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Special Interview with Professor Dr. Anne Burns, Macquarie University, Sydney

Anne Burns

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First of all, we would like to know your opinion about action research.

Okay! I think action research is a fairly new form of research, and people are still getting used to the idea of it. It's different because it takes us away from the more experimental kind of research which people have often done in the past. And it takes us into an area of research where you can investigate things in your own practice. So, the whole point of action research is really to look at areas that you feel should have further investigation in your work or your school -- your teaching context. It's a very practical kind of approach because it allows you to look at gaps in practice or problems that you might want to pose about what you're doing, your daily work, your daily practice in the classroom perhaps. And it allows you to find some ways of changing the things that you are not happy with, but at the same time, working systematically to look at what might work better. So, it's a kind of approach that takes practical ideas and investigates them in a systematic way. What we're looking to do is to gain an idea of some data that will tell us more about what's going on in the classroom and on the basis of the information we get when we look at something in depth, we can then make

changes which are very informal changes that can help us develop new ideas about what we are doing.

What are the current trends involving action research?

I think people are trying to work with it to look at questions they can address in their own situations. Some people are interested in working on their own as teachers who want to develop professionally and learn a little bit more about research and to look at things they would like to improve in their own particular practice. Other people are attempting to work collaboratively, working together to look at things that are common across a number of different classes and working together on solutions to those problems. So, in different countries around the world, people are taking this up in very different ways. In Australia, with teachers I work with, we always look at a common area which people are interested in and then teachers investigate those areas in their own way, in their own particular situation. So, for example, that might be concerned with how you develop a new curriculum, how you integrate new ways of teaching vocabulary into your practice or how you might work more effectively when assisting

students with reading and writing skills. So you have a number of teachers working together to investigate one area that they all are interested in. Other teachers that I work with in different parts of the world are attempting to join together using the Internet in order to exchange ideas. They might be looking at issues they have in common which they would like to talk about over the Internet. Each person will then go away and do their own research. They have an Internet group to come back to, to share their ideas and findings with and so on. They can talk about strategies to be put in place in their classrooms.

What criticisms do you hear about action research?

Well! I think one of the major criticisms is that it isn't generalizable and many people have said that action research is not valid research because you can't generalize from it. But I think this is really missing the point because in action research our purpose is not to generalize. It's really to investigate specific situations and find a solution to the problems or ways for development in a specific situation. So, the idea of action research isn't to generalize, it's not the purpose of it. It looks at some small-scale research that you want to undertake which is highly contextualized in one specific context. The interesting thing for teachers, however, might be that some of the things that one teacher will find out in one context may well be of interest in another context. Then the findings can be taken up and perhaps tried out again in different contexts to see whether similar strategies will work or to see whether different strategies can be applied to this context. Really, it's a way of sharing professional knowledge among a large group of people.

What would you recommend to teachers who would like to do action research for the first time?

Well! I think that you just need to get going and try something. Teachers sometimes worry about doing research. Often many teachers are busy in their classrooms, and research hasn't traditionally been a part of the work they do. So, when they hear the word "research," they often feel very anxious, that it has to be something large-scale, experimental, and generalizable. They think they have to set up a control group and an experimental group. I think that they think rather differently about research when they start doing action research. The main thing is to find an area that you don't feel happy about and to try to do something in your classroom to change that. I think for teachers who want to do research, the main advice I can give is to keep it small, keep it focused, try it out for a period of time and see where the research takes you. If possible, try to join together with other teachers, try to join a group and collaborate with those people because you'll find that you'll gain a lot more self-confidence if you have the support of others; if you can go back and have a discussion with other teachers or other researchers about how your research is going. Other advice that I had from teachers that I work with is to try to set a particular period of time to complete the task. Don't give yourself a task which is too big, which will exhaust you. Put a period of time on it, and see where that takes you in your research. After that, you may perhaps think about it for a while and then maybe if you want to take up an idea later, you can try it out with another class or take the idea further in a future piece of research.

Do you think there're some common problems that may occur while teachers are doing action research?

Well! I think one of the greatest difficulties that people have from my experience of working with teachers in different places is to find the area that they want to focus on. And people often get a little concerned when they come to a workshop and talk about action research. They're very keen to try it out, and they go back to their classroom and think that they will start some research. And then, they're worried that they're not doing the right thing or their research isn't academic enough or they can't find a focus for their research. Often, I find that teachers worry about this. My advice is to keep going, keep trying new things and keep exploring your classroom in such a way that the situation you're looking at becomes a little clearer as time goes on. And if you do that, you may find that the idea you had when you first started will change along the way. But often by working your way through a cycle of research, you'll find something far more interesting to focus on in the end. So, I think the best advice I can give is to keep going, don't get discouraged, start small, work with other people if you possibly can and try something, even it's only small-scale, to get yourself involved in action research.

Can we say that if teachers wish to do research, they should start with action research?

I think that for teachers who are not working in an academic context, it's a good idea to start with action research. Many teachers want practical solutions. When I talk to teachers, they are really concerned about the classroom activities in their classroom, materials in their classroom, what kind of

things their students do or what kind of techniques they can use as teachers. So, I think the classroom is a really interesting place for teachers. And often we're looking for practical application and practical solutions. So, action research is a really good place to start if you are a teacher because you can often work with it in such a way that you can develop good ideas which you may not have time to really think through during your teaching. I think it can be quite difficult to set up an experimental form of research and often teachers are not dedicated to this because they are not given time in their teaching situation to do research in the way that people who work in universities are encouraged to publish and engage in research. For teachers, I think action research is a much more manageable kind of research. And it's also very encouraging and supportive because you can learn a lot about research techniques and research strategies. And I go back to the point I made before. If you usually work without group support, you'll not get the opportunity to share your expertise and experiences.

I heard that some people may be against action research because it's small-scale and it applies only to your own classroom and may not be useful to others. What would you say about that? For dissertations, some people would like to do action research but they are concerned that their committee would find this unacceptable.

Yes, that can be a problem, and we're still looking at the various kinds of research that are valuable in different fields. But I think in the field of Applied Linguistics and TESOL, we're moving towards a point where we really do want to make a difference in the classroom. So, there is a

great deal of interest now in finding out more about what goes on in the classroom, finding out more about the way teachers think about the classroom, finding out more about the way students behave in the classroom and finding out more about what kinds of technique work in different parts of the world. I think, in a language teaching situation, we already realize that there isn't one method that's going to work in every language situation. So, we become a little more sophisticated and realize that methods can only be as good as the people and the students who work with them. So, we need another form of understanding or knowledge about what goes on in classrooms. And, I think by doing research of this sort and, hopefully, having teachers publish their research or present their research at conferences, we can begin to build up an interesting picture in a much more complex and sophisticated picture about what teaching looks like when people put it into practice what teachers do in the classroom. So, my own view is that teachers doing research is a very important part of our development of theories about what teaching is like. We still don't have a lot of knowledge about what goes on in classrooms or what people think about in classrooms, so, when a teacher does action research and reports that research, it's of great interest to other teachers, and it also allows us to get a picture of the problems teachers have in the classroom. So, you're right when you say that it's small-scale, and mention the criticism that it's not generalizable. But, I think we're going to be getting a lot from looking at the study of action research and knowing when and where teachers take up different ideas and implement them in the classroom.

How about when we write an article on classroom research? Do we follow the same pattern as we do in other kinds of research; for example, quantitative or qualitative research?

Well! I think it's still important when you write up a piece of action research to describe the context that you were working in, to describe the students you worked with, the subject of the research, who was involved in the research, what methods were used and the process that you went through, the steps in your research plan. But I think the reports of teachers doing this kind of action research are going to look rather different from those of people doing other academic types of research. I think we're going to get a more narrative feel to the account. Teachers are, in a sense, telling their own stories about the classroom, what the classroom looks like, and expressing their points of view. So, I think the idea of a teaching narrative is going to become an important kind of genre in which teachers will feel comfortable when writing up their research and also expressing ideas about their research to other teachers. Certainly, in the work I have done in Australia where teachers had written up their research, other teachers found them to be user-friendly because they had been written up in a way that teachers understand and enjoy. They felt comfortable with them; they related to them because it's teachers talking to teachers. So, I think it's a new way of writing up research to a certain extent.

So, it sounds like action research will deal with qualitative rather than quantitative research?

If you're referring to the more experimental quantitative studies which have been done using a more scientific method, then we're

not getting to see so much of this in action research. I think in action research, you're going to see a more qualitative approach. But that doesn't mean to say that you can't analyze your data quantitatively. You can still use quantitative information and quantitative data analysis when writing up research. And, I think a variety of ways of

presenting the data can be very useful. You may have people presenting some quantitative information using questionnaires and percentages and so on. On the other hand, you may have people presenting a more discussive or narrative kind of data. However, on the whole, I think we will see a more qualitative approach.