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Books that changed my life: reading and re-reading *Learning from Experience* by Richard Winter

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ABSTRACT

This invited review is part of a series called 'The Book(s) That Changed My Life' in which members of our action research community reflect on the seminal texts which have changed the way they think and work. Here, Andrew Townsend, our Coordinating Editor, reflects on his first reading of the book which changed his life . . . and how it felt to revisit it decades later. My chosen book, *Learning From Experience* by Richard Winter, was a text I first encountered as a masters student. It helped me think more about my understanding of action research and my role as an educational practitioner. In this article I reflect on my initial reading of *Learning From Experience*, and on what I believe I have learnt from revisiting a text which was so influential for me. This includes reflections on principles for action research, on reflexivity and on the connection between those topics and the practices of action researchers themselves. I argue that, although my relationship with the field has changed since I first read the book, these are enduring themes of interest to me and, potentially, others working in action research.

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In writing this article about life-changing books, I was reminded of Susan Noffke's re-examination of the seminal text Becoming Critical (2005), in which she talks about reading and meaning making as located in a particular time:

> Reading and rereading are not only about the material that is read. They are also about seeing one's self – knowing who one has become individually, but also recognizing who one is learning to be as one realizes the multiple aspects of one's identity. (Noffke 2005, 322)

To have a series on 'books that changed my life' might seem grandiose, suggesting, inaccurately, that it is books, and not people, who change lives. *Learning from experience* Winter (1989), my chosen text, did not change my life on its own. But, when I read it for the first time, it was a part of a period of considerable learning and growth that have come to define my second (potentially third) career as an academic (and, subsequently, as an editor). To understand why it made such an impression on me, I will first try to revisit my younger self, to discuss what appealed to me about the book then, and perhaps, as Noffke says, this also allows me to better understand who I was then.

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Reading *Learning from Experience*

I first came across *Learning from Experience* while studying for a master's degree at the University of Nottingham in the UK. I was motivated to embark on this MA by my experience of being part of a school improvement programme while working as a science teacher. This involved groups of teachers from participating schools working in collaboration, both with each other and with groups from other schools. Termed 'Improving the Quality of Education for All' (IQEA) (Hopkins, West, and Ainscow 1996), each network was supported by a facilitator, in my case Michael Fielding, who is perhaps best known for his work on student voice and radical state education (Fielding 2004, 2007). Michael was a wonderful facilitator – empathetic, supportive, but also knowledgeable and challenging – and, for me, this was a transformational experience. Our use of 'inquiry' changed my relationships with my colleagues and my understanding of my practice. I felt it allowed me to step back from the immediate challenges of my work and appreciate my practice and school from a broader, critical perspective. When I chose to study for an MA, therefore, I looked for one with an emphasis on school improvement.

But studying school improvement was not quite the edifying experience I had hoped it would be. The more I read, the more cynical I become of centralised attempts at educational reform. These seemed mainly to be concerned with making teachers follow doctrines established by others. Researchers, consultants and academics all decided what schools should do, and the challenge seemed only to be how to make school leaders and teachers comply.

This was a contrast with my experience of being a member of the IQEA network and, perhaps especially, the relationships established by Michael Fielding. I was looking for something more like my own experience. Something more rooted in the interests, knowledges and aspirations of practitioners. Coming across action research, in classes taught by Chris Day, one of the co-founders of this journal (Day 1998, 1999), answered that need. And so, at Chris's urging, I started to read myself into the area.

In these adventures in reading, I came across much that expressed a need for action research to challenge the kinds of inequality in professional knowledge with which I was frustrated. I also read many texts outlining a process for action research through continuing cycles, which built on and extended Lewin's model (Lewin 1946). These all prompted me to reflect further on my own experience. It was at this point that I came across Winter's *Learning From Experience* (Winter 1989), which built on his previous text, *Action-Research and the Nature of Social Inquiry* (Winter 1987). While the first book analysed the basis of arguments about closing the separation of action and research, *Learning From Experience*, published two years later, considered how these arguments worked in practice.

There was much in *Learning From Experience* which resonated with me, but the way it was written is a big part of why I have chosen it for this series. The style is accessible and discursive (I was finding that this is not true of much 'academic' literature) and, it seemed to speak directly to the reader. For example, the opening line of the preface reads: '[s]ome years ago, I received a rather irritating birthday card' (Winter 1989, vii). While this might seem unnecessarily informal to some, to me, it felt like a welcoming conversational style.

There are three parts to the book. The first covers 'method' (although that may not be the best word for what Winter was trying to convey). The second provides a series of examples to illustrate and extend the points made in Part 1. Part three, the shortest, brings

the reader back to a common issue in action research: Where to start? The book then concludes with an interesting postscript on ideology and critique. This structure provided a clear sense of progression, and I could also see how threads of Winter's account of action research were woven throughout the successive sections. They were introduced, illustrated, reflected on and concluded. Ultimately, this seemed to me to achieve a coherence which some texts lack.

In reflecting on why *Learning From Experience* was so useful and meaningful, I have identified three aspects of the text which especially resonated with me.

Practitioner action research

The first of these is the 'kind' of action research outlined in the book. We are a discipline which loves to typologise. I have done it myself, and the results, I think, vary in their clarity and usefulness. I sometimes question whether the different kinds of action research we are presented with are really separate, unrelated, and different in terms of quality. However, where these types, kinds, forms, or styles become useful is where they accurately account for what people do or challenge us to reflect on our approach. This does require a willingness of the author to critique themselves and to challenge their assumptions. But I think it is also important for them to be clear about who their readership is, and to communicate directly with them.

Sometimes action research can seem so broad that it can be a challenge to work out what we have in common. Winter is very clear that his book is for practitioners (of any kind, in all disciplines). His 'form' of action research is, therefore, practitioner action research. I found this helpful, as my own experience of action research was about my practice, and located in the organisational setting of my professional work. I was trying to understand and develop my teaching 'practice' and so, practitioner action research immediately appealed. As a result, whilst I sometimes struggled to relate to some of the other action research texts I was reading, interesting though they might be, Winter's account of practitioner action research seemed much more directly relevant to my own experience.

My own inquiry when working as a science teacher had been about how to help students become more independent in their learning. I worked with my colleagues, to better understand why this mattered to us and what we could do about it. This led to changes in the way we taught – working with students to help them plot their routes through curricula, supporting, assessing, challenging where necessary. We also provided options for dialogue and explanation. We were not defining what we were doing as action research; yet, reading Winter's writing about Practitioner Action Research seemed to encapsulate our approach. It also acted as a prompt to reflect on whether we were living the values we were espousing, something which is a significant aspect of Winter's writing, and something I return to later in this review.

A focus on principles, alongside processes

The first part of Winter's book discusses issues relating to the 'method' of action research. Winter himself recognises the problematic nature of the use of 'method' and there is an on-going discussion about how action research, undertaken by practitioners in their own

organisations, differs from research undertaken by independent researchers unconnected to those settings. The writing explains the benefits of each and argues that there should be no hierarchy between the two. But Winter also examines the problems of adopting positivist approaches in attempts by practitioners to understand and develop their own practices. He calls these 'positivistic echoes' and identifies them in some process models of action research.

While Winter recognises the significance of the models of action research which have become so popular, and indeed useful, he questions the inflexibility which is sometimes implied. Although his discussion of the process of action research builds explicitly on the cycles presented by Elliott (1991), and Kemmis and McTaggart (1982), this is not the main emphasis of his explanation of the nature of action research. These steps are not, he suggests, to be followed religiously, with *observing*, for example, only ever following *acting*, and preceding *reflecting*. He also argues that we need a more sophisticated understanding of reflection, as this is central to the ways in which practitioners can understand and develop their work.

Instead of slavishly following a series of steps, therefore, Winter puts more emphasis on the principles which underpin action research. These are arguments which build on his previous book, *Action-Research and the Nature of Social Inquiry*, in which he examines action research as a form of social inquiry and explains how research and practice are related (Winter 1987). In *Learning From Experience*, Winter suggests we should think about process and principles as working together. Action research requires some kind of rigorous strategy, developed with a rationale borne of a combination of purpose and understanding of the setting for action. In addition, according to Winter, action researchers should aim for rigor rather than validity, which is seen as a problematic concept in action research. His argument then is that the process of action research, how it is developed and enacted, must be founded on a series of principles which form the core identity of practitioner action research.

In my first reading of *Learning From Experience*, this struck a particular chord with me. I had read and reflected on the differing models of action research, and each, in some way, related to the inquiry I had undertaken as a part of the IQEA network. And yet, whilst they were informative and provided some structure, there was something about them which left me a little cold. Reducing action research to a series of (often four) repeating activities, felt a little instrumental. There was a technique to this, which could be built on and refined, (and I have tried to do this in my ongoing use of action research). But, before reading Winter's work, I found myself wondering if that was all action research was and, if so, feeling that it seemed to lack a sophistication of purpose. Encountering a parallel narrative about principles put much more emphasis on *why* we do this work. On what we want it to *accomplish*. It added nuance and sophistication to a representation of action research that had previously felt overly technical and lacking in substance.

Part of the purpose of Winter's focus on principles is to redefine the concepts Lewin used in his cycle of observation, reflection and implementation (1946) in order to 'free action research from its reliance on positivistic criteria and concepts' (Winter 1989, 28). Winter outlines six principles in total, each introduced with an explanatory summary and followed by a discussion of how that principle can be applied to the conduct of action research. This continues a characteristic of Winter's text: that sophisticated concepts and arguments are related to practical illustration.

Reflexivity and meaning making

The first of Winter's principles concerns reflexive critique and its role in the 'process' of action research. In earlier works, he explained his reservations about the application of natural science concepts and values to action research and argued that there was a need for a better, more sophisticated, understanding of reflection and its role in expert practitioner knowledge. His discussion of reflexive critique, and the second principle, dialectical critique, build on these arguments and are intended to redefine Lewin's use of observation and reflection.

Reflexive critique is presented as a way for practitioners to think about and better understand their own purposes, motivations and settings. Reflexivity is explained as a process of meaning making which is a consistent feature of any social setting. But it is also presented as a strategy to employed in order to understand those settings and oneself. This entails three steps, the first is to collect accounts, including official documents, interview transcripts etc. The second to analyse these accounts to make implicit bias within them explicit. The third to identify alternatives to these preconceptions and to formulate questions arising from these analyses (Winter 1989, 39–46).

Winter's discussion of reflexivity might be the element of his writing which is best known. He uses this to demonstrate that whilst people share events, our experiences of those events differ. To illustrate his point, he uses examples of teachers and students, showing how each might interpret classroom activities in different ways. This sits at the core of his critique of the application of natural science methods to research in social, in my case, educational, settings.

This also seemed to speak to my own concerns about the ways in which school improvement was presented as uniform and deterministic. My own experiences as a teacher and head of department in secondary schools had convinced me that the heart of education and the work of educators is relational. I felt that the pedagogic approaches or other activities presented as school improvement initiatives were presented independent of context, and, in particular, independent of the understanding teachers have of their charges, of the social dynamics of schools and classrooms, and of the knowledge of each party.

Re-reading *Learning from Experience*

Revisiting the text now is both an enlightening and sentimental experience. Over the intervening years, I have remained committed to action research and continue to be an active member of the field. My roles have not always allowed me to be as engaged as I might, but these interests and enthusiasms remain. What has perhaps changed over the period is investment in, and views on, publishing, disseminating and sharing action research. This is something I think about regularly given my role with this journal. Re-reading *Learning From Experience* I was surprised to discover/remember how much of it is about *sharing* action research. This is partially achieved in the examples which are used to illustrate particular points. But it is also covered in sections about the writing of and sharing of research reports. Being explicit about one's own principles and enacting some of the principles Winter outlines, including reflexive critique, can only help to move

communications about action research from accounts of processes or projects to more sophisticated commentaries on the socially situated nature of action research.

Re-reading *Learning From Experience* also made me think about the status of process, and indeed of principles, and the implications of providing any account of action research which encourages a degree of compliance. Much of my initial attraction to action research was because it did not impose practices but instead seemed to recognise and respect the expertise of practitioners. However, I do find myself reflecting on whether insisting on a consistent process is really that different from insisting on a form of practice. We need a common language to understand and describe action research. But when do questions of consistency become a form of oppression in their own right? If the aim is to support people, individually and collectively, to achieve some kind of ownership over change, then what are the implications of requiring mandated activities, in a consistent sequence? Does insisting on a method or methodology reproduce the kinds of intellectual hierarchies which action research is often intended to overturn? These are not easy questions, but it is right that in our own reflexive critique we ask them of ourselves.

In my initial reading of *Learning From Experience* then, I was applying its principles to my practice as a teacher. In this re-reading I am applying it to my practice as an advocate of action research. Both readings convince me that this book should have a more prominent position in our discipline. It is an accessible text which is both readable and challenging. It does not seek to instruct but challenge readers to engage in their own reflexive critique. And yes, ultimately, it was, indeed instrumental, in changing my life. Perhaps others could experience the same transformation too, and I would encourage them to give it a try.

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