree is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Communication at Fairfield University (USA) where she teaches courses in international and intercultural communication.

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