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Recommended Citation

Tinker Sachs, G. (1999). Action research files: An interview with Anne Burns. *Networks: An On-line Journal of Teacher Research*, October, 1999. Canada: University of Toronto OISE.

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Action Research Files: An Interview with Anne Burns

An Interview and Book Review by Gertrude Tinker Sachs

Gertrude Tinker Sachs teaches at the City University of Hong Kong.

This summer I did quite a bit of travelling. I went to Tokyo for the AILA99 conference and then I travelled to the United States, the Bahamas and Canada. There was one thing that was common to all the stops I made: I met teachers who were searching for some excitement in their teaching. The Japanese teacher who kindly agreed to walk with me to the subway station in Tokyo was desperate for "some innovative teaching ideas," as were my relatives, the 3 Bahamian teachers in the Bahamas. The Canadian teacher from Alberta, sat next to me on the plane and for the two and a half hour ride from Miami to Toronto, we talked non-stop about education. What is interesting about all my encounters with these teachers is that they were from different teaching levels, different education backgrounds and contexts, and different ethnic groups but they all aspired to be better teachers and yearned for something more! Bravo for teaching!

These teachers were all looking for ideas to help them maintain their interest and excitement in teaching but what these teachers were not really aware of was that they already possessed the power to invigorate their teaching! I recommended action research to all the teachers that I met and promised to send them materials about action research and to work with them if there were keen to do something about improving the teaching and learning atmosphere in their classrooms.

For teachers and teacher educators who are interested in investigating their own practice, and spicing up their teaching and learning methodologies, I would recommend that they gain inspiration and encouragement by reading the Action Research books edited by Anne Burns and Susan Hood, *Teachers' Voices 1, 2, 3, and 4*. These publications are based on the action research project initiated by the National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR) at Macquarie University in Sidney, Australia. The Australian based teacher educators were the project co-ordinators for the Australian Adult Migrant English Programme (AMEP) which started in 1988. This was a large scale government sponsored initiative and involved teachers, teacher educators and researchers in developing effective strategies for working with new adult immigrants to Australia. The publications tell the stories of the teachers' participation in various aspects of the action research, hence the appropriately named title, *Teachers' Voices*.

In January of this year, I was fortunate to interview Anne Burns about her work with the Adult Migrant Programme and how she worked with the teachers in carrying out the action research paradigm. Extracts from the one and a half hour inspiring interview capture some of the key problem areas in conducting action research. The initials represent: G: Gertrude, the interviewer and writer; and A: Anne Burns.

Participation of Teachers

G: Anne, how did you get teachers to participate in the action research project?

A: Voluntary participation! We decided to ask for expression of interest from teachers who would like to be actively involved in the research project. What we did also was we made very very clear to teachers right from the outset what the obligations were in the project. And when we invited expression of interest, we indicated to them that they would be involved in the research project for six months with us and that it would feed back into their practice, but they would also need to agree to collect the data.

Data Analysis

G: Many teachers worry about the time and effort involved in the analysis of data. What do you suggest?

A: To move into a research type mode of teaching, I think there has to be a certain amount of partnership, coaching, mentoring or support so that they can begin to have a little more self-reflective time. Having said that, I don't think it's necessary for teachers to feel burdened by data collecting but in some cases teachers have done their own data collecting and analysis.

Integrating Action Research Methodology into Regular Practice

G: So, how can action research become more meaningful to classroom teachers?

A: One of the things Sue would agree with, which both of us feel strongly about, is that teachers should somehow try to integrate a lot of work that they normally do in the classroom into their data collection methodology. So, for example, if you have a communicative activity in the classroom where you want the learners to survey each other or ask questions, or if you want to use self-reflective journals, this lends itself very, very much to data collection for the project and you can get lots of valuable information out of that data collection. So one of the things I try to emphasize very strongly to teachers is to use methods that they feel comfortable with. I think there are a number of methods that they can use and we talked about these in our workshops. And to integrate the methods into the classroom activities so they become at the same time the teaching tool, but also a method of collecting some data more systematically than you would normally do.

Practical Concerns

G: What were some of the practical concerns that teachers experienced in implementing the action research paradigm?

A: I think one of the major problems in many educational organization is simply the research culture. Many administrators and principals are not either aware or convinced of the relationship between research and practice. I think to some extent we've been fortunate in the Adult Migrant Programme because it has been seen as an important part of the work of the whole programme.

G: How did teachers respond to the perennial problem of "lack of time"?

A: Yes, teachers were very busy. One of the teachers I worked with who was extremely positive about doing action research, in fact, saw it as a very, very positive form of professional development. When she sent me her evaluation of her project, I asked her a question: "What was a major problem for teachers doing the research?" She told me, "Time, time, time, time." And then I asked her: "What was the disadvantages of this kind of approach?" She said, "Time, time, time, time." So my response to teachers asking me that question is there is no way to get away from the extra time required, you have to accept that from the beginning that engaging yourself in this process is going to take up some of your time. But the huge advantage is and I've been told constantly by the teachers I worked with is that they gained so much more than from this process professionally than any other form of professional development.

Action Research as a form of Professional Development

G: How does action research compare to other forms of teacher professional development?

A: Compared with workshops where information is simply being handed down to teachers to disseminate, this

is a more fundamental way of working with teachers in that they are taking real issues and real problems in their classrooms and they are bringing them to a collaborative group and what they discovered is that their problems and their issues are by no means isolated. We have to move away from the isolationist view of both teaching and teacher education because it's the collaborative elements which seems to make huge changes for people and allow them to modify and renew their practice. The other aspect is what happens when teachers begin to talk about their own practice. It's immensely affirming so there is a very strong sense of feeling empowered, feeling your work is valued, feeling you've been listened to, and feeling you have some recognition for your work as a teacher.

Getting Started

G: If we say that teachers can start by themselves, what about the collaborative side of it? What about working with other teachers to support you and sustain you with the work you are doing?

A: I think if you really are the only person in your school who wants to do action research and you cannot find any like-minded people, then I think you have to look for any networking opportunity outside your school, like join professional associations, where there may be opportunities for teachers or special interest groups to join. There are now Internet facilities and, the on line journals are very good. These provide opportunities for discussion. So I think you have to look for networking outside of your school if your own colleagues are not interested.

Teachers' Voices

You have just heard from one of the editors of *Teachers' Voices*. Now, you might be more interested in reading the books to find out what the teachers themselves think and feel about the work that they have done. *Book 1* is about implementing different aspects of the Adult Migrant curriculum. Susan Hood, provides a cogent summary of the curriculum and the main findings from the participating teachers. The teachers' voices provide us with a variety of view points about incorporating students' input in the selection of teaching content, approaches to teaching grammar in the competency-based curriculum and exploring different assessment approaches. *Book 2* targets different learning groups such as mixed ability classes. What is very interesting in these reports is how the teachers' concepts of "disparate groups" changed from a deficit view to an enriched view of diversity over the duration of the project. The volume documents these changes in its coverage of a range of subthemes such as individual and group case studies, students' perceptions on learning in different contexts, and teaching skills and strategies. *Book 3* focuses on the application of different activities for teaching critical literacy in reading. This book is much thinner than the previous two but no less rich in its coverage of very important issues related to the social construction of discourse. The teachers write about how they develop a critical literacy approach through oral activities, use of resources and the adoption of various teaching strategies. The teachers also provide examples of the texts that they used. The newly released *Book 4* is a follow-up to *Book 1* and it examines how learner-centredness can be fostered within a competency-based curriculum. All the volumes make a strong effort to incorporate learners' views in their reports and the teachers do this through a range of methodological approaches such as through questionnaires, case studies and journal keeping.

I found these books to be very well organised in their presentation of the teachers' voices. The themes and sub-themes make the teachers' stories easy to appreciate. The editors support the teachers' stories with useful introductions and overviews of the action research paradigm and the pertinent literature on the respective book's theme. The books are useful for teachers in any educational context, secondary, primary or tertiary settings and in any location, East or West. They also make worthwhile reading for teacher educators and researchers who are interested in investigating teacher development and new curricula implementation issues

through action research which Anne thinks, "is a very good way for helping teachers to make sense of a new curriculum." So, to teachers who wish to invigorate their teaching, think about incorporating action researcher into your teaching routine. If you need some support in getting started, think about the advice given in this article. You need not be alone and in fact, you are not alone in wanting to spice up your teaching!