

## Searching for the Nature of Action Research: A Response to Evans, Hardy, and Fleming

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In a professional sense, I feel privileged to be asked to respond to the paper by Evans, Hardy and Fleming (hitherto referred to as "the authors"). My intention in this regard is not to reflect upon the efficacy of the applied material, but rather to focus upon the methodological elements within the paper. In undertaking this exercise I focus upon the nature of action research.

Action research does not lend itself to easy identification. Tinning (1992a) recognizes this problem, and although he accepts that not all claims to action research are defensible, he suggests

... different readings will occur because individuals, as a result of their different discursive histories, will, in the process of reading the text, foreground certain discourses and background others. From this viewpoint, it is inappropriate to consider that some individuals have the wrong idea (meaning) of action research and others have got the correct (true) version. (p. 2)

I refer to these sentiments on several occasions throughout the present paper. In a general sense, they help to legitimize the varying shades of opinion that typify the action research literature. More specifically, they also neatly capture how I would wish readers to contextualize my own comments. To borrow from Tinning, my thoughts are likely to reflect the nature of my own research journey, one in which action research has played a formative role. It is from this historical context (with all its accompanying distortions and upheavals) that I offer my personal views on the methodological aspects of the authors' work.

### Establishing a Balanced Perspective

First and foremost, it is important for me to state that I believe the paper offers an insightful exploration of the sports injury experience. Indeed, many of the points raised within the paper resonate with my own applied and research experiences. The clear documentation of athletes' unfolding dilemmas and the accompanying

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fluctuations in their motivational states serves to remind me of how unpredictable rehabilitation can be. More generally, I appreciate the capacity of the text to capture a sense of empathy and concern as the first author occasionally shines light into her own experiences, a point I will return to later in this discussion. In addition, the application of wide ranging and flexible intervention strategies provide, I believe, examples of good practice. Early praise only serves to heighten the inevitability of criticism later, and (needless to say) there are aspects of the paper about which I harbor some concern. It is my own reflections upon these concerns that occupy the majority of this text.

My early reading of the paper left me with a sense that the authors had failed to capture the epistemology of, what I understood by the term, action research. More specifically, I was unconvinced that the authors had conducted action research at all. Over time, I accepted the authors' view that action research had been undertaken. During this realignment, I discarded my doubts and focused increasingly on the epistemological visibility of action research within the text.

In the commentary to follow, I provide a rationale to support these remarks and comment on the authors' definition, classification, and location of their research. More specifically, I suggest that the definitions of action research offered by the authors are lacking in detail and, in consequence, risk misleading those readers who are unfamiliar with the background literature. In defending this assertion, I introduce elements of action research literature that have (according to Tinning, 1992a) contributed to my own discursive history. Finally, I consider how the authors' work aligns with these particular parameters.

### **The Role of Definitions in Establishing Understanding and Epistemological Visibility**

The authors begin the paper by providing a number of definitions of action research and many of these clearly support the general thrust of the paper (e.g., Castle, 1994; Cohen & Manion, 1994). For example, the notion that action research is concerned with interventions in real life situations (Castle, 1994) suggests that the research is somehow in the right ball park. For example, the authors state that interventions did take place and the rehabilitation scenarios were undoubtedly, if unfortunately, real life.

Castle's (1994) work is, however, open to wider interpretation and carries a certain invitation to view life itself as action research. For example, parents, teachers, law enforcement agencies, social workers, and so on all intervene regularly in real life situations, yet few would seriously suggest that they are all engaged in action research. In a more specific sense, sport psychology interventions might also be intuitively linked to Castle's definition. Similarly, I suspect that few sport psychologists would consider themselves to be action researchers.

This dilemma (if that is not too strong a term) seems to be compounded when the cyclic procedures, planning, acting, monitoring, and reflecting, which frame most action research projects, are considered. As with Castle's (1994) rather generic definition discussed above, these procedures also appear transferable to a number of everyday situations. For example, many practitioners may reasonably be expected to review what they do, think up ideas to improve matters, introduce these ideas, and reflect further on the efficacy of any changes. To repeat my earlier