

Original citation:

Hammond, Michael, 1956-. (2013) The contribution of pragmatism to understanding educational action research : value and consequences. Educational Action Research, Volume 21 (Number 4). pp. 603-618. ISSN 0965-0792

Permanent WRAP url:

<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/66310>

Copyright and reuse:

The Warwick Research Archive Portal (WRAP) makes this work of researchers of the University of Warwick available open access under the following conditions. Copyright © and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable the material made available in WRAP has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Published version:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Educational Action Research on 2013, available online:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/09650792.2013.832632>

A note on versions:

The version presented here may differ from the published version or, version of record, if you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the 'permanent WRAP url' above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: publications@warwick.ac.uk

warwick**publications**wrap

highlight your research

<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/>

Abstract

This paper argues that action research finds a rationale in the pragmatic position that knowledge is provisional and generated through a transaction between agent and environment. Action research finds a further methodological rationale in the pragmatic view that knowledge is generated within indeterminate situations requires habits of reflection and analysis and is arrived at through open agreement. However pragmatic action research is also distinctive: it has a particular concern for consensus and, through the work of Dewey, a focus on the pedagogical implications of problem solving. This paper discusses the value of the label 'pragmatic' and the strengths and weaknesses of the pragmatic approach.

Michael Hammond

Institute of Education

University of Warwick

CV4 7AL

m.hammond@warwick.ac.uk

The contribution of pragmatism to understanding educational action research: value and consequences

Introduction

This paper examines how pragmatism can help us to understand action research. In particular it asks if pragmatism provides an appropriate epistemological basis for educational action research and, if it does, whether a pragmatic approach can be distinguished from other types of action research. These questions are important as assumptions about *epistemology*, a term used throughout this paper to indicate a standpoint on the nature and generation of knowledge, underlie the case for action research and for particular traditions within it. Yet action research is often understood only at the level of method, a series of steps taken to improve a situation, rather than as offering a distinctive approach to the generation of new knowledge. Can pragmatism provide the required epistemological underpinning?

The paper gives an overview of action research as a concept and covers some key ideas within pragmatic thinking, drawing primarily on the work of Dewey. This is followed by a section which examines pragmatic notions of truth. Drawing on these earlier sections, the paper next explains the contribution of pragmatism to our understanding of action research and the distinctive character of pragmatic action research. It then goes on to provide a discussion of the pedagogical implications of Dewey before finishing with a concluding commentary.

What is action research?

While it has been commonplace over the years to observe that it has no single definition (for example, McCutcheon and Jung, 1990; Peters and Robinson, 1984; Punch, 2005) action research can be understood as a form of inquiry which has: an action orientated focus; a moral and democratic commitment of some kind; a concern for agency albeit with an awareness of constraints on action; an orientation towards collaboration; the generation of both emic (interconnected to the insider) and etic (disciplinary) knowledge. Thus Reason and Bradbury (2001, 1) see action research as a 'participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes', a view endorsed by Brydon-Miller et al (2003), while Somekh (2006) sees action researchers as integrating research and action; committed to collaboration and social justice; concerned with reflexivity; and able to generate new knowledge building on existing knowledge.

Of course there are varying traditions within action research. Carr and Kemmis are at pains to define the aims of action research as improving 'the rationality and justice of their (*practitioners*) own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out' (1986, 162). This signals that understanding the purpose of action is as important as the action itself and a recurring issue in much action research is reflexivity and the critical interrogation of one's own beliefs, judgments and practices (for example, McCutcheon and Jung, 1990; McNiff and Whitehead, 2010; Winter, 1989). Indeed Whitehead characterised action research as 'living theory' - an opportunity for practitioners to put forward descriptions and explanations of their own value-laden practice for interrogation within a 'dialogical community' (Whitehead, 1989). However, a concern for dialogue and collaboration is widely shared by most action researchers even if collaboration between practitioners is not seen as straightforward

(Waters-Adams, 1994) and made more complicated when involving outside supporters or ‘facilitators’ (Rogers et al. 2012).

Carr and Kemmis (1986) saw action research as serving different purposes, in particular ‘technical’, ‘practical’ or ‘emancipatory’ interests. They argued, famously, for a critical approach aimed at emancipating people from oppression. However practitioner accounts of action research, including Nixon (1981) and arguably the scenarios described in Carr and Kemmis (1986, 171-176), are often focused on more immediate problems of practice and appear practical or technical in scope (for example, Elliott, 2005). Action research can, however, embrace political activism, often undertaken by outsiders (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998). Recent examples include Freytes Frey and Cross (2011), a report on working with disadvantaged youth in Buenos Aires, and L’Etang and Theron (2012), an intervention with young people living with HIV/AIDS in rural South Africa.

A unifying feature of all action research then appears to be a concern for action-oriented inquiry but, as put by Hammersley (2004), researchers hold differing standpoints as to whether action research is necessarily a collective undertaking; whether it does or should involve external ‘agents’; and whether it is concerned with local problems or ones which require wider educational or social change.

Epistemology and action research

Action research is varied, too, in the epistemological positions it takes up. For Hammersley (2004) action research draws on positivism, pragmatism, interpretivism, critical theory and postmodernism. Such theoretical eclecticism is acknowledged by many action researchers (for example, Somekh, 2006 and Brydon-Miller et al, 2003), and is largely seen as a virtue. However eclecticism can obscure important differences with, as Peters and Robinson (1984) complain, questions of epistemology left underdeveloped. One consequence, as Townsend (2013) further notes, is that discussion of action research becomes narrowly focused on strategies for problem solving. Thus Lewin’s spirals of activity (Marrow, 1969); the nested cycles of planning, implementation and reconnaissance and monitoring in Elliott (1991); the ‘plan, do, observe and reflect’ in Kemmis and McTaggart (1982) and so on become misread as the point of action research; the distinctive perspective that action research offers on the generation of new knowledge is missed.

There have, of course, been periodic attempts by action researchers to debate epistemology, notably Carr and Kemmis (1986) and Elliott (2006), and this is where pragmatism makes a contribution. For pragmatism, the work of Dewey in particular, seems to underpin *educational* action research (for example, Edwards, 2005, Elliott, 2006, Gillberg, 2012, Greenwood, 2007) and action research more generally (for example, Baskerville, 2004, Charles and Ward, 2007; Goldkuhl, 2012; Levin and Greenwood, 2001; Oquist, 1978; Reason, 2003). However an interest in pragmatism is not universally shared - for example pragmatism is barely mentioned in Carr and Kemmis (1986) and becomes part of a much wider picture for Reason (2006). Thus in discussing the contribution of pragmatism to action research three questions are worth asking:

- Can pragmatism provide a suitable epistemological basis for action research?

- If so, is this a justification for action research in general or is there a type of action research that is distinctively pragmatic?
- If there is a distinctively pragmatic approach to action research on what grounds should it be commended or critiqued?

The paper proceeds by offering a definition of pragmatism alongside a brief discussion of pragmatism in its historical context and a discussion of pragmatic notions of truth.

What is pragmatism?

Pragmatism, like action research, is not easily defined. The classic texts of, say, Peirce (1878); James (1904); Dewey ([1931] 1982) are open to competing interpretations and recent contributions, notably those from Rorty (1982; 2000), have shifted our understanding of pragmatism into a more contemporary anti-positivism. Nonetheless one common starting point is the classic pragmatic maxim put forward by Peirce in 1878:

Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object (Peirce 1878, 135).

This ‘maxim’ has been open to varying interpretation, not least by Peirce himself. For example it may as easily suggest that inquiry is focused on conceptual clarification, almost a deductive testing of ideas, as much as an inductive drawing out of what can be learned by attending to the consequences of actions. The maxim might also be read as offering a utilitarian calculation regarding the impact of our action - something which Dewey in particular was keen to counter (Dewey, 1926 /1986, 28). Nonetheless the maxim captures a unifying principle in pragmatic thinking that knowledge is consequential, generated after action and reflection on action, even if we can use what we know already (antecedent knowledge) to guide our actions.

Dewey’s position on experience and knowing is worth considering in more detail as it offers one of the most widely discussed perspectives on pragmatic thinking. It is also one of the most appealing and it is Dewey’s work which largely informs the view of pragmatism offered in this paper. Dewey offered an ecological view of knowing based on the transaction between an active organism and its environment. This positioned pragmatism between philosophical idealism (put briefly the idea that our sense of reality is mentally constructed) and empiricism (the idea that knowledge comes primarily from our sensory experiences). Instead for Dewey we construct our own sense of reality *and* our sense of reality is formed by our experience of the environment.

Dewey notes:

The organism does not stand about, Micawber-like, waiting for something to turn up. It does not wait passive and inert for something to impress itself on it from without. The organism acts in accordance with its own structure, simple or complex, upon its surroundings. As a consequence the changes produced in the environment react upon the organism and its activities. The living creature undergoes, suffers, the consequences of its own behaviour. This close connection between doing and suffering or undergoing forms what we call experience. ([1920] 1982, 129)

Within this dialectical transaction of organism and the environment Dewey tended to differentiate between every day experience of the world and intelligent action. As organisms we were necessarily faced with problems to which we do not know how to respond and this means that we need to continually generate knowledge in order to adapt to a changing world. Of course we could respond, and respond successfully, through trial and error, but for Dewey indeterminate situations provided a stimulus for intelligent action:

Thinking begins in what may fairly enough be called a forked-road situation, a situation which is ambiguous, which presents a dilemma, which proposes alternatives. In the suspense of uncertainty, we metaphorically climb a tree; we try to find some standpoint from which we may survey additional facts and, getting a more commanding view of the situation, may decide how the facts stand related to one another. (1910, 11)

Intelligent action involved ‘experimentation’ at a symbolic level as well as at a practical level. Indeed for Dewey thinking or deliberation carried the sense of ‘dramatic rehearsal’ and in taking intelligent action we have ‘hit in imagination upon an object which furnishes an adequate stimulus to the recovery of overt action.’ (Dewey [1922] 2007, 192). Of course whether the solution we have imagined will lead to a resolution of the problem, whether it will ‘work’ or not, only becomes clear when the consequences of an action are considered but much more than trial and error is at stake.

Before moving on to consider its legacy for action research, it should be made clear that pragmatism is not unique in taking a dialectical position and both Hegel and Marx offer interesting historical counterpoints. Both are briefly considered here.

Hegel’s dialectic method involved looking beyond appearances and recognising that all phenomena, natural or social, contained a unity of opposites. This can seem a perplexing position but, put simply, it is saying we cannot conceive of what is (for example existence) without considering what is not (nothingness). Why do this? Hegel wanted us to view the world not in terms of what is but what it is in the process of becoming or what it has the capacity to become; only by understanding the contradictory elements within a phenomenon we will be able to comprehend it. Hegel coupled his dialectical position with a notion that it was only after the event that the full meaning of a phenomenon can be appreciated – as, famously, he put it, ‘The owl of Minerva takes its flight only when the shades of night are gathering (Hegel [1820] 2001, 20). Hegel’s work has a metaphysical feel and he has been widely seen as teleological – a belief in progress towards the ideal – and this is quite missing in Dewey. However Dewey took from Hegel the idea that knowledge was consequential as well as a deep concern for the nature of freedom (for example, Waddington, 2010).

Marx provides a second point of reference for, like Dewey, Marx was heavily influenced by Hegel, and, again like Dewey, he rejected Hegel’s more idealist philosophy, replacing it with an idea of praxis which fused human agency with material activity. This begins to look much closer to Dewey but unlike Dewey, Marx saw consciousness as shaped by modes and relations of production, arguing that class consciousness could only emerge when material conditions were appropriate. As a corollary this meant that class consciousness could not be created through the force of moral example and could not be imposed from outside: as Marx famously asked ‘Who will educate the educators?’ (Marx [1845] 1969, 13). In spite of superficial similarities the

disjuncture between marxism and Dewey's pragmatism is relatively clear and becomes important in our later consideration of critical theory: Dewey was deeply concerned with addressing social inequalities but unlike Marx he did not offer a class based or 'partisan' analysis (Damico, 1981). Dewey had little to say on the ownership of the means of production, and he did not see a grand narrative of history.

Pragmatic and alternative conceptions of truth

We have seen that pragmatism offers a view of knowledge as generated in action and reflection on action in order to address particular problems. This means that what we know is tentative or fallible for it has been created in particular circumstances to meet particular ends and to express particular values. This puts pragmatism in a distinctive position in relation to positivist and interpretivist inquiry.

Both positivism and interpretivism are more complex concepts than are frequently presented but they do provide useful labels for two very different stances on knowledge. Positivism offers a view of knowledge that is 'hard, objective and tangible', something generated through distanced observation and an 'allegiance to the methods of natural science' (Cohen and Manion 2010, 7). Interpretivism takes knowledge as personal and subjective. Interpretivist researchers seek to 'stand in the shoes' of those they are researching and reject the methods of natural science.

In relation to these 'isms', it is the anti-positivist stance of pragmatism that is more strongly emphasised by contemporary commentators (for example, Badley 2003, Biesta 2010, Cherryholmes 1992, Rorty, 1982). Rorty, for example, accepts that there may be an external world independent of our minds but if this is so then it is not a reality we would be able to recognise. Hence the question as to whether the world is real or not is not worth asking:

When they [pragmatists] suggest that we not ask questions about the nature of Truth and Goodness, they do not invoke a theory about the nature of reality or knowledge or man which says that 'there is no such thing' as Truth or Goodness. Nor do they have a 'relativistic' or 'subjectivist' theory of Truth or Goodness. They would simply like to change the subject. (Rorty, 1982, xiv).

For Baert (2005) a pragmatic position is to see knowledge as constantly changing, growing and adapting to the life in which it is located. The world as capable of diverse, even infinite, interpretation; any interpretation of that world is necessarily selective and any claims to knowledge, causality, and objectivity are provisional and contingent. For Cherryholmes (1994, 16-17) no obvious distinction can be made between text and context and for Rorty:

Once one drops the traditional position between context and thing contextualized, there is no way to divide things up into those which are what they are independent of context and those which are context dependent. (Rorty, 1991, 97-98).

However, spreading the net wider, some of the classic pragmatic writing offers a 'harder, more objective' account of our knowledge of reality. Peirce, for example, suggested that 'The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real.' (Peirce, 1878, 300). The key term here is 'fated': a suggestion, though see Peirce's own footnote, of a belief in the existence of fixed and pre-

existing structures which has few takers today. Instead the more settled view is that pragmatism does not take a correspondence view of reality; we reach agreements about the world which are offered as warranted assertions when established by rigorous examination. Dewey in particular was deeply concerned with how we could reach agreements about social reality when we lived in pluralist and rapidly changing communities. He felt that even if we can and do interpret the world subjectively, we could share an inter-subjective world (Dewey [1910] 2008, 16). Agreement, however, needed to be ‘other regarding’ and consider the consequences of our actions for others. Intelligent action needed to be socially intelligent:

But suppose that each becomes aware of what the other is doing, and becomes interested in the other’s action and thereby interested in what he is doing himself as connected with the action of the other. The behaviour of each would be intelligent; and social intelligent and guided. (Dewey [1916] 1947, 37)

To his contemporary critics this looked like a strongly relativist perspective on knowledge - Russell, for example, was particularly trenchant, feeling that pragmatism was confusing beliefs, and a willingness to act on beliefs, with truth (Russell [1938] 2004, 210). However the distinctive position of pragmatism is to reject positivism while also rejecting out-and-out subjectivity. Instead pragmatism interrogates the conditions in which intersubjective agreement is possible. In particular Dewey has a normative commitment to open and democratic discussion with full respect for other points of view. This contrasts with interpretive inquiry in which the goal is to describe how agreements, for better or worse, are reached, not how they should be reached or how we can enable them to be reached (see Goldkuhl, 2012; McNiff, 2002, 18). Furthermore, pragmatic inquiry, as we see later, does not eschew the methods of natural science but rather the assumptions on which these methods are based.

Pragmatism and action research

Pragmatism, it will now be argued, provides an underpinning for the practice of action research, but that is not to say Dewey, or any other pragmatist, invented action research or to rule out alternative epistemological underpinnings. Rather, the point is that action researchers carry pragmatic assumptions about knowledge when conducting their work, and much action research can be described as a form of pragmatic inquiry. This is for three principal reasons.

First, the pragmatic view that knowledge is consequential and fallible lies at the heart of action research. Indeed if there were a pre-existing reliable ‘knowledge base’ or ‘best practice’ to follow there would be little point in asking practitioners to engage in the arduous and uncertain process of generating their own knowledge through their own actions and rigorous reflection on the consequences of those actions (Baskerville, 2004; Elliott, 2006). Thus, while action research is often praised as having a practical impact on a local context, it is also making the wider pragmatic point that without action we would not know what is useful or desirable: it is only by undertaking the journey that our ends, and the actions needed to achieve those ends, become clear. Past research can inform action and action research can create knowledge from which others can learn - in Elliot’s (2007) words it might have ‘value for use’ or, put more simply, may be relatable to other practitioners. However, action researchers cannot claim to offer ‘anywhere, anytime’ answers or incontrovertible ‘best practice’ and nor, pragmatists would say, should anyone else (for example, Badley, 2003; Biesta and Burbules, 2003; Biesta, 2010).

Second, the pragmatic stance that knowing is consequential underpins the idea that investigation of, and agreement on, the consequences of action provide the basis for a claim to knowledge (for example, Elliott, 2007, Heikkinen, Kakkori, and Huttunen, 2001, Heikkinen et al., 2012).

Pragmatism, moreover, provides action research with a *dialectical* perspective on the generation of knowledge: we come to know the world through our actions and interaction within the world but in creating new knowledge reality is modified and we face gaps in what we know and new problems to address. Action research inquiry is thus an iterative, never ending process.

Third, the pragmatic concern for intersubjective agreement justifies the prominence given to collaboration in many forms of action research. Collaboration enables ordinary people to address problems which they have in common (Marrow, 1969) and collaboration helps the action researcher keep his or her 'feet on the ground' and avoid being cast in the role of hero innovator (Lacey, 1996). However, the wider significance of collaboration is epistemological for it offers a means of validating new knowledge and leading to what pragmatists describe as warranted assertions about the world. Thus for Elliott (2006, 179): 'What is to count as warranted or justified belief in contrast to mere opinion, dogma and guesswork is solely determined by a democratic discussion aimed at achieving an unforced consensus'. For such consensus to be reached individuals need to feel free to disagree over what they consider to be important (for example, Fendt and Kaminska-Labbéc, 2011, Hase, 2004) and to be encouraged to reassess their views in the light of new evidence. As Reason (2003) notes, in discussing Rorty's work, it is in language and through language that we 'make our world'; any claims to knowledge can be considered as communicative actions.

The distinctive character of pragmatic educational action research

If pragmatism provides a rationale for action research in general, it also offers a distinctive way of thinking about action research. This distinctiveness can be illustrated by contrasting a pragmatic approach with action research which has been influenced by other epistemological traditions. First some comments on the influence of post modernism on action research, then the positivist legacy, and third a longer discussion of critical theory.

Post modernism provides action researchers with an alternative focus on language and the exercise of power. Indeed post modernism largely saw questions of language as coming down to standpoints on power (see Heikkinen, Huttunen and Kakkori 2001); discourse was always a language game (Antonio, 1991) and ultimately reason and rationality were social constructs. While there is no clearly defined post modernist 'school' of action research a post modern influence can be detected in the greater awareness researchers now have of the multiplicity of roles and 'voices' in an inquiry and a greater concern for positionality and reflexivity (for example, Somekh, 2006, 11-31). Post modernism has also been influential in the development of a narrative inquiry approach within action research (for example, Jennings and Graham 1996), an approach which offers more personal, reflexive and subjective stories of change. Post modernism, then, does not have the same focus on intersubjectivity as in pragmatism and pragmatism offers a more straightforward view of human agency (Baskerville, 2004, 331). In post modernism there may ultimately be no means of arriving at a democratic and rational consensus; in Dewey's pragmatism there is.

The second comparison, between a pragmatic and a positivist approach, is more controversial as few action researchers cite positivism as an influence on their work and many define themselves as anti-positivist. Nonetheless Lewin seemed at times to believe that controlled experimentation could generate law-like generalisations about social activity (Peters and Robinson, 1984) and some writers (for example, DeLuca and Kock, 2007; Kock, McQueen, and Scott, 1997) have sought to make action research more accessible to 'positivists' by suggesting that its iterative approach can correspond to traditional notions of validity and reliability. However the idea of truth as correspondence to reality cannot be reconciled to pragmatism even if pragmatism can accept, even embrace, experimental methods. Indeed Dewey valued the methodology of natural sciences but argued that scientific inquiry was more value laden than often claimed - as a mirror image he also claimed that questions of moral behaviour were more 'scientific' than many moralists would allow as questions of morality needed to be addressed through careful reflection on the consequences of action. Lewin suggested something similar, but in the main his experimental approach was aimed at developing participants' sense of self-efficacy and their capacity for collaboration (Marrow, 1969) rather than as a means of arriving at a 'scientific truth' - a position that seems to fit well with Dewey.

Next we turn to the contrast between pragmatic action research and action research undertaken within a critical inquiry tradition. The disjuncture again is fairly clear. Pragmatism, at least to critics such as Durkheim (1983), was anti-sociological for it did not take seriously the idea of a shared social reality that acted *upon* the social beings: the ecological metaphor of the transaction between the organism within a physical environment was inapt, social actions took place within a *social* reality. Thus Habermas, a philosopher who shared many of Dewey's interests, drew on sociological and marxist theory and reached different conclusions as to the nature of communicative action (McCarthy, 1984). Perhaps for this reason Carr and Kemmis (1986) find Habermas, rather than Dewey, a more suitable point of reference in developing their idea of critical action research. Inspired by Habermas, Carr and Kemmis (1968, 179) ask how can agency be exercised in the face of the 'distorted understanding' we have of ourselves, a distortion which they saw as inevitable given our historical and class positions. For Carr and Kemmis this is not just a sociological distortion for there is an understanding from twentieth century psychoanalysis that we are not the rational thinkers which the Enlightenment imagined us to be. Critical action research does not rule out the idea of rational consensus, but it displays awareness of the constraints on communication - for example treating an 'ideal speech situation' (put broadly one in which all parties are competent to speak and act, to question the rules and procedures by which agreement is sought) as a special case.

The difference between critical and pragmatic action research can be illustrated in more concrete terms in relation to teacher consciousness. Johnston (1994) once asked 'is action research a natural process for teachers?'. The answer from the pragmatic point of view is that action research is not a natural process as it requires a commitment to collaboration, to seeking consensus and to reflection which is not an everyday 'habit'. However pragmatic action researchers are optimistic that practitioners can step outside of their subjective consciousness of the roles they perform. Such distancing may be supported by external agency but this is not a necessary condition. Critical action research offers a more complex, sociological and historical view in which practitioner consciousness is nested within layers of expectation and constraint.

Critical consciousness needs to be scaffolded by those with a wider and more emancipated view of teaching and learning, albeit one gleaned through praxis. Reaching consensus in pragmatic action research requires sustained attention, in critical action research reaching any such consensus is open to misunderstanding.

Pragmatism and pedagogy

We turn now to the pedagogical implications of taking a pragmatic approach to action research, drawing primarily again on Dewey. A crucial point to note here was that Dewey's primary concern was explaining how to think intelligently about the world, not what we should think about the world (see Ryan, 1995). However Dewey was not slow to offer his opinions on teaching and learning and he not only provided a number of important texts on schools and teaching (for example, Dewey, 1910; Dewey [1938] 1963) but worked with teachers, was a supporter of teachers and teacher unions and set up an experimental school. Indeed Dewey has a particular appeal to *educational* action researchers: he was 'one of us' in ways that, say, Hegel, was not - though as it happens some action researchers can make very imaginative use of Hegel in analysing educational interventions (for example, Winter, 1989, 46-55).

Dewey's views on education were based on his transactional philosophy. He wanted a curriculum in which children experienced problems, tried to address these problems, and drew conclusions through reflection on their encounters with these problems (for example, Dewey, [1916] 1947, 179-192). His focus tended to be on children's learning: adults faced a broad range of naturally occurring problems in their everyday lives, teachers needed to intervene in school in order to present children with the same breadth of problems that adults faced. However each problem was to be treated holistically and he did not believe in rigid demarcation between disciplines. The problems he wanted children to encounter were often practical but they were not geared towards vocational preparation, rather they could provide a rehearsal of the kind of intelligent and collaborative action needed for all aspects of adult life. For Dewey the education process 'has no end beyond itself; it is its own end' (Dewey [1916] 1947, 59).

Dewey's view of pedagogy has been labelled by critics as well as supporters as child centred. In fact he believed that teachers needed to intervene to help children move from the practical to more abstract reasoning (Dewey, 1910: 109) - not surprisingly the comparison with the work of Vygotsky (Vygotsky and Cole, 1978) is much discussed. Dewey felt that his experimental curriculum could engage pupils without coercion but he did not label himself a progressive (Dewey, [1938] 1963) and he recognised that his approach to schooling would be challenging for children lacking 'habits' of cooperation. In fact his progressive stance has been exaggerated (see Petrovic, 1998), perhaps as he had in his sights the pervasive practice of rote learning (of which he had considerable direct experience) rather than experiments at the margins of educational systems.

Dewey's work has been a long standing and, many would say, benign influence on educational innovations, such as those undertaken in Reggio Emilia (Soler and Miller, 2003), as well as an enduring point of reference for curriculum reformers (for example, Taatila and Raij, 2012) and small scale action researchers (for example, Levin and Greenwood, 2001). However care should be paid when interpreting his legacy. Dewey provided a way of thinking about education, and although he had strong views he put them forward only in the most general terms and, for the

most part, in relation to young learners. Perhaps the key lesson to take from Dewey is that there must be a correspondence between what we believe about the way we come to know the world and how we want to educate those in our care. In particular if action researchers, drawing on pragmatic principles, believe that there is value in a collaborative, iterative approach to addressing problems of practice then, taking the same logic, they should favour pedagogical interventions that promote a problem solving curriculum rather than ones that focus on crude memorisation strategies.

Pragmatic action research was earlier compared to critical action research and in a similar way Dewey's views on teaching can be contrasted with a more recent tradition of critical pedagogy. Dewey's primary focus, his unit of analysis as it were, was the child or learner albeit within an understanding that learning takes place within a wider context. Critical pedagogy shares Dewey's concern for the active participation of learners but it comes up with a more politically committed analysis of the action needed to support this aim (for example, Freire, 1974, Giroux, 1992). Taking the much cited example of adult literacy programmes Freire believed that adult educators could and should support action to improve the situation of the dispossessed: the focus of teaching may well be the everyday problem of literacy but the educator's ultimate goal was to contribute to the structural transformation of society. Freire's unit of analysis was society and its fundamental inequality. This has led, over the years, to the association of pragmatism in some minds with a more reformist approach to action research and critical action research with a more politicised one (Brydon-Miller, 2009, Gillberg, 2012). Pragmatic action research tends to focus on the agency of the practitioner, and indeed the agency of learners themselves; in contrast critical action research has an emancipatory agenda which seeks to free the learner from the constraints which operate on his or her exercise of agency (Boog, 2003).

Conclusion

The paper has covered the concept of action research, the concept of pragmatism and the distinctive nature of pragmatic action research. It has also drawn attention to criticisms of Dewey and of pragmatic thinking. This final section sums up the contribution of pragmatism to educational action research.

At the start of this paper it was suggested that action research is too easily understood as a series of steps, or at least we are too ready to read action research in this way, rather than as a perspective on the generation of new knowledge. In response it was asked if pragmatism could provide an epistemological basis for action research. The answer is clearly that it can, for pragmatism tells us that what we know is provisional and arrived at through a dialectical transaction between agent and environment. Action research finds further methodological support in the pragmatic position that knowledge is generated within indeterminate situations, requires habits of reflection and analysis and results in warranted assertions which attend to the social and moral consequences of action (Table 1).

Insert table 1 about here

The second question asked was whether there was anything distinctive about a pragmatic approach to educational action research. The answer is fairly clear: like most, if not all, action research a pragmatic approach has an action orientation. However it also has a special concern

for collaborative inquiry and the generation of intersubjective agreement on the consequences of action. The most distinctive aspect of pragmatic action research is the concept of warranted assertion. This offers a less complex, less sociological, view of knowledge than appears in critical action research and to some extent within traditions of participatory action research. Pragmatism is not however naive or complacent about inequalities of power and the exercise of vested interest, and indeed such asymmetries have a particular resonance for feminist pragmatic research (for example, Gillberg, 2012). Pragmatic inquiry is stimulated by problems of practice and seeks to address them. It does so by focusing on a problem-solving pedagogy rather than enlisting the learner in a project for the radical transformation of society. Pragmatism is particularly flexible and varied, it does not offer a 'paradigm' in which action research should take place or define a particular research strategy. Much depends on what is appropriate in particular circumstances. Pragmatic action research may or may not involve external 'agents'.

The final question asked was whether a pragmatic approach to action research should be commended or critiqued. To its supporters pragmatic action research carries optimism, a concern for civic engagement and an Enlightenment belief in the emancipatory potential of reason. It makes values integral to research and is concerned with how democratic values can be expressed. As with action research in general, the practical consequences of pragmatic action research may include a greater sense of self-efficacy among participants, institutional capacity building and the addressing of practical problems without reducing those problems to a short term quick fix. Pragmatic inquiry is radical in the restricted but powerful sense in that it is asking 'what happens when we take the right of democratic expression seriously?'.

Pragmatism is open to criticism but three of the most trenchant criticisms fall wide of the mark. First, to 'positivist' critics such as Russell pragmatists had lost touch with truth as correspondence to reality. However there is, post Popper, little dispute today that what we know is uncertain; it is fallibilism, if not always pragmatism, that has won out. Second, to conservative critics Dewey was a naïve progressive. Clearly he was not and he had much to say that was prescient on the role of the teachers in supporting learning. Third, to 'orthodox' Marxism, Dewey was reformist and indeed for Lenin ([1908] 1948) the pragmatism of James was politically bourgeois. This, however, is to miss the radical character of Dewey's notion of democracy and the integrity with which Dewey defended liberal values.

There are instead other criticisms of pragmatism that are more pertinent for educational action researchers today. First, one does not need to be a critical theorist to accept that Dewey was, with exceptions, largely disinterested in sociological explanation and it can be asked whether pragmatic inquiry is missing insights from interpretive social research and indeed if researchers are missing opportunities to contribute to this wider field of social inquiry. Second, by underestimating the degree to which social institutions serve political interests, pragmatic inquirers might be overestimating our capacity to exercise agency, and for the matter our willingness to exercise agency in Dewey's sense of the word (for example, Wilkinson, 2012). Third, it can be argued that pragmatism is so general a philosophy that at times its very flexibility appears a weakness. For example, pragmatic inquiry can be stretched to cover experimental testing but also much more inductive approaches to inquiry - this leaves a great deal of scope methodologically.

To conclude, do we need the label 'pragmatic educational action research'? The answer is 'yes' in that it provides a useful means of signalling a particular standpoint on the nature of knowledge and the way that new knowledge is generated. This standpoint is shared by many action researchers but *pragmatic* educational action research has a particular concern for collaboration and warranted assertion and an engagement with pedagogical tradition established by Dewey. Pragmatic action research can be distinguished from other approaches to action research more influenced by positivist, postmodern, critical or interpretivist thinking. However pragmatism is nothing if not adaptive and pragmatism does not seek to establish an exclusive or rigid framework in which action research inquiry should take place. This flexibility leaves questions unanswered and those wishing to identify their research as resting in the tradition of pragmatic inquiry need to understand what is contextually appropriate in their inquiries and to be responsible for the methodological choices they make.

References

- Antonio, R. (1991) Postmodern storytelling versus pragmatic truth-seeking: The discursive bases of social theory. *Sociological Theory*, 9 (2): 154-163.
- Badley, G. (2003) The crisis in educational research: a pragmatic approach. *European Educational Research Journal*, 2 (2): 295-308.
- Baert, P. (2005) *Philosophy of the Social Sciences: Towards Pragmatism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Baskerville, R. (2004) Special issue on Action Research in Information Systems: Making IS research relevant to practice. *MIS Quarterly*, 28 (3): 329 - 335.
- Biesta, G. (2010) Why 'what works' still won't work. From evidence-based education to value-based education. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 29 (5): 491-503.
- Biesta, G. and Burbules, N. (2003) *Pragmatism and Educational Research*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Bogdan, R. and Biklen, S. K. (1998) *Qualitative Research for Education: An introduction to theories and methods*. New York: Pearson Education Group.
- Boog, B. (2003) The emancipatory character of Action Research, its history and the present state of the art. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 13 (6): 426-438.
- Brydon-Miller, M., Greenwood, D. and Maguire, P. (2003) Why action research? *Action Research*, 1, (1): 9-28.
- Brydon-Miller, M. & Maguire, P. (2009) Participatory action research: contributions to the development of practitioner inquiry in education. *Educational Action Research*, 17(1): 79-93.
- Carr, W., and Kemmis, S. (1986) *Becoming Critical. Education, knowledge and action research*. Lewes: Falmer.
- Charles, L. and Ward, N. (2007) *Generating Change through Research: Action Research and its Implications*. Newcastle: University of Newcastle, Centre for Rural Economy.
- Cherryholmes, C. (1992) Notes on pragmatism and scientific realism. *Educational Researcher*, 21 (6): 13-17.
- Cherryholmes, C. (1994) More notes on pragmatism. *Educational Researcher*, 23 (1): 16-18.
- Cohen, L., L. Manion and K. Morrison 2007. *Research Methods in Education*. London: Routledge.
- Damico, A. 1981. "Dewey and Marx: On Partisanship and the Reconstruction of Society." *The American Political Science Review* 75 (3): 654-666.
- DeLuca, D. and Kock, N. (2007) Publishing Information Systems action research for a positivist audience. *Communications of AIS*, 19 (10) Published online at <http://aisel.aisnet.org/cais/vol19/iss1/10/>:
- Dewey, J. (1910) *How We Think*. London: D. C. Heath & Company. Published online at <http://archive.org/details/howwethink000838mbp>.
- Dewey, J. [1916] (1947) *Democracy and Education*. New York: The Macmillan Company.
- Dewey, J. [1920] (1982) Reconstruction in philosophy. In *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899-1924*, vol. 12, Edited by Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dewey, J. [1922] (2007) *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology*. NY, USA: Cosimo.

- Dewey, J. [1926] (1982) Corporate responsibility. In *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, vol. 2, Edited by Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dewey, J. [1931] (1982) The Development of American Pragmatism. In *Pragmatism, the Classic Writings*, Edited by H.S.Thayer. Indianapolis, USA: Hackett.
- Dewey, J. [1938] (1963) *Experience and Education*. New York: Collier Books.
- Durkheim, E. (1983) *Pragmatism and Sociology*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press.
- Edwards, G. (2005) Researching thinking skills strategies in a primary school: challenging technical-rationalist orthodoxies of learning? *Educational Action Research*, 13 (2): 213-236.
- Elliott, J. (1991) *Action Research for Educational Change*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Elliott, J. (2005) Becoming critical: the failure to connect. *Educational Action Research*, 13 (3): 359- 373.
- Elliott, J. (2006) Educational research as a form of democratic rationality. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 40 (2): 169-185.
- Elliott, J. (2007) Assessing the quality of action research. *Research Papers in Education*, 22 (2): 229-246.
- Fendt, J. and Kaminska-Labbéc, R. (2011) Relevance and creativity through design-driven action research: Introducing pragmatic adequacy. *European Management Journal*, 29 (3): 217–233.
- Freire, P. (1974) The adult literacy process as cultural action for freedom. *Harvard Educational Review*, 40 (2): 205-225.
- Freytes Frey, A. and Cross, C. (2011) Overcoming poor youth stigmatization and invisibility through art: A participatory action research experience in Greater Buenos Aires. *Action Research*, 9 (1): 65-82.
- Gillberg, C. (2012) A methodological interpretation of feminist pragmatism. In *Contemporary Feminist Pragmatism*, Edited by M. Hamington and C. Bardwell-Jones. London: Routledge.
- Giroux, H. (1992) *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education*. London: Routledge.
- Goldkuhl, G. (2012) Pragmatism vs interpretivism in qualitative information systems research. *European Journal of Information Systems* 21, (2): 135–146.
- Greenwood, D. (2007) Pragmatic action research. *International Journal of Action Research*, 3 (1/2): 131-148.
- Hammersley, M. (2004) Action research: a contradiction in terms? *Oxford Review of Education*, 30 (2): 165-181.
- Hase, S. (2004) *Action research in the workplace, pedagogy or pragmatism? That is the question*. Paper presented at a symposium held for the *Work and Learning Network Conference*, University of Alberta, Canada.
- Hegel, G. [1820] (2001) *Philosophy of Right*. Ontario: Batoche Books.
- Heikkinen, H., Huttunen, R., Syrjälä, L. and Pesonen, J. (2012) Action research and narrative inquiry: five principles for validation revisited. *Educational Action Research*, 20 (1): 5-21.

Heikkinen, H., Kakkori, L. and Huttunen, R. (2001) This is my truth, tell me yours: some aspects of action research quality in the light of truth theories. *Educational Action Research*, 9 (1): 9-24.

James, W. [1904] (2007) *What is Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. Minnesota, USA: Filiquarian Publishing, LLC.

Jennings, L. and Graham, A. (1996) Postmodern perspectives and action research: reflecting on the possibilities. *Educational Action Research*, 4 (2): 267-278.

Johnston, S. (1994) Is action research a 'natural' process for teachers? *Educational Action Research*, 2 (1): 39-48.

Kemmis, S. and McTaggart, R. (1982) *The Action Research Planner*. Victoria: Deakin University Press.

Kock, N., McQueen, R. and Scott, J. (1997) Can action research be made more rigorous in a positivist sense? The contribution of an iterative approach. *Journal of Systems and Information Technology*, 1 (1): 1-24.

Lacey, P. (1996) Improving practice through reflective enquiry: confessions of a first-time action researcher. *Educational Action Research*, 4 (3): 349-361.

Lenin, V. [1908] (1948) *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism: Critical Comments on a Reactionary Philosophy*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.

L'Etang, S. and Theron, L. (2012) A critical reflection on the participatory action process involved in the development of a cognitive-behavioural-based counselling intervention programme for youth living with HIV/AIDS in a rural South African town. *Action Research*, 10 (1): 5-21.

Levin, M. and Greenwood, D. (2001) Pragmatic action research and the struggle to transform universities into learning communities in P. Reason and H. Bradbury [Eds.] *Handbook of Action Research: Participative inquiry and practice*. London: Sage. 103-113.

Marrow, A. (1969) *The Practical Theorist: The life and work of Kurt Lewin*. New York: Basic Books.

Marx, K. [1845] (1969) Ludwig Feuerbach and the end of classical German philosophy. In: eds. in *Marx/Engels Selected Works, Volume One*. Moscow, USSR: Progress Publishers, 13-15.

McCarthy, T. (1984) Translator's introduction. In *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol.1*. by J. Habermas. Cambridge: Polity Press.

McCutcheon, G. and Jung, B. (1990) Alternative perspectives on action research. *Theory into Practice*, 29 (3): 144-151.

McNiff, J. (2002) *Action Research: Principles and Practice*. London: Routledge.

McNiff, J. and Whitehead, J. (2010) *You and Your Own Action Research Project*. London: Routledge.

Nixon, J. (1981) *Teachers' Guide to Action Research*. London: Grant McIntyre.

Oquist, P. (1978) The epistemology of action research. *Acta Sociologica*, 21: 143 - 163.

Peirce, C. (1878) Illustration of the logic of science: Second paper. - How to make our ideas clear. *Popular Science Monthly*, January 1878, 286-302. Published online at: <http://archive.org/details/popularsciencemo12newy>.

Peters, M. and Robinson, V. (1984) The origins and status of action research. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 20 (2): 113-124.

Petrovic, J. (1998) Dewey is a Philistine and other grave misreadings. *Oxford Review of Education* 24 (4): 513-520.

- Punch, K. (2005) *Introduction to Social Research*. London: Sage.
- Reason, P. (2003) Pragmatist philosophy and action research: Readings and conversation with Richard Rorty. *Action Research*, 1 (1): 103-123.
- Reason, P. (2006) A response to J.A.McKernan. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 15 (2): 207-208.
- Reason, P., and Bradbury, H. (2001) *Handbook of Action Research: Participative inquiry and practice*. London: Sage.
- Rogers, J., Convery, I., Simmons, E. and Weatherall, A. (2012) What does it mean to be a friendly outsider? Critical reflection on finding a role as an action researcher with communities developing renewable energy projects. *Educational Action Research*, 20 (2): 201-218.
- Rorty, R. (1982) *Consequences of Pragmatism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Rorty, R. (2000) *The Decline of Redemptive Truth and the Rise of a Literary Culture* published on line at <http://www.stanford.edu/~rrorty/decline.htm>
- Rorty, R. (1991) *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Russell, B. [1938] (2004) *Power: A new social analysis*. London: Routledge.
- Ryan, A. (1995) *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company.
- Soler, J. and Miller, L. (2003) The struggle for early childhood curricula: A comparison of the English Foundation Stage Curriculum, Te Whāriki and Reggio Emilia. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 11 (1): 57-68.
- Somekh, B. (2006) *Action research: a methodology for change and development*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Taatila, V. and Raij, K. (2012) Philosophical review of pragmatism as a basis for learning by developing pedagogy. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 44, 8, 831–844.
- Townsend, A. (2013) *Action Research: The challenges of understanding and researching practice*. Berkshire: Open University Press.
- Vygotsky, L. and Cole, M. (1978) *Mind in Society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Waddington, D. (2010) Uncovering Hegelian connections: a new look at Dewey's early educational ideas. *Education and Culture* 26 (1): Article 6. Published online at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/eandc/vol26/iss1/art6>
- Waters-Adams, S. (1994) Collaboration and action research: a cautionary tale. *Educational Action Research*, 2 (2): 195-210.
- Whitehead, J. (1989) Creating a living educational theory from questions of the kind, 'How do I improve my practice?'. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 19 (1): 41-52.
- Wilkinson, M. (2012) *Dewey's 'Democracy without Politics': on the Failures of Liberalism and the Frustrations of Experimentalism*. London: London School of Economics and Political Science. Published online at: www.lse.ac.uk/collections/law/wps/wps.ht
- Winter, R. (1989) *Learning From Experience: Principles and practice in action research*. London: The Falmer Press.

A pragmatic stance on knowledge argues:	This explains why action research:
antecedent knowledge has been constructed in particular circumstances and for particular ends	requires practitioners to generate their own knowledge even if existing concepts and evidence can guide their inquiry
intelligent action is stimulated by indeterminate situations	has a 'problem' solving focus
intelligent action can be contrasted to trial and error reasoning, it requires new habits of reflection and analysis	is reflective and systematic
generating knowledge is a dialectical process	is an iterative process which is never complete
warranted assertions are stable, social agreements but they do not offer a correspondence view of reality	is a collaborative and communicative process
knowledge is generated after the event by considering the consequences of action	has quality criteria that consider the impact of action
the generation of knowledge is value laden	is explicit about democratic values

Table 1: The contribution of pragmatism to understanding action research