

Chapter 112

Taking Action Research in Teacher Education Online: Exploring the Possibilities

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ABSTRACT

The systematic, intentional study by teachers of their own classroom practice is critical for powerful professional development. Action research, or practitioner inquiry, provides teachers with a vehicle to engage in this professional development in order to raise teacher voices in educational reform and capture and share the knowledge generated by teachers within their classrooms. The quality of any piece of action research completed by a practitioner inquirer is directly related to the coaching s/he receives in the process, but the scope and reach of teacher educators' action research coaching is often constrained by limitations of time and space. Extending the coaching of action research to online environments may provide possibilities for negotiating challenges of time and space and enhance both the quantity and quality of the teacher educator's action research coaching opportunities. The purpose of this chapter is to explore online tools that can facilitate distance action research coaching.

INTRODUCTION

Many teacher education programs include action research as a core component of their programs at the pre-service level during the student teaching

experience as well as the in-service level as the capstone experience to earn an advanced graduate degree (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Simply stated, action research, or practitioner inquiry, is defined as systematic, intentional study by educators of their own professional practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 2009). Inquir-

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ing professionals seek out change by reflecting on their practice. They do this by engaging in a cyclical process of posing questions or “wonderings,” collecting data to gain insights into their wonderings, analyzing the data along with reading relevant literature, taking action to make changes in practice based on new understandings developed during inquiry, and sharing findings with others (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009).

While many educational innovations have come and gone, the systematic study of teachers’ own classroom practice is a concept that has proved its staying power, rooted in the work of John Dewey (1933), popularized by Kurt Lewin in the 1940s (Adelman, 1993), and shortly thereafter applied to the field of education by Stephen Corey (1953). Whether we refer to this process as classroom research, teacher research, action research, teacher inquiry, or some other name, three main reasons exist for the longevity of this concept:

1. The process has proven to be a powerful tool for teacher professional development (Zeichner, 2003);
2. The process has become an important vehicle to raise teachers’ voices in educational reform (Meyers & Rust, 2003); and
3. The process is a mechanism for expanding the knowledge base for teaching in important ways (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 2009).

Because systematic, intentional study by teachers of their own classroom practice is critical for powerful professional development, raising teachers’ voices in educational reform, and capturing and sharing the knowledge generated by teachers from within the four walls of their classrooms, engagement in teacher inquiry continues to be a process that is built into the fabric of many teacher education programs across the nation (see, for example, Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2003, 2009; Crocco, Bayard & Schwartz, 2003; Dana, Silva, & Snow-Gerono, 2002). An important role the teacher educator plays is coaching action

research, as the quality of any piece of action research completed by a practitioner inquirer is directly related to the coaching s/he receives in the process (Drennon & Cervero, 2002; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2008; Poekert, 2010; Smeets & Ponte, 2009).

The scope and reach of teacher educators’ action research coaching is often constrained by limitations of time and space. It is difficult to find time to bring teacher inquirers together to support one another in the action research cycle. It is also difficult to bring student teachers or practicing teachers in different schools or districts together because of geographic distance between places of practice that can inhibit face-to-face meeting time. Extending the coaching of action research to online environments may provide possibilities for negotiating challenges of time and space and enhance both the quantity and quality of the teacher educator’s action research coaching opportunities.

In addition, Appana (2008) summarized some of the benefits of online learning that include increased learning, improved student interaction, increased satisfaction, availability of more learning resources, opportunity to bring in experts from different locations, promotion of life-long learning, flexibility, and opportunities for reflection. All of these benefits of online learning have the potential to be actualized in relationship to coaching the action research process online as pre-service and/or in-service teachers interact within a virtual classroom space to learn with and from each other through the investigation of their own classroom practice.

Because of the many benefits of online learning, a number of virtual teacher professional development initiatives are being introduced and studied, some of which contain an action research component (Dede, 2006). For example, Project WIDE (Wide-scale Interactive Development for Educators) World Online Professional Development at Harvard University is a job-embedded model of online professional development that contains an action research course. While the

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